By Brigitte Nacos

Many have tried to enter the textbook market on terrorism but few single authors have seen their textbooks go into a second or third edition. An exception is Prof. Brigitte Nacos who has been teaching on the subject for 16 years at Columbia University in New York. Dr. Nacos, a German foreign correspondent and academic who authored more than half a dozen books, made her name mainly through her incisive analyses on the relationship between terrorism and the media, (e.g. her 2002 volume Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism). The volume under review here is much more than an update of two previous editions. While originally written for an undergraduate audience, it can serve as a solid basis for graduate courses as well. Half of the volume deals with terrorism, half with counter-terrorism. Rather than covering all possible subjects broadly and superficially, Brigitte Nacos concentrates on a limited number of essential subjects such as ‘The Utility of Hard and Soft Power in Counterterrorism’ or ‘Balancing Security, Liberty and Human Rights’. She notes that the terrorist calculus is driven by a set of four assumptions:

(i) groups that are too weak to fight nation-states in conventional civil or foreign wars tend to opt for terrorism, (ii) governments are ill-prepared to react to the type of psychological warfare that terrorists wage against their citizens, (iii) because of their openness and far-reaching civil liberties –especially press freedom – liberal democracies are more susceptible to terrorist activities and propaganda than authoritarian regimes, and (iv) in reaction to serious acts of terror, decision-makers in constitutional democracies are likely to overreact in efforts to prevent and counter terrorism (p.5). Nacos defines terrorism “as political violence or the threat of violence by groups or individuals who deliberately target civilians or non-combatants in order to influence the behaviour and actions of targeted publics and governments” (p. 31). In other words, her focus is on non-state actors, holding that “…when governments commit this type of violence, there are a number of appropriate pejorative terms, such as war crimes, crimes against humanity, human rights violations, genocides, atrocities – and terror.”(p.29). Having seen Nazi terror from close quarters in Germany herself, Brigitte Nacos is not minimizing state terror. Rather, she argues that characterizing this kind of political violence committed by power-holders in states as ‘terrorism’ “would actually minimize the enormity of systematic political violence and mass killings of civilians by those in control of states” (p.30). In her discussion of religious terrorism, Nacos not only focuses on Islam but also shows how terrorism has been anchored in some Christian and Jewish traditions. Her treatment of crucial issues are reflecting the latest scholarly discussions; these are ably summarized before she comes down on one or the other side of the debate. Regarding the question of the effectiveness of terrorism, she concludes, for instance, that “….the terrorist rate of success is pretty high when it comes to short-term goals but quite low when it comes to long-term objectives” (p.131). Nacos, as a “born” journalist, is most at home in the discussion of the role of the media. She notes that terrorists want three things; (i) attention,
(ii) recognition of their grievances, demand and objectives, and (iii) to win the respect and even gain legitimacy in some circles, countries, or regions (p.58). For Nacos, “…the news media and terrorists are not involved in a love story; they are strange bedfellows in a marriage of convenience” (p.263). To support her argument, she quotes a suspected London-based follower of Bin Laden who told an interviewer, “Terror is the language of the twenty-first century. If I want something, I terrorize you to achieve it”. (pp. 299-300) – a statement that, according to her, “goes to the heart of the terrorist calculus”(p. 300). Nevertheless, the author concludes that given the poor long-term success rate of terrorism, there is no reason for gloom and doom. (p.303).

This is a very information-rich and well-argued scholarly work which places Bigitte Nacos in the good company of Louise Richardson and Martha Crenshaw as a leading female author in the field of Terrorism Studies. (Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid).