

***The Terrorism Ahead: Confronting Transnational Violence in the Twenty-First Century.* By Paul J. Smith. New York and London: M.E. Sharpe. Soft cover: 257pp.**

Since the Al Qaeda attacks of 11 September 2001, there have been as many experts as there have been theories on the whys and wherefores of terrorism. The air is thick with sound bites and quotable quotes generated by an army of analysts and security experts who have rushed in to fill the public thirst for news and fuel the media's quest for headlines. Into this inevitable, but not exactly helpful environment, comes Paul Smith's book, cutting through the jargon with a lucid, nuanced, carefully researched handbook on terrorism in the twenty-first century. What sets this book apart from most others in its genre is its remarkable simplicity and clarity. Smith manages the arduous task of sifting through reams of literature on terrorism, past and present, to come up with a book that quite simply focuses on the essence of terrorism and its place in our world. The book weaves past and present into a sophisticated account of terrorism that explores what Smith terms "the confluence of demographical, technological, and social factors (that have) created the conditions that make the world particularly vulnerable to terrorism today" (p. xii).

At its core, this is not just a book about terrorism, but more importantly, one that confronts the challenges to freedom, civil liberties and justice engendered advertently or inadvertently by the so-called "war on terrorism". "Just as humans must contend with infectious diseases, they may also have to contend with terrorism as part of the human condition", says Smith (p. 190), underlining the imperative need to evolve long-term strategies to create an environment that is inhospitable to terrorism. In getting there, Smith delves into the historical roots of terrorism and traces its evolution to its present form, as much a social scientist as a historian. What is terrorism, what causes it, what is its real impact on international politics, what are the social, political religious and cultural factors that enable terrorism, and most importantly, how does the modern world counter terrorism? These are some of the broad issues Smith addresses in the book with passion and scholarship.

In his preface, Smith posits that "terrorism is a constant feature of human civilization — it is neither new nor is it likely to ever end" (p. xi). Having begun the book with this rather depressing assumption, Smith goes forth in a remarkably candid yet un-alarmist,

scholarly manner to dissect the core historical, social, political, religious and geographical elements of terrorism, presenting at once a reality that is as challenging as it is coherent.

The most important contribution of the book is its analysis and exposition of future trends in terrorism. Smith contends that terrorism will remain a potent threat to the international system throughout the twenty-first century, primarily because of the convergence of two negative trends: the availability of Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Weapons (CBRN) — also known as Weapons of Mass Destruction — and the proliferation of terrorist organizations seeking to achieve mass casualties. In delineating future trends in terrorism, the book examines systemic flaws in counter-terrorism policy formation and implementation in recent times and makes the case that in addition to counter-terrorism strategies, cooperation between states and non-state actors is likely to yield more positive results. “Greater reliance on ‘soft power’ ... rather than hard (military) power will likely generate a more long term, sustainable environment that is inhospitable to terrorism” (p. 191), contends Smith. In his lead-up to this conclusion, Smith identifies several direct and indirect causal factors which create an enabling environment for terrorism. These include demographic factors such as urbanization, poverty, unemployment and migration; the information revolution; transnational crime; the festering of failed states; climate change contributing to national calamities, and increased social and political instability; and the rise of religious and ethnic identities. Smith also identifies the desire of terrorists to achieve increasingly “spectacular” results in their attacks following the example of 9/11.

This book is a must-have for anybody interested in terrorism — layperson or expert. At its simplest, it is an unclipped rendering of the history and impact of terrorism on our world; at its most complex, it is a careful exploration of currents and counter-currents in the modern world’s battle with terrorism and its quest for strategies to cope with and mitigate the threat of terrorism in our world, without compromising the democratic ideals that are themselves threatened by terrorism.

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SHYAM TEKWANI is Assistant Professor at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.