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Review

Triadic Coercion: Israel's Targeting of States That Host Nonstate Actors

Wendy Pearlman and Boaz Atzili. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 384pp.

Richard English*

This scholarly, serious-minded book represents a valuable addition to the Columbia University Press series, Columbia Studies in Terrorism and Irregular Warfare. Considering the decades-old Arab-Israeli conflict, Wendy Pearlman and Boaz Atzili address the issue of what they term “triadic coercion—in which a state directs military threats or strikes at another state to force it to take action against a nonstate actor to which it offers shelter or assistance” (242). This tactic has been common enough to be historically significant, and the Israeli case that is examined here offers a useful laboratory within which to offer systematic consideration of the phenomenon.

Pearlman and Atzili are especially interested in two questions. First, what are the conditions under which triadic coercion is likely to succeed? The authors argue that the key variable here is the strength of the targeted host state: “For the host state to act effectively against a nonstate actor on its soil, it requires internal political cohesion and institutional capacity” (2). On the basis of this argument, triadic coercion is most likely to prove effective when the targeted regime is strong, rather than weak. The authors’ second

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question therefore is why, given that such coercion is only likely to work against strong regimes, states (including Israel) have frequently deployed it against weak ones also. Their answer here is that strategic culture holds the explanation: “A state’s system of beliefs, values, and practices can elevate the use of coercive force as an appropriate response—and host states as appropriate targets—independent of the efficacy of those choices” (3).

The book clarifies its conceptual framework well, and it draws on a good scholarly literature (including the pioneering work of scholars such as Georgetown’s Daniel Byman, and Ray Hinnebusch from the University of St. Andrews) as it pursues its argument in a well-organized fashion. Chapters successively consider Israel’s historical evolution in relation to triadic coercion, and then the cases of Israel’s approach to Egypt, Syria, the Palestinian Authority, and Lebanon; then two non-Israeli cases (India in relation to Pakistan and Kashmir, and Turkey in relation to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, Iraq, Syria, and Iran) are offered as comparators.

Israel’s success in coercing states to act against nonstate actors has been mixed, but Pearlman and Atzili plausibly point out that strategic culture in Israel has involved a moralizing orientation: “Israel increasingly defended triadic coercion on the grounds that it was morally justified” (21). The history of non-state terrorism and state counter-terrorism has frequently reflected a paradoxical and mutually-shaping intimacy, and there are echoes again of that here. The nonstate groups attacking Israel, of course, justify their own violence often in moral terms rather than purely in relation to instrumental efficacy. And it is the painful atrocities duly suffered on each side which seem to give force to the moralizing sustenance of conflict, despite the strategic ineffectiveness of the violence so practised.

The central spine of the book is that, whether defiant or cooperative, the targeted host state is most likely to do what the coercing state demands if it is a strong rather than weak regime. Moreover, Israel’s approach to triadic coercion repeatedly emerges from this account as being determined by a strategic culture that is at odds with the politics of instrumental efficacy; the “embrace of triadic coercion was conditioned by Israel’s strategic culture, in terms of both decision-making processes and ideas” (152); “The impact of strategic culture on Israel’s use of triadic coercion against the second Intifada was evidenced in both its decision-making and ideational pillars” (172). Part of this involved the important fact that “strategic culture reinforced the idea that coercive force should aim not simply at enemies’ capabilities but also at their consciousness, in order to change their

beliefs about Israel. In particular, Israel's aim became convincing its enemies of Israel's will and overwhelming capacity to punish any who dared to oppose it" (244). This is a vital point. And, again, it has echoes on the other side of the martial fence: one of the key arguments stressed again and again by nonstate actors is that their violence demonstrates their own enduring will, and the need for their demands and for their organizations to be part of the relevant political future.

Overall, more interviews would have further strengthened the account offered in this book, since such sources tend to offer nuance in analysis at the individual level. And, as always, readers will think of areas in which the bibliography might have been stronger (on Hamas, for instance, given the importance of that movement for Israel and Israeli strategic thinking in the past few decades). But the book is impressive: it offers a sustained and fascinating argument on a major topic.