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Lecture critique de Daniel Byman, A High Price. The Triumphs and Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism

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Daniel Byman, *A High Price. The Triumphs and Failures of Israeli Counterterrorism* New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, 464 pages.

Daniel Byman, professor at Georgetown University and senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy, has written a monumental book depicting Israel's long fight against terrorism, from the years preceding the state's creation in 1948 till today. The book is divided into five substantive sections. The first one deals with the pre-Oslo period. It opens on the formative years, which were marked by repeated and often bloody attacks that targeted the "infiltrators". Then it turns to the years between the Six-Days War and 1970, the year the PLO was expelled from Jordan, leading the group to install itself in Lebanon and form the Black September Organization, responsible for numerous attacks including the 1972 hostage-taking at the Munich Olympic Games. The author goes on to discuss the 1982 "Peace for Galilee" Operation, launched to put an end to the PLO's claim over the West Bank, and to help the Maronites, led by Bachir Gemayel, attain the presidency. Until Israel withdrew the Tzahal forces from Southern Lebanon in 2000, the operation resulted in several disastrous and well known failures - the loss of Christian allies, the emergence of Hizballah, the deaths of hundreds of soldiers and the subsequent condemnation by the international community.

The second section focuses on the period between the Oslo Accords, signed on the White House lawn in 1993 by Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat, and the controversial Operation Cast Lead, a three-week armed conflict launched in the Gaza strip in 2008, which set off waves of international condemnation. The third one analyzes the enduring conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. Tackling the issue of qualifying Hezbollah and Hamas as terrorist organizations, Byman takes care to define the notion of terrorism, making the distinction between attacks against civilians and attacks against military targets, excluding the latter from the category of "terrorism".

A fourth section is devoted to "Jewish terrorism", inflicted against both Palestinians and Israelis accused of being traitors to the cause of "Greater Israel", of which Rabin would later

become one of the most illustrious victims. The fifth and final section juxtaposes several issues: the effects of targeted killings, of the security barrier erected by Israel and the “dilemmas” faced by its leaders. The author explores to what extent the lessons from this conflict are transferable to other democracies, and outlines the major political errors made by Israel.

From this impressive amount of information the author draws several compelling conclusions. Israel’s fight against terrorism has been neither a complete success nor a total failure; Byman’s picture of the conflict is depicted more in shades of grey than black and white. On the positive side of the balance he puts the successes of the Israeli secret services that foiled multiple attacks, arrested numerous perpetrators, and thus prevented countless Israeli deaths. Targeted killings proved effective, the separation barrier complicated terrorist efforts, and despite its “harsh interrogation practices” Israel has, in his eyes, managed to reconcile counter-terrorism with respect for human rights over the last two decades. Moreover, the Israeli population has shown extraordinary resilience in its capacity to lead a normal daily life despite wave after wave of suicide attacks.

On the negative side, he points to the deliberate ignorance of Israelis regarding the political consequences of this struggle, specifically, the fact that it led to the radicalisation of warfare and the creation of groups such as Hezbollah. The dissuasion strategy has not always been very successful. While many armed extremist groups now hesitate to provoke Israel, retaliatory measures are harder to launch because of the vigilance of the media. The search for a political solution to this conflict has been greatly complicated by Israel’s decision to erect the security barrier. Last, insufficient attention has been paid to Jewish terrorism and there is a double standard in the Israeli response, Palestinian terrorists being punished more severely than their Jewish counterparts. The author concludes with recommendations encouraging Israel to find a political solution to the conflict.

From an academic perspective, this book is an outstanding achievement in pedagogical clarity and wealth of data. It does not limit itself to the analysis of Israel’s counter-terrorism policy,

it also provides useful insights into the motivations of Palestinian armed groups. It draws on numerous interviews that reflect both Israeli and Palestinian perspectives. However, the book gives rise to a number of reservations. It lacks a theoretical framework, and yet, the notion of “asymmetrical warfare” at the core of the study could have provided one. The author strives to balance the positive and the negative aspects, but falls short of offering a hierarchy in his conclusions, or any strong ideas regarding this “Shadow War”. The book also lacks a comparative perspective between Israel and other countries, like Great Britain or France, who have had to deal in the past with the same type of asymmetrical conflict.

Moreover, the “success” of targeted killings must be qualified. Byman writes: “Israel has successfully used targeted killings to disrupt terrorist groups, reducing their effectiveness and forcing their leaders underground”. But history has shown that this modus operandi was at times effective, at others counterproductive, and the question is, under what conditions can it prove the most dissuasive against terrorist attacks. The January 2002 assassination of Raed Karmi, one of the leaders of the Tanzim, occurred despite the cease-fire Israelis and Palestinians had just reached, and pushed Fatah to resort to suicide attacks beyond the green line. This explains the dramatic increase of suicide bombings starting in 2002. The incident, mentioned in the book, should have brought the author to a more nuanced global conclusion.

Overall, this book is an unquestionable success, well-nuanced, and displaying a great intellectual honesty. That is why, paradoxically, it is unlikely that it will please the Israeli public, who, in general, is more inclined to accept the explanations given by its leaders than to dwell on the nuanced, serious and sophisticated analysis written by an academic.

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