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The Motivation for Terrorism

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Most terrorists are not motivated by the prospect of financial gain or the hopelessness of poverty, says economist Alan B. Krueger, least of all in the Middle East.

- Only 13 percent of Palestinian suicide bombers are from impoverished families, while about a third of the Palestinian population is in poverty, according to new research by Claude Berrebi, a Princeton University graduate student.
- A remarkable 57 percent of suicide bombers have some education beyond high school, compared with just 15 percent of the population of comparable age.

This evidence corroborates findings for other Middle Eastern and Latin American terrorist groups. Terrorists are drawn from society's elites, not the dispossessed.

As far back as 1958, political scientist Daniel Lerner argued, "The data obviate the conventional assumption that the extremists are simply the `have-nots.'"

Krueger analyzed State Department data on significant international terrorist incidents. He found that more terrorists do come from poor countries than rich ones.

- But once a country's degree of civil liberties is taken into account -- measured by Freedom House as the extent to which citizens are free to develop views, institutions and personal autonomy without interference from the state -- income per capita bears no relation to involvement in terrorism.
- No other factor besides a lack of civil liberties -- including the literacy rate, infant mortality rate, terrain, ethnic divisions and religious fractionalization -- could predict whether people from that country were more or less likely to take part in international terrorism.

Thus economically well off countries that lack civil liberties have spawned relatively many terrorists. Poor countries with a tradition of protecting civil liberties are unlikely to spawn terrorists.

Evidently, the freedom to assemble and protest peacefully without interference from the government goes a long way to providing an alternative to terrorism.

Source: Alan B. Krueger, "Poverty Doesn't Create Terrorists," Economic Scene, *New York Times*, May 29, 2003.

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