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Seeking the Roots of Terrorism

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In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, a consensus quickly emerged that poverty and lack of education were major causes of terrorist acts and support for terrorism. Subscribing to that theory are politicians, journalists, and many scholars, as well as officials responsible for administering aid to poor countries. For example, James D. Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank, asserted that the war on terrorism "will not be won until we have come to grips with the problem of poverty and thus the sources of discontent."

The consensus is bipartisan. "We fight against poverty," George W. Bush said in a speech in Monterrey, Mexico, "because hope is an answer to terror. ... We will challenge the poverty and hopelessness and lack of education and failed governments that too often allow conditions that terrorists can seize." At the other end of the political spectrum, Al Gore, at the Council on Foreign Relations, argued that the anger that underlies terrorism in the Islamic world stems from "the continued failure to thrive, as rates of economic growth stagnate, while the cohort of unemployed young men under 20 continues to increase."

Many well-regarded public intellectuals also concur. For example, Elie Wiesel claimed, "Education is the way to eliminate terrorism." And the Nobel laureate Kim Dae Jung asserted, "At the bottom of terrorism is poverty."

With such a strong and broad coalition in agreement, we asked, what evidence links poverty and poor education to terrorism? Perhaps surprisingly, the relevant literature and the new evidence that we assembled challenge the consensus. In a study we recently circulated as a National Bureau of Economic Research working paper, we considered support for, and participation in, terrorism at both individual and national levels. Although the available data at the national level are weaker, both types of evidence point in the same direction and lead us to conclude that any connection between poverty, education, and terrorism is, at best, indirect, complicated, and probably quite weak.

Defining terrorism is difficult. Some definitions, like the State Department's, emphasize the "subnational," "clandestine"

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character of "politically motivated violence," while others include the state as a perpetrator. We have focused on substate terrorism because we believe that the roots of state-sponsored terrorism are substantially different. What's common to most definitions is the inclusion of terrorists' goal of inducing fear in a target audience that transcends the physical harm caused to immediate victims, the ultimate purpose being persuasion.

A large body of evidence exists on hate crimes, a close cousin to terrorism. These are crimes against members of a religious, racial, or ethnic group selected solely because they are part of that group. Hate crimes are usually less orchestrated than terrorist acts, and thus a cleaner measure of the "pure supply" of those willing to carry out hateful acts. The effect of both terrorism and hate crimes is to wreak terror in a greater number of people than those directly affected by the violence. Until recently, social scientists thought that economic deprivation was a crucial determinant of hate crimes. However, after research by Donald P. Green and his collaborators at Yale, a consensus is emerging in the social-science literature that the incidence of hate crimes, such as lynchings of African-American people in the South, or violence against gay and lesbian people in New York, bears little relation to economic conditions.

About 10 percent of the 3,100 counties in the United States are currently home to a hate group such as the Ku Klux Klan, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center. A study by the Swarthmore economists Philip N. Jefferson and Frederic L. Pryor found that the likelihood that a hate group was located in a county was unrelated to the unemployment rate in the county, and positively related to the education level in the county (that is, the higher the education level in the county, the greater the likelihood of a hate group). Similarly, a study by one of us (Krueger) and Jörn-Steffen Pischke, now of the London School of Economics and Political Science, found that in Germany, both the average education level and average wage in the country's 543 counties were unrelated to the incidence of violence against foreigners occurring there.

Neither cyclical downturns nor longer-term regional disparities in living standards appear to be correlated with the incidence of a wide range of hate crimes. That doesn't prove the absence of a causal relationship, of course; but if there were a direct causal effect one would expect hate crimes to rise during periods of economic hardship. Rather than economic conditions, the hate-crimes literature suggests that a breakdown in law enforcement, and sanctioning and encouragement of civil disobedience, are significant causes.

Turning to terrorism, public opinion polls can provide information on which segments of the population support terrorist or militant activities. In December 2001, the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, in the West

Bank city of Ramallah, conducted a public-opinion poll of 1,357 Palestinians age 18 or older in the West Bank and Gaza on topics including the September 11 attacks in the United States, support for an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, and attacks against Israel.

The poll reveals several things. First, support for attacks against Israeli targets by the Palestinian population is widespread (from 74 percent to 90 percent, depending on the subgroup), though it is important to emphasize that there is a distinction between support for attacks expressed in a poll at a particular moment and participation or active collusion in such attacks. Second, a majority, more than 60 percent of the population surveyed, believes that attacks against Israeli civilians have helped to achieve Palestinian rights in a way that negotiations could not have.

These results offer no evidence that educated people are less supportive of attacks against Israeli targets. In fact, the support for attacks against Israeli targets is higher among those with more than a secondary-school education than among those with only an elementary-school education, and the support is considerably lower among those who are illiterate.

The study showed also that support for attacks against Israeli targets is particularly strong among students, merchants, and professionals. Notably, the unemployed are somewhat less likely to support such attacks. If poverty were indeed the wellspring of support for terrorism or politically motivated violence, one would have expected the unemployed to be more supportive of attacks than were merchants and professionals, but the evidence points the other way.

News reports often create the impression that Islam is a source of terrorism. Note, though, that suicide attacks are a relatively new, alien element in the history of mainstream Islam. The Koran rejects suicide, and classical Islamic legal texts consider it a serious sin. True, a fighter who dies for faith or another noble cause is held in great esteem in both legal and cultural tradition, and those who die on the path of God are promised immediate recompense. Individuals or Islamic sects have used political assassinations (including an 11th-century Shiite sect in Northern Iran, the corrupted nickname of which is the origin of the term "assassin"). Those fighters, however, did not commit suicide attacks. Also, suicide attacks and other forms of terrorism have been carried out by people belonging to other established religions, too, and by individuals professing no religious faith at all. Timothy McVeigh's heinous terrorist attack on American soil, for instance, cannot be linked to organized religion.

To study the correlates of involvement in a terrorist organization more directly, we performed a detailed analysis of participation in Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hezbollah is a

multifaceted organization that provides health and educational services, has a political wing, and is also believed to engage in terrorism. The U.S. State Department and British Home Office have both classified Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. We compared the background characteristics of 129 members of Hezbollah's militant wing who died in action in the 1980s and early 1990s to the Lebanese population from which they were drawn. We culled a data set from the biographies gathered by Eli Hurvitz, of Tel-Aviv University, in 1998 that included the individuals' age at death, highest level of school attended, poverty, region of residence, and marital status, and compared it to data on the general population in Lebanon.

Despite the limitations of both data sets, several findings are of interest. The poverty rate is 28 percent among the Hezbollah militants and 33 percent for the population. In terms of education the Hezbollah fighters are more likely to have attended secondary school than are people in the general population (47 versus 38 percent). The results suggest that poverty is inversely related, and education positively related, to the likelihood that someone becomes a Hezbollah fighter.

Similarly, Claude Berrebi, a graduate student in economics at Princeton, has studied the characteristics of recent suicide bombers in Israel. From information on the Web sites of Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas, he was able to paint a statistical picture of suicide bombers. He compared that to survey-based data on the broader Palestinian population of roughly comparable age. His results indicate that suicide bombers are less than half as likely to come from impoverished families than is the population as a whole. In addition, more than half of the suicide bombers had attended school after high school, while less than 15 percent of the population in the same age group had any post-high-school education.

We regard these findings as suggestive but not definitive. First, data limitations prevent us from drawing strong conclusions. Second, the process of participation in Hezbollah, primarily a resistance organization, may not be representative of participation in other organizations that are more exclusively focused on terrorist activities. Nevertheless, the findings provide no support for the view that those who live in poverty or have a low level of education are disproportionately drawn to participate in terrorist activities.

On the other side of the conflict, the picture is not too different. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, numerous violent attacks against Palestinians were conducted by Israeli Jews in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, led most prominently by the Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful) group. Those attacks included attempts to kill three Palestinian mayors of West Bank cities and to blow up the Dome of the Rock, the third-holiest shrine of Islam. From 1980 to 1984, 23 Palestinians

were killed in attacks by the Jewish Underground, and 191 people were injured.

Looking at the backgrounds of the perpetrators of those violent attacks, it is clear that the Israeli extremists were overwhelmingly well educated and in high-paying occupations. The list includes teachers, writers, university students, geographers, an engineer, a combat pilot, a chemist, and a computer programmer. As Donald Neff, in a 1999 issue of the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, observed of the three men convicted of murder, "All were highly regarded, well-educated, very religious."

Although those who carry out terrorist acts themselves do not appear to be particularly impoverished, it is possible that they are acting out of concern for their countrymen, who are less advantaged. One way to investigate that hypothesis is to use cross-country data. Unfortunately, data on the quantity of terrorism carried out by citizens of various countries is difficult to come by.

We made a first pass at the issue by analyzing data on "significant international terrorist events" as recorded by the U.S. State Department. Specifically, we tried to infer the national origin of the events' perpetrators. We then related the number of terrorists produced by each country to characteristics of the country, including gross domestic product per capita, literacy rates, religious fractionalization, and political and civil freedoms. Apart from population -- larger countries tend to have more terrorists -- the only variable that was consistently associated with the number of terrorists was the Freedom House index of political rights and civil liberties. Countries with more freedom were less likely to be the birthplace of international terrorists. Poverty and literacy were unrelated to the number of terrorists from a country. Think of a country like Saudi Arabia: It is wealthy but has few political and civil freedoms. Perhaps it is no coincidence that so many of the September 11 terrorists -- and Osama bin Laden himself -- came from there.

What does economic theory tell us about participation in terrorism? Consider the supply side first -- that is, why do people join terrorist organizations or commit terrorist acts? As is conventional in economics, involvement in terrorism is viewed as a rational decision that depends on the benefits, costs, and risks involved compared with those of other activities.

According to the standard model of crime, participation increases as one's market wage falls relative to the rewards associated with crime, and decreases if the risk of being apprehended after committing a crime, or the penalty for being convicted of a crime, rises. Available evidence -- like Isaac Ehrlich's 1973 study, "Participation in Illegitimate Activities:

A Theoretical and Empirical Investigation," in *The Journal of Political Economy* -- suggests that people are more likely to commit property crimes if they have lower wages or less education, though the occurrence of violent crimes, including murders, is typically found to be unrelated to economic opportunities. When it comes to terrorism, an important benefit from the standpoint of the terrorist is the furtherance of the goals of the terrorist organization. Affluent, educated people may care more about the political goals of a terrorist organization than impoverished illiterates do. The Harvard economist Edward L. Glaeser emphasizes the role politicians play in fueling hatred against certain groups to solidify their own power. There is little reason to suspect that the supply or demand of hatred would be strongly connected to economic factors in his model, and that is consistent with what we have found.

The demand side is also important. Terrorist organizations recruit and screen their participants. According to Nasra Hassan, a relief worker for the United Nations who interviewed nearly 250 militants and associates of militants involved in the Palestinian cause, there is an excess supply of willing suicide bombers. "The selection process is complicated by the fact that so many wish to embark on this journey of honor," said a senior member of al-Qassam, Hamas's armed wing. "When one is selected, countless others are disappointed." Thus, the demand side clearly plays a role.

A planner for Islamic Jihad explained to Hassan that his group scrutinizes the motives of a potential bomber to be sure that the person is committed to carrying out the task. Now, a high level of educational attainment is probably indicative of one's commitment to a cause and determination, as well as ability to prepare for an assignment and carry it out. For this reason, the stereotype of suicide bombers being drawn from the ranks of those who are so impoverished that they have nothing to live for may be wildly incorrect.

Suicide bombers are clearly not motivated by the prospect of their own individual economic gain, although it is possible that the promise of payments to their families may increase the willingness of some to participate in suicide-bombing missions. We suspect their primary motivation is their passionate support for the ideas and aims of their movement. "Over and over," Nasra Hassan reported, "I heard them say, 'The Israelis humiliate us. They occupy our land, and deny our history.' " Eradication of poverty and universal high-school education are unlikely to change those feelings. Indeed, it is possible that those who are well off and well educated perceive such indignities more acutely.

We believe that in most cases terrorism is less like property crime and more like a violent, inappropriate form of political engagement. Highly educated people from affluent

backgrounds are more likely to participate in politics, probably in part because political involvement requires some minimum level of interest, expertise, commitment to issues, and effort. Political participation is much more prevalent among people who are educated and wealthy enough to concern themselves with more than mere economic subsistence. Although the opportunity cost of voting is higher for someone with high education and high earnings than for the unemployed, the more affluent are more likely to vote. Similarly although the impoverished have a low opportunity cost in terms of time, they are less likely to become engaged in terrorist organizations because they are less involved politically in general, and less committed to the objectives of the terrorist organizations.

Instead of viewing terrorism as a response -- either direct or indirect -- to poverty or ignorance, we suggest that it is more accurately viewed as a response to political conditions and longstanding feelings of indignity and frustration that have little to do with economic circumstances. We suspect that is why international terrorist acts are more likely to be committed by people who grew up under repressive political regimes.

There are many good reasons to improve education and reduce poverty in poor countries. Alas, reducing terrorism is probably not one of them.

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