



**How Terrorism Ends:
Understanding the Decline and
Demise of Terrorist Campaigns**

By Audrey Kurth Cronin

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Audrey Kurth Cronin has produced a work that is both insightful and frustrating—but it is frustrating for all the right reasons. Readers searching for definitive answers for the end of terrorism will be disappointed. So, too, will critics expecting a presentation of how “simple” it is to end terrorism. What readers will find is a book written conditionally and with much argument by counterfact, but active readers will find a rich source for debate. More critically, it is the right debate to have regarding terrorism and its threat today: namely, how will it end? One of the most effective themes throughout the book is that despite all of the contemporary hyperbole, historical experience shows that terrorist movements generally do not last long, and at some point in time, practically all of them come to an end. How that end is achieved—whether it is done by or at the expense of the state—and what lessons states today can take from past experiences are the major themes of this book.

The introduction serves as an effective executive summary

of the argument and insights of the entire book. Successive chapters detail the six potential avenues for the demise of a terrorist movement: decapitation (leader/leaders are killed or captured), negotiation, success (movement’s aims are achieved), failure, repression, and reorientation (group/movement shifts from terrorist violence to something else). These avenues are developed from an analysis of over 400 terrorist groups (a description of the dataset and more detail from the statistical analysis are given in an appendix). Each chapter then presents a few cases as illustration of how the particular avenue ends (or does not end) the terrorist movement in question. The cases are selected for variance in terms of leadership, goals, and other factors. A seventh chapter applies the various frameworks to al Qaeda, putting forward an initial analysis on that group’s possible end, and a short conclusion closes out the text.

While some may view the conclusions from the data as basic, Cronin’s analysis brings them into stark relief, especially considering shortcomings in U.S. counterterrorism policy to apply such “conventional wisdom.” Some of the findings include the point that the arrest and discrediting of a terrorist leader are generally more effective than assassination as a decapitation technique. Negotiation may not be possible with core members of an organization, but may have value in creating factions within the group. More importantly, the historical record shows that negotiations are not linear, that setbacks will inevitably occur, and that the most successful negotiations occur with terrorist organizations with clearly articulated goals. The findings are important, but a deeper insight may be the underlying point that terrorism is most effective when

governments overreact. In other words, the question may not be how terrorism succeeds, but how governments fail.

The chapter devoted to the end of a terrorist movement due to its success is perhaps the weakest of those presented (the cases are Irgun in Israel and Umkhonto in South Africa). Much of Cronin’s own analysis suggests these causes are won *despite* the use of terrorist violence (and indeed, such violence may have been counterproductive to achieving the goal). Regarding the “success” of establishing the state of Israel, Cronin notes that Irgun chooses to lay down its arms rather than engage in a civil war in Israel (p. 247, note 43, which also points out that this decision coincided with the sinking of a ship carrying arms for Irgun). The goal of an independent Israel was certainly achieved, but Irgun’s contribution to that goal could be contested. Its role could be considered akin to that of a spectator at a sporting event trying to distract the opposition. Can those actions really be connected to “victory”? More importantly, Cronin’s argument regarding the role of terrorist violence in achieving a particular goal does not mention the possibility of the terrorist organization’s value as the “greater evil.” Terrorist violence may be counterproductive politically, but it may also move a government to negotiate with a more moderate entity sharing the goals of the terrorist group. Terrorist violence may not “win” in and of itself, but it may make some compromise more palatable to a government.

Another point for debate lies in the application of the various approaches to al Qaeda. Cronin suggests the various ways al Qaeda may be unique (considering most of them as matters of degree rather than type), and a reader can take issue with some of the conclusions drawn. For

example, Cronin points out al Qaeda’s “resilient structure” but later suggests that its methods of recruitment and forms of communication move it further away from being an organization and closer to a larger social movement with various like-minded affiliates. If the latter is the case, then is it even valuable to discuss a structure to al Qaeda? Cronin herself seems to note this, suggesting “the debate over the size, structure, and membership of al Qaeda is a quaint relic of the twentieth century” (p. 176).

Cronin’s argument illuminates more than it obscures but still touches on only part of the problem. Ultimately, the reasons for the end of terrorism, despite the categorizations offered here, are almost as varied as the reasons given for the causes of terrorism. While Cronin correctly recognizes that focusing on single groups or only the current phenomenon is ahistorical and misses valuable potential lessons, the reasons and factors for the end of terrorism are too broad to be valuable in and of themselves. The preoccupation with an ongoing terrorist organization misses valuable precedents, while simply noting “factors” of terrorism’s demise is too vague. The value is in the synthesis of these approaches: “The lessons of the past must be considered, comprehended, and then carefully calibrated for the particular circumstances and the particular strategy of a particular group, directing its energies at the vulnerabilities of a particular kind of state” (p. 206). Alliteration and repetition notwithstanding, the combination of deep knowledge of a specific group with a broader conceptual framework of the overall phenomenon is the way to greater understanding. **JFQ**

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