



Book review of battle for allegiance: governments, terrorist groups, and constituencies in conflict

by Seden Akcinaroglu and Efe Tokdemir, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2020, 218 pp., £64.50 (Hardback) (UK), ISBN 9780472131990

Jack Kalpakian & Georgi Asatryan

To cite this article: Jack Kalpakian & Georgi Asatryan (2022) Book review of battle for allegiance: governments, terrorist groups, and constituencies in conflict, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 15:2, 515-516, DOI: [10.1080/17539153.2022.2062099](https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2022.2062099)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2022.2062099>



Published online: 01 May 2022.



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Book review of battle for allegiance: governments, terrorist groups, and constituencies in conflict, by Seden Akcinaroglu and Efe Tokdemir, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2020, 218 pp., £64.50 (Hardback) (UK), ISBN 9780472131990

This imaginative book takes on a counter-intuitive topic – why do terrorist groups use non-violent methods? The book is concerned with this main question as well as the effectiveness of government responses towards the use of non-violent methods by terrorist groups and attempts to answer four inter-related questions: Why do terrorist groups pursue violent or non-violent tactics, or both? How does the use of such strategies affect a terrorist group's success in achieving its goals? How do governments respond to such strategies? And how do the people respond to the strategies employed by both terrorist groups and governments? (1).

Unlike many other books addressing terrorist-related issues, this book examines the political appeals that terrorist organisations make to constituents through non-violent means. The book's introduction, which forms the first chapter, contains an excellent literature review that discusses previous work done on the use of non-violent methods by terrorist groups. The book looks at these four questions from the perspective of three different relationships: the government's relationships with both the terrorist organisation and the target constituency, and the relationship between the terrorist organisation and the target constituency (15). The non-violent relationships between these three poles include governance, social services, accommodation, and political support. The book's organisation reflects these three poles as well, with the first part examining the role of non-violent methods used by terrorist organisations, and the second part examining the governments' response. The text uses extensive interviews, as well as a global level quantitative approach, to go beyond the case study method that the authors believe has defined the field.

Chapter 2 discusses the factors that could lead terrorist groups towards non-violent methods. The authors find that terrorist organisations that rely on external state support tend to disregard their nominal constituencies and focus on violent methods with both the state and their constituents. In the third chapter, the authors evaluate the effectiveness of violent versus non-violent methods, while in Chapters 4 and 5 the authors test their arguments concerning the choice of methods and their effectiveness, using both interviews and by building on Audrey Kruth Cronin's work (Cronin 2009). These two chapters are the methodological heart of the book, because the authors use rigorous statistical testing to check their arguments. In the sixth chapter, the authors turn to the state, arguing that terrorism can force the state to improve minority rights and change the way it treats constituencies. Chapter 7 duplicates for the government what the fifth chapter did for the terrorist organisations. Here the authors use statistical methods to check the effect of government conciliatory policies towards ethnic minorities to test for their effectiveness. In the eighth chapter, the authors evaluate the idea that the grievances that lead to terrorism have political solutions. They use the following chapter to crystallise their conclusions and to derive some implications for scholarship and policy making. Overall, the book is very rigorous and displays a high degree of creativity. It clearly builds on the work of Audrey Kruth Cronin and adds value to the field.

Nonetheless, the work contains some weaknesses that must be addressed in future work. First, like many works on terrorism, the book does not grapple with the issue of the politics of defining terrorism. The authors appear to think that a terrorist organisation is whatever a government calls a terrorist organisation. This is reflected in their disproportionate focus

on the Kurdish Labour Party (PKK in its Kurdish acronym), a movement accused of terrorism by Turkey and by its allies. Terrorism is broadly defined by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 49/60 to mean:

Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them (United Nations General Assembly 1995).

An honest reading of this resolution would note that it does not define the actor, meaning that a state is perfectly capable of committing acts of terrorism under it. Given Turkey's record in the 1990s in its Kurdish-inhabited regions, perhaps the authors need to rethink their approach. Any follow-up edition must grapple with the issue of terrorism and how it is defined, preferably in a chapter that addresses both the PKK's use of terrorism and the literal counter-terror that was employed against Kurdish people in regions controlled by Turkey in Kurdistan.

Second, the PKK is mentioned no fewer than sixty times in the book, meaning it appears on average once every three pages. While the authors want to move away from the case study approach, the overwhelming presence of the PKK in their book raises some serious questions about their methodology as well as objectivity. Fundamentally, the authors appear to want to help shape better "counter-terrorist" policy against movements like the PKK, meaning that their approach to the topic has left the academic realm and migrated towards policy, which has its own rules, and these are clearly not applied here. In the deontology of academia, the scholar must make an attempt at even-handedness, which is often achieved through focusing on cause-and-effect relationships and upon historical factors.

"Why did the PKK evolve and why did it act the way it did?" is an academic question. "How can we create better counter-terrorist policies to defeat the PKK?" is not an academic question. At some stage, the authors need to address their own bias in this book. And to be clear, this is not a bias against Kurdish people or culture, but rather a tilt towards statism and a preference for the government that invariably alters the analysis and morphs it into something else.

References

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Jack Kalpakian
Al Akhawayn University, Morocco
 J.Kalpakian@au.ma

Georgi Asatryan
Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, Moscow, Russia

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2022.2062099>

