Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East


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This is a work that starts out well with a solid premise, namely to critique the oft repeated claim that Middle Eastern terrorism stems, to a large degree, from a democracy deficit in the region. Unable to vote or participate in politics, so the theory goes, certain marginalized groups resort to terrorism. Pro-American authoritarian regimes like that of Mubarek in Egypt or the Saudi dynasty drove those whose voices could not be heard to join terrorist groups like Saudi-led Al Qaeda or Egypt’s Gamaa Islamiya. Dalacoura sums up her book’s objectives by stating on page 23 “The central purpose of the book is to investigate whether a convincing case can be made that Islamist terrorism in the Middle East has political causes stemming from non-democratic or authoritarian structures.” Dalacoura argues that it cannot by stating that “there is no simple or consistent pattern of causation or any identifiable and consistent relationship between democracy (or lack thereof) and terrorism.” (page 38).

In her first (and best) chapter Dalacoura, Lecturer in International Relations at the London School of Economics, points out the weaknesses of the theory that a lack of democracy leads to terrorism and its counterpoint theory that democracy is somehow the antidote to terrorism and extremism. While the Neo-Cons and the Bush administration made democracy promotion in the Middle East a primary mission during the early years of Operation Iraqi Freedom, it

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would seem that terrorism is in fact found in democracies, such as Spain’s ETA, Germany’s Baader Meinhof, Italy’s Red Brigades, Greece’s 17 November Group, and Northern Ireland’s IRA. North Korea by contrast has no terrorist groups nor did the Soviet Union, to name just a few examples of authoritarian regimes that did not create terrorism by stifling democracy.

Dalacoura points out that “democracy many not only fail to stymie terrorism but can positively encourage it, for a number of reasons.” She states, for example, that “Democracies permit the freedoms of movement, information and assembly which may allow terrorist groups to organize and remain undetectable for a long period of time.” (page 26). And in the case of the Gaza Strip in 2006, Dalacoura correctly points out that Palestinian democracy led to the election of the terrorist group Hamas, hardly a positive outcome of the spread of democracy in the region from the perspective of the Neo-Cons. One could also point the rise of extremist Salafists in Egypt’s parliament since elections in that country following the overthrow of Mubarek’s authoritarian rule in 2011.

Dalacoura then proceeds to critique the notion that Islam is somehow more pre-disposed to terrorism than other religions or cultures. But here her argument peters out and she fails to offer an answer for why the vast majority of terrorism (especially suicide bombing) in the world from Bali to Inner China to Chechnya to Morocco to Nigeria is carried out by terrorists acting in the name of Islam. Despite Dalacoura’s vague, unsupported criticism of those who argue for the exceptionalism of Islam as a facilitator for terrorism, she offers no serious argument against this theory that has gained wide acceptance, especially since 9/11.

In her second chapter Dalacoura gives a rather basic overview of Al Qaeda’s history, but seems to contradict her earlier critique of the notion that a lack of democracy in the Middle East helps generate terrorism when she states “The pervasiveness of authoritarianism in the Middle East is linked to al Qaeda’s choice of ideology and tactics in multiple and subtle ways. For one, the lack of formal outlets to publicly express opinion, grievances and concerns made it easier for Bin Laden to hijack the Arab ‘street.’ Al Qaeda found a ready pool of recruits among those who became marginalized and disillusioned by the politics of their respective states.” (page 48). Dalacoura also describes an interview she had with a radical whose extremist whose views were “cemented” by his harsh imprisonment by Egypt’s notorious police state. (Page 49). Dalacoura does, however, correctly point out that the theory that