

FLETCHER SECURITY REVIEW

Summer 2017 | Vol. 4 No. 1



Book Review - *Hearts, Minds, and Hydras: Fighting
Terrorism in Afghanistan, Pakistan, America, and Beyond*
— *Dilemmas and Lessons* by William Nester

A Book Review by Basem Aly

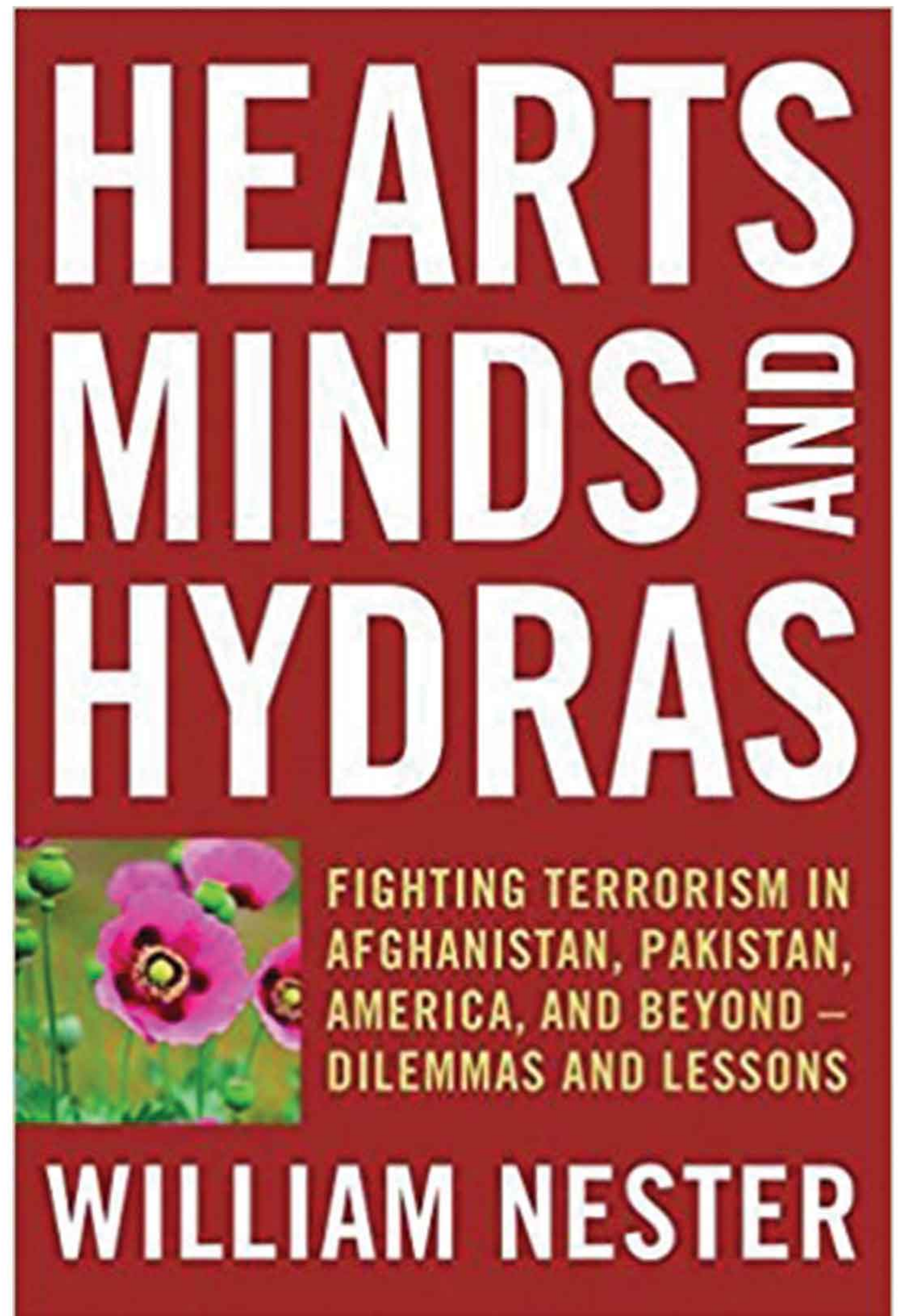
Hearts, Minds, and Hydras: Fighting Terrorism in Afghanistan, Pakistan, America, and Beyond — Dilemmas and Lessons by William Nester

Book Review by Basem Aly

Decision makers and academics have debated for decades the most effective strategies to defeat militant groups. The absence of a clear center of gravity for conventional militaries to target creates hardships in achieving strategic objectives against non-state actors. In a conventional war, the force with a higher capability to destroy these centers of gravity — such as weapons depots and troop deployment locations — will likely win. Yet, when conventional militaries encounter non-state groups, whose centers of gravity may be well hidden or highly dispersed, the results are quite different. The Israeli wars against Hezbollah and the U.S. war in Vietnam exemplify the difficulties related to this traditional dilemma. One counterinsurgency program, suggested by classical theorists such as David Galula, says that success requires focusing on winning the support of local populations by “capturing hearts and minds.” The logic is obvious: locals living in warzones know where militants are hiding their weapons, money, and personnel. Thus, militaries need local support. In his book, *Hearts, Minds, and Hydras: Fighting Terrorism in Afghanistan, Pakistan, America, and Beyond — Dilemmas and Lessons*, William Nester argues that capturing hearts and minds is not enough. Rather, Nester develops two primary arguments to show that militaries need a multidimensional strategy in order to succeed.

First, Nester argues that governments and militaries must convince local populations that terrorists are enemies, not allies. Changing local perceptions is the expected outcome of a hearts-and-minds campaign, which traditionally involves providing aid and internal security. Nester emphasizes that this *must* be backed by other factors, including effective intelligence, good governance, and solving existing socio-economic grievances, in order for a hearts-and-minds counterinsurgency operation to be effective.

Second, Nester states, “only after carefully analyzing the ends, means, strengths, and weaknesses of oneself and one’s enemy can one begin to devise the strategies and tactics with the best chances of victory.” He believes that militant groups differ from one another in their ob-



jectives, stages of development and internal structure. He particularly analyzes the development of al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Without denying the theological justifications for al-Qaeda attacks, he focuses on its paramilitary moves, which mainly involve attacks on U.S. assets and personnel globally. This differs from groups such as Hamas or the Islamic Jihad, whose politico-ideological thinking and objectives lead to attacks against Israeli targets. Different objectives translate to differences in target selection; thus, governments cannot replicate prior strategies with new conflicts and actors.

Nester fails to distinguish between the concepts of insurgency and terrorism, using them interchangeably. He describes terrorism as one tactic that armed groups

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sometimes follow, and differentiates between “old” and “new” terrorism. One might reasonably assume that the political objective of militants is the success of their insurgency through socio-political support and territorial control. But, as Nester does not make this explicit, readers are left uncertain. Nester’s argument would have been stronger had he left no ambiguity between these critical concepts.

Nester claims that each insurgency requires a distinct strategy. Focusing on Afghanistan, specifically the Taliban and al-Qaeda, Nester compares the responses of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush to the threat of Islamist militancy. Clinton refused to launch a counterinsurgency campaign, instead imposing financial sanctions and supporting a strategy of leadership decapitation. This strategy failed to defeat al-Qaeda partially because Clinton refused to create alliances with local groups for intelligence support to locate bin Laden.

After 9/11, the Bush administration created a series of alliances with anti-Taliban groups and neighboring countries during its invasion of Afghanistan. For the Taliban and al-Qaeda, these alliances resulted in tactical defeats, an inability to access financial resources, and daily pressure from aerial bombing. According to Nester, the Bush administration’s failure to stop members of al-Qaeda and the Taliban from fleeing to Pakistan was a tactical mistake that allowed for their eventual return. This discussion is the most useful in terms of producing new research about the limitations of depending on indigenous groups in asymmetric warfare. Nester states that Taliban and Al-Qaeda leaders secretly reached an agreement with the pro-U.S. groups in Afghanistan that allowed them to flee.

Although it does not discuss Barack Obama’s presiden-

cy, the book offers insights into how we can analyze his policy towards militants. Compared to his predecessors, Obama faced a complex situation after the Arab Spring as dozens of armed groups emerged. His defense doctrine was an attempt to reach a middle ground between his predecessors’ use of military force and avoidance of total involvement in asymmetric conflicts. The administration led international coalitions against militants in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya, and it received support from diverse local militant groups. Despite being empirically rich with counterinsurgency lessons, Nester ignores the US’ most recent counterinsurgency experience — specifically how Obama was the first president to deal with the implications of killing bin Laden and al-Qaeda’s split into different groups.

Nester hypothesizes that combating non-state actors requires more than winning hearts and minds. His arguments, however, fall short of proving such a generalization holds true around the world. Nester’s specific case studies involve the U.S. military fighting in relatively similar conflicts and adopting strategies and tactics, which it adapts across its various theaters of operation. Not all conflicts against non-state groups are identical to these. Taking this into account and diversifying his case studies would have improved his analysis and strengthened his argument. As it is, Nester fails to justify how the cases he analyzes are applicable across the spectrum of asymmetric wars. A more fruitful comparison would have compared two cases, the first involving a conventional military and militants who utilize guerrilla and conventional tactics, and the second presenting a conventional military confronting a traditional, guerrilla-based armed group.

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