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Review of doctoral thesis

Nir Barkan Nagr MA, „The Mechanism of „Targeted Killing” as a part of Israeli Counter – terrorism Policy”, Poznań 2021, written under the supervision of prof. Radosław Fiedler and assistant doctoral supervision of dr Artur Pohl

1. Choice of the dissertation subject


The thesis under review is located within the area of political science and administration and security studies. Subject chosen by Nir Barkan Nagr is very important, particularly in the contemporary world, where the issues of terrorism and counter-terrorism still matter very much, due to threats posed by numerous terrorist organizations, networks and individuals. Hence, the reasoning standing behind the choice of this particular subject is perfectly understandable – the State of Israel is seriously threatened with terrorism since its very creation and, as a result, Israel’s experience in the field of counteracting this kind of threat is unmatched. No other state has also developed similarly advanced and persistent program(s) of “targeted killings”, directed against multiple terrorist organizations – even American attempts to “eliminate selectively” terrorist leaders, commanders and foot-soldiers in the “Afpak” region under the administration of two Presidents of the USA: G. W. Bush and B. Obama have been quite limited in comparison (at least as time framework is concerned). Thorough analysis of this vast and longstanding Israeli experience, proposed by Nir Barkan Nagr in his dissertation, can definitely provide essential assistance in understanding the very nature of such efforts and its many risks, challenges as well as advantages and disadvantages and complex character of this type of counter-terrorist activity.



2. Substantive assessment of the dissertation

The dissertation consists of the Introduction, four main chapters divided into numerous subchapters, references (bibliography) and fourteen Appendices. It has an abstract in English, unfortunately there is no Polish abstract which would have been quite useful in case some members of the Polish public could have some insight into the content of this intriguing dissertation.

In the Introduction the reader will find general description of the thesis, including research goals, research hypotheses, research problems/ questions, research methods, work structure and short review of the literature in the field. The main objectives of the thesis under review are: “to examine whether the use of “targeted killing” is an effective counter-terrorist tool”” and whether it deters and reduces terrorist activity. As the Author claims it is done through the review of the existing literature supported by the analysis of the Israeli use of this method, particularly during the so called “second intifada” (2000 – 2005) till the end of the first decade of the XXI Century. Two main research hypotheses claim that: 1) “the use of a targeted killing mechanism (...) reduces the number of terrorist attacks against the State of Israel and there is a direct effect” and: 2) it “reduces the number of terrorist incidents, due to a lack of leadership and operational infrastructure for the organization”. Whether the author was able to verify precisely these hypotheses I will pertain further on. Further research “problems/ questions” offered by the Author present even more general approach and deal with the possibilities of effective deterring and reducing by the use of targeted killing the acts of terrorism in the long term, so it is difficult to understand how this relates to the aforementioned research hypotheses? As far as research method(s) are concerned, the author claims that “this research study is a comparative research study (...) on the basis of qualitative analysis with the combination of quantitative data from the fields of economics, the military and law” and, alas, I must note that it is definitely not. Introduction contains also quite extensive review of the existing literature divided into “general deterrence theories”, “deterrence against terrorist organizations” which is useful and helps trace the origins of the academic, legal and political discussions on the subject. First chapter deals with the problem of defining the notion of “targeted killing” and discusses extensively the methods of counter – terrorism in general and the problem of Human Rights. This is a strong point of this thesis: as terrorism is a cumbersome and ruthless tactics posing a huge problem for an attacked state and society, there are simply no good and morally inoffensive ways of stopping it. Terrorism is itself an activity implying gross abuses of fundamental human rights and defeating this type of warfare provides all decision – makers



with a rough dilemma: how to tackle this problem effectively and protect own society against the enemy using asymmetric “war of attrition” and at the same time do not violate widely accepted principles, protecting basic human rights? Unfortunately, there is no perfect answer to this fundamental question important for democratic states and open societies, hence the problem of methods used in truly effective counter-terrorism should be a subject of careful analysis. Hence, the question of their effectiveness *vis a vis* potential damage they may cause to the reputation of the state using such a harsh method as targeted killing is very relevant. It should be stressed that Nir Barkan Nagr is perfectly aware of these dilemmas and challenges for the democratic state stemming from its counter-terrorist activity, as it can be read in the title of one sub-chapter based on the vast literature devoted to this precise problem. Terrorists definitely are “unlawful combatants”, using cunning method of inflicting damage to the attacked societies and posing serious threat to its citizens, so it cannot come as a surprise that state institutions responsible for maintaining public security seek most effective measures to combat terrorism. They should be based on a precise legislation, which enables the state officials to act within the norms of law and providing them with a proper legitimization for conducted actions. Chapter two presents in details the politics of targeted killings (in Hebrew: *sikul memukad*) in the State of Israel. It deals with the main objectives of this activity (self-defence, punishment, deterrence), its prescribed influence on the abilities of terrorist entities, and the interrelation with morality, system of justice and social norms. This chapter is solid and clear. Chapter three provides an analysis of the so called *Al-Aqsa Intifada* (2000 – 2005) and terrorist actions carried out by Palestinians terror networks further till the year 2009. The Author describes various reasons for the outbreak of the armed rebellion known as “second Intifada”, its characteristics and focuses on the terrorist activities during this clash of the Hamas, Islamic Jihad in Palestine and Fatah organizations. He provides an interesting analysis of the suicide terrorist attacks, mass shootings, shootings, car bomb attacks and attacks with other explosive devices. He also presents the activity and response of the Israeli security forces and IDF during this period. Chapter four includes final discussion on the subject and conclusions of the dissertation. It describes particular cases of the use of targeted killings method by the State of Israel in the period 1956 – 2010 and the overall general statistics of targeted killings in the period under research. Finally, the author refers to his research hypotheses with the use of literature analysis and presents his main findings. And here lays the biggest problem with the overall results of the dissertation under review. Since the Author presents very general hypotheses and does not operationalize them in any way, it is really hard to assess whether they were properly verified. One cannot know from the content of the dissertation in which precise

way the Author managed to address his hypotheses – and what kind of crude data justify the final findings of his dissertation, considering the fact, that many various factors, apart from targeted killings, were influencing the overall terrorist situation in the years 2000 – 2009 in Israel. Targeted killings were not one and only activities carried out by the IDF and security and intelligence services of the State of Israel in its effort to counter the wave of terrorist attacks, so it is really difficult to determine, on the basis of research material provided in the dissertation, whether this factor or another was influencing the activities of terrorist entities in a presumed way. This task could have been achieved through the advanced statistical analysis of much broader and more precise data, and perhaps it might not lead to unquestioned conclusions. Nevertheless, the overall quality of analysis does not discard the merits of this dissertation.

3. Methodology and formal assessment of the dissertation

Mixed research methods have been used in dissertation, however, qualitative analysis vastly outnumbers quantitative approach, which is limited to the presentation, not even in a structured manner, some numerical data. No methods of statistical analysis was in use in any way, and research hypotheses were not, as I have mentioned before, properly operationalize, what makes them barely verifiable. However, the analysis of literature done by the Author of this dissertation brings interesting argumentation and his line of reasoning is pretty well established anyway. Language used in dissertation is correct though in some sections of the dissertation polemical fervour outweighs cold analytical skills of the doctoral student.

Bibliography is arranged properly and appears in alphabetical order, references have been drawn up correctly and in accordance with accepted standards.

4. Conclusion:

The main problem with the doctoral dissertation under review is that it proposes a very interesting and important research problem, promises to provide the reader with the profound analysis of this problem and ultimately fails to keep all its promises. It could have been a meticulous examination of quantitative data and some part of such data are presented in the form of fourteen graphs which are rarely, if ever, is used in the body of text. No modern advanced statistical analysis has been in use to offer a wider quantitative view on the mechanism of targeted killing in Israel. Secondly, though the Author declares in the Introduction, that his thesis offers a “comparative analysis” of the research problem it does not make any comparison

of the Israeli “targeting killing” policies in different periods of time (e.g. in the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90 s of the XX Century, compared with the period 2000 – 2009). Neither it compares this Israeli approach with apparently similar activities of other States, e.g. U.S. targeted killings campaign in the Afpak region, which might be particularly useful. This American military intervention created an interesting “case” when its military and security apparatus had to cope with vast terrorist activities of numerous Jihadi organizations located there, aimed at destabilizing the country and kicking them off, what by the way they ultimately managed to achieve. It is a pity, cause these are lost chances to put this dissertation on an entirely different academic level, far above the final result – pretty “conventional” review of existing literature and basic analysis of available “cases”. The main weight of this dissertation is put on the scrutiny of legal, political and ethical arguments used in the discussion over Israeli “targeted killing” policies and practice. But it is good enough to defend itself as a doctoral dissertation. It is based on a well-selected bibliographical material, and deals with numerous arguments analysed by the Author.

Hence I am convinced that despite some visible misconceptions and flaws, the Ph. D. thesis presented by Nir Barkan Nagr, entitled „The Mechanism of „Targeted Killing” as a part of Israeli Counter – terrorism Policy”, contributes well enough to the research the subject and hence meets the statutory requirements formulated in Article 13 (1) of the Act of 14 March 2003 on Academic Degrees and Title and Degrees and Title in Art (Journal of Law, 2017, item 1789) in connection with Article 179 (1) of the Act of 3 July 2018, the provisions introducing the Act – Law on Higher Education and Science (Journal of Law, 2018, item 1669, od 2019, item 39, 534), presenting the doctoral student’s general knowledge and the ability to conduct independently scientific work in the field of political science and administration, as well as providing original solution to the scientific problem. Therefore I propose to accept the thesis and admit Nir Barkan Nagr to further stages of the doctoral degree procedures.

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