

Citizen Guides to Politics and Public Affairs

A Citizen's Guide to Terrorism and Counterterrorism

SECOND EDITION



Christopher C. Harmon

“This timely book from brilliant teacher-scholar Christopher C. Harmon offers a lot: a concise overview of the terrorist threat to the U.S., a detailed analysis of our counterterrorism strategy, a useful explanation of how terrorist groups have been defeated, and important recommendations for what needs to be done, and by whom (including citizens), to confront the threat of terrorism more successfully. Overall engaging, accessible and useful to a wide audience, this is highly recommended reading.”

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“Dr. Harmon has done it again. Having endorsed the first edition—which was so valuable to our citizenry—I can guarantee readers will find this new edition to have the very best qualities of a book on public affairs. We begin with a current and deeply informed account of terrorism today, inside America and beyond our borders. Then we see a rich description of America’s national strategy for fighting back, assessment of how it is going, and suggestions about what citizens can do to help.”

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John Horgan, Georgia State University and editor of the
journal *Terrorism and Political Violence*



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A Citizen's Guide to Terrorism and Counterterrorism

This *Citizen's Guide* addresses the public policy issues of terrorism and counterterrorism in the United States. Written for the thinking citizen and student alike, this succinct and up-to-date book takes a “grand strategy” approach toward terrorism and uses examples and issues drawn from present-day perpetrators and actors.

Christopher C. Harmon, a veteran academic of military theory who has also instructed U.S. and foreign military officers, organizes his book into three sections. He first introduces the problem of America's continued vulnerability to terrorist attack. Part II examines the varied ways in which the U.S. is fighting terrorism, highlighting the labors of diverse experts, government offices, intelligence and military personnel, and foreign allies. The book outlines the various aspects of the U.S. strategy, including intelligence, diplomacy, public diplomacy, economic counterterrorism, and law and law-making. In Part III, Harmon sketches the prospects for further action, steering clear of simple partisanship and instead listing recommendations with pros and cons and also including factual stories of how individual citizens have made a difference in the national effort against terrorism.

New to the Second Edition

- Adds coverage of the Islamic State, explained in terms of its character, rise, and relative collapse under coalition pressures.
- Focuses on the growing right-wing terrorist threat, domestically as well as internationally.
- Covers additional schools of militancy including anarchism; variants of communism and especially Maoist insurgency; and the Iranian/Shia terrorist threat throughout the Middle East and Europe, among others.
- Analyzes the current published White House strategy for countering terrorism.

Christopher C. Harmon has been teaching, publishing, and advancing studies of terrorism and counterterrorism for three decades. This is his sixth book in the field. Here he covers the moral, political, tactical, and strategic problems that citizens most want to know about. Dr. Harmon holds the Bren Chair of Great Power Competition, Marine Corps University, Virginia.

Citizen Guides to Politics and Public Affairs

Morgan Marietta and Bert Rockman, Series Editors

Each book in this series is framed around a significant but not well-understood subject that is integral to citizens'—both students and the general public—full understanding of politics and participation in public affairs. In accessible language, these titles provide readers with the tools for understanding the root issues in political life. Individual volumes are brief and engaging, written in short, readable chapters without extensive citations or footnoting. Together they are part of an essential library to equip us all for fuller engagement with the issues of our times.

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A Citizen's Guide to Terrorism and Counterterrorism, Second Edition

Christopher C. Harmon

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A Citizen's Guide to Terrorism and Counterterrorism

Second Edition

Christopher C. Harmon

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Dedicated to living heroes of Pensacola on
December 6, 2019:

Navy Airman Ryan Blackwell, though shot, still
protected others from the terrorist.

Marines Ryan Masel and Sam Mullins ran to the
sounds of the gun, and rendered aid.

Three hundred million Americans are safer because of
men like you.



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Educate and inform . . . the people. Enable them to see that it is their interest to preserve peace and order and they will preserve them.

(Thomas Jefferson, letter to James Madison, 1787)

Aggression must be judged, not from the standpoint of Right and Left, but of right and wrong. . . . We are in the midst of dangers so great . . . we are the guardians of causes so precious to the world. . .

(Winston S. Churchill, Paris, 1936)

Preface

Six years have elapsed since the first edition of this *Citizen's Guide*. They have all been eventful, sometimes in dark ways.

We have witnessed the swift rise from obscurity of the self-declared “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” which established new standards for depravity. Our country participated in its effacement from the physical earth. There are ongoing campaigns by powerful sub-state actors such as the Shia of Hezbollah, as well as the Sunni of Al Shabaab and Boko Haram in northern Africa. Even if nearly all governments in Asia now decline to govern by Mao Tse Tung Thought, in the southern Philippines, Nepal, or eastern-central India, when political violence kills the innocent it is often the work of Maoist revolutionaries. Tribal and ethnic politics take their own bloody tolls, as always, and they have risen in the newest forms of online hate speech and propaganda. The last few years have witnessed a disturbing rise in white racial hatreds—in Europe but also right here, militancy akin to what we saw here at home between 1980 and 1995. This primitive ideology and its adherents are now accounting for mass murders—even if the perpetrators’ views have no home in the minds or hearts of most of our citizenry.

If such problems remain and are complex and protracted, and if counterterrorism can rarely be as swift and decisive as the commandos who chased down ISIS “Caliph” al Baghdadi in December 2019, then as a polity we would be unwise to “just move on.” Even in this era, well-defined as one of great power competition, we have in our world the assassin, the hidden cell, the transnational network, the “foreign fighters,” the broad insurgency, and the state actor or great power that may use many of those, as instruments. And so it is appropriate to revisit and revise a book and bring forward an altogether new version for the 2020s.

As an author I enjoy acknowledging helpful advice received at points in the preparation of the new material, and text revisions, for this small book. Those to thank begin with Morgan Marietta and Bert Rockman, as the series editors, and then include all these fellow citizens: Aaron Danis, Donovan Chau, Darren Fazzino, Tom Hastings, Tim Joyce, Jim Phillips, Robert Reilly, Al Santoli, Adam Seitz, Carl Shelton, Kevin Smith,

Christopher Snedden, and Amin Tarzi. Year after year, officers at Marine Corps University have always inspired new thoughts and offered insights based on their reading, experience, and work overseas. My first terrorism book (in 2000) was dedicated to the Marines, and nothing in the last two decades alters my high view of this fine organization. In that vein, gratitude is due to the executives and staff of the Marine Corps University Foundation in Quantico, Virginia, and its generous donor Donald Bren, for direct support to my teaching, writing, and security studies.

Christopher C. Harmon, PhD
Bren Chair of Great Power Competition
Marine Corps University
April 2020

Part I

The Threat



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1 We Americans Remain Vulnerable to Attack

In June 2019, Ashiqul Alam was a “lawful permanent resident” of the United States and of Queens, New York City. It was not particularly unusual, in such a big city, that he was also a citizen of Bangladesh, or that he deemed himself a Muslim, or that he studied at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan. What *was* unusual was his obsession: Alam wanted to attack as many people as possible because “you know, it makes more impact.” Filming his own reconnaissance trips through Times Square, he settled on the northern sector of it, Father Duffy Square, because “most of the people are there.” When the Federal Bureau of Investigation determined it was time to quit listening to Alam and make his arrest, the plotter had bought two Glock pistols as well as discussed silencers and grenades with his informant/arms supplier. Why? A lust for fame was evident: he exulted that he and a teammate would become “legends.” Just as evident was a familiar and unholy modern mix of extremist religion and politics: it is “the duty of Muslims . . . to make the Khalifa [caliphate],” Alam told his FBI informant. Osama bin Laden “did his job. He did what he is supposed to do. Now it’s up to us.”¹

Other contemporary terrorists have had their twisted visions of glory in Times Square. These include white supremacist James Harris Jackson, who journeyed there from out of state in March of 2017 and used a sword to slay a black man he’d never seen before, a resident beloved by his neighbors.² Surrendering, the heavy consumer of neo-Nazi web propaganda admitted to being a “domestic terrorist.”³ He told police that he chose Times Square because it is the “global capital of media,” guaranteeing coverage. Another ideologue, also expecting infinite attention, was a religious zealot working for the Pakistani Taliban, a Connecticut resident named Faisal Shahzad. He built a car bomb, parked it in Times Square and set the fuse, expecting to kill at least forty people. With the calculation characteristic of such politicized mass-murderers, he had monitored live video feeds over the internet for three months, studying the square to decide when and where to position the car bomb so it would kill the most Americans. An alert street vendor ruined his plan.

4 *The Threat*

For terrorists, New York's attractions include great towers, Wall Street, prestigious targets such as the Statue of Liberty, busy ports and transportation hubs, and almost any mass gathering of citizens. While few citizens would think of it, the mere presence of the United Nations (U.N.) with its New York headquarters infuriates Al Qaeda and its comrades; they declaim the organization as a tool of the U.S., inherently anti-Muslim, and a guarantor of the status quo, an enemy of their own plans for a multinational Muslim caliphate. Bin Laden's people plotted on multiple occasions to take down U.N. buildings or kill U.N. personnel.⁴ And "the blind sheik," Egypt's Omar Abdul Rahman who sent followers to conduct the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center, also had the U.N. headquarters on his list of projected targets. That professional radicalizer and terrorist organizer died of old age in an American prison in February 2017.

We have seen one attempt after another to rend New York City with a massive attack on civilians. In March 1994, a Lebanese opened fire on a van transporting Hasidic youths over the Brooklyn Bridge; one rider died and more were injured.⁵ In mid-1997, West Bank Palestinians entered our country over the Canadian border and took up an apartment in Brooklyn, where they prepared a suicide vest and nail bombs for an attack on subway riders.⁶ Legacies of 9/11/2001 include an astonishing audiotape, released three months after the tragedy, of Osama bin Laden and close associates praising Allah and exulting about how the results of the airplane plot exceeded all hopes.⁷ In 2009 came another plot against the subways, with direction from senior Al Qaeda planner Adnan G. el Shukrijumah.⁸ 2009 also witnessed men seeking to deploy man-portable missiles to shoot down military planes at a New York air base and use explosives to blow up a synagogue in the Riverdale section of the Bronx.⁹ Multiple arrests in Queens and Staten Island in June 2015 brought in a team of U.S.-born Islamic State adherents who hoped to build pressure-cooker bombs. One of them, Fareed Mumuni, repeatedly stabbed an arresting FBI agent with a long knife; so grave an offense, aggravated by the ISIS connection, led a federal appeals court recently to recommend an eighty-five-year sentence.¹⁰ "The Chelsea Bomber" brought weapons into the city from his home in New Jersey, and injured 30 people when it detonated in September 2016. Firing at police to resist arrest, Ahmad Khan Rahimi was jailed and then sought to interest fellow convicts in the recorded speeches of Al Qaeda representatives. A bewildering flurry of anti-Semitic attacks around New York City brought 2019 to a close. During the December holy days, one perpetrator went to Rockland County and invaded the home of a noted rabbi, where the strongly built male wounded five worshippers savagely with a sword. The suspect's journals and internet search patterns revealed an obsession with Jews and with Nazis.

Nor are New Yorkers alone. Terrorism has many American targets; our other cities share many of the dangers. Bostonians will live long before

memories fade of the marathon bombings of April 15, 2013—an attack with multiple roadside bombs that was immediately shown in a self-glorifying pictorial magazine issue by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Consider the sprawling metro area of Washington, D.C. The Capitol, the White House, and the Pentagon have all been targets of modern terrorists, from the Weather Underground through adherents to today's Islamist extremists. One Al Qaeda journal recommends shooting up noted restaurants in D.C. at an hour when the “power lunch” crowd could be victims. Nor are medium-sized cities exempt. Portland, Oregon escaped a car bomb plot in late November 2010; the target was a gathering for a Christmas tree lighting in a public square. One year before, on Christmas Day 2009, in a plot begun in Yemen, “Underwear Bomber” Umar Farok Abdulmutallab threatened aerial disaster over Detroit. Smaller cities and towns are also potential targets, and any concentration of Americans is targetable according to the illogic of the new partisans of religious war.

The terrorism threat picture has never been one that merges exactly with indiscriminate killing, however. When analysts define terrorism as “indiscriminate,” they err. On many occasions the target of a terror group may be a single person. Consider anarchists—doctrinal enemies of almost all government, simply. It was probably anarchists who blew up part of Wall Street in 1920 with one of history's first vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices, yet anarchists were as well known for patiently hunting down named enemies such as a named industrialist or a known police interrogator, which they did frequently here, in Europe, and in Russia. Today, Al Qaeda is known for simultaneously bombing two American embassies in 1998 and the World Trade Towers three years later, but they have also done careful assassinations. Indeed, as their infamy grew and the security services worked to constrict terrorists' travel and training camp options, Al Qaeda explicitly advised in their publications such as *Inspire* that individual initiative and singular assassination are a perfect pairing. Even though leader Ayman Al Zawahiri is a surgeon trained to heal, he has penned instructions for the common man to use in killing Americans and other “infidels” with such simple tools as a knife or an iron bar. This perverse counsel echoes advice in the Al Qaeda training manual discovered by police in Manchester, England and used as evidence in subsequent trials: the reading public can see, in clinical detail, how an assassination may be carried out with poison, or “cold steel,” or a pistol.¹¹

Such individuals and groups often described as “sub-state actors” are most often the perpetrators of terrorism, and in recent years, single males have most often been the sort to attempt terrorism. But some states are regular practitioners of terrorism. As surely as there are states that terrorize their own subjects—instead of fostering free citizens—so too do some states “export” terrorism overseas as a way to hurt other countries, stand for ideological causes, or reward allies in the underground.