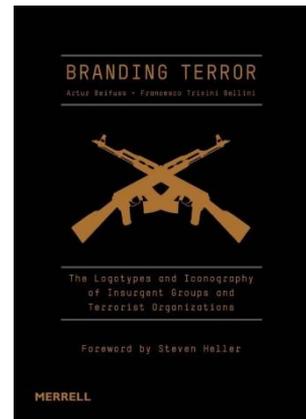# Branding Terror: The Logotypes and Iconography of Insurgent Groups and Terrorist Organizations

by Artur Beifuss and Francesco Trivini Bellini
Merrell Publishers, London
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Reviewed by Christian Luc Carnus

Visual branding as a means to improve the public image of terrorist organisations and insurgent groups is not a new concept. Nonetheless, relevant studies of terrorist iconography are under-represented in academic literature and the subject-matter is, arguably, poorly understood by intelligence practitioners. *Branding Terror*'s authors, former counterterrorism analyst Artur Beifuss, and graphic designer Francesco Trivini Bellini, systematically break down the images, colours and typographies represented in the logos and, when relevant, also the flags and other imagery, of sixty-five terrorist organisations. Their study suggests that terrorist groups perceive themselves as brands and that they use deliberate imagery to broadcast their aims.

The book itself is bound in leather and is aesthetically pleasing. Steven Heller, a former Art Director at the New York Times, sets the tone with an excellent foreword and his summation of the book's relevance to the contemporary international environment is one of the highlights.

Beifuss introduces the authors' aims early on; stating that in order to better understand the terrorist threat, they have analysed the "…visual language of terrorist organisations as conveyed through logos and other aspects of their visual communication." His writing is articulate and each group is portrayed in impartial and simple language. The book is well-researched and while it does not incorporate every known terrorist group, most of the major groups are included; as are all corners of the geographic, religious and political spectrums. These groups were selected from the official lists of designated foreign terrorist organisations of the United States, the European Union, Russia, India, and Australia.

Each organisation is given its own chapter; broken down into three sections. The first section provides an overview of the group and its capabilities are detailed; along with a timeline of its involvement in major terrorist attacks. The second section introduces the group's logo in black and white and specifies the logo's colour schemes and pantone coding. A full-colour version and an interpretation of its colours, imagery and slogans are presented in the final section.

While the details of each organisation are mainly descriptive, an overall analysis of the logos provides insight into their use of branding. For example, Beifuss notes the meaning of specific colours, such as green, blue and black— which represent Islam. Images are also analysed for their symbolism and it is apparent that specific objects are well-represented in the icons of certain ideologies, for example the map of Palestine, which often features within the logo of groups claiming to be dedicated to the liberation of Palestine. Certain animals are also regularly present in these logos, such as birds of prey which frequently appear in the logo of groups linked with violent struggle.

From a counterterrorism perspective, *Branding Terror* is highly relevant, particularly in this age of social media, which enables terrorist groups to effortlessly connect with potential recruits and sympathisers. These groups promote themselves as brands in the same sense that commercial advertisements market consumer products to strengthen their brand and global influence. Counterterrorism analysts can use the book's list of terrorist groups in order to identify which groups employ these branding mechanisms. Why is this important? Once a brand is identified, governments can work towards publicly undermining the group's particular narrative in order to discourage individuals from joining their cause or from lending financial and/or moral support.

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is an example of a successful and dynamically evolving terrorist brand. Its iconic black flag bearing the *Shahada* (the Muslim declaration of faith) in white, combined with their black uniforms and balaclavas and their theatrical use of the sword; a traditional symbol of Islam, has strengthened their visual brand as the legitimate emissaries of Islam and has made their iconography and members instantly recognisable to the general public.

While iconography is informative, it should be noted that the study of logos and icons alone is insufficient towards identifying a brand. Terrorist groups use other additional visual instruments, such as symbolic uniforms, to form their

trademarks. Clothing and action figures celebrating ISIS can even be purchased online. They also reinforce their brand through the use of dramatic and cinematic videos, military parades and religious rituals, such as beheadings. I would be interested in an updated edition of *Branding Terror*, which not only covers even more groups but also incorporates these types of additional branding devices.

The book provides an outstanding analysis of terrorist and insurgent iconography and is a superb introduction to terrorism. It is highly recommended to any intelligence practitioner. While the pantone coding and typography descriptions may not be greatly beneficial to an analyst, the study is also aimed at graphic designers. Being a counterterrorism analyst with the United Nations, I can attest that *Branding Terror* has been a valuable addition to my personal professional library.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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