

PoliBlog

Thinking, linking, and commentary from a political science professor and occasional columnist.

Knowledge of the good would seem to be the concern of the most authoritative science, the highest master science. And this is obviously the science of politics . . . [Ethics, Bk. I: 2, 1094a]

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June 07, 2003

Poverty and Terror

Jeff Jarvis links to (and comments on) the following story from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: [Seeking the Roots of Terrorism](#)

The basics of the story discuss a study which concludes that the link between poverty and terrorism is a weak one. Indeed, I have long balked at the thesis that poverty is the cause of terrorism. Indeed, we know that many terror leaders, and many operatives, come from fairly affluent backgrounds.

For example:

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.

[...]

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."

Indeed, as one who studies the Third World for a living, I can state that it is not the case that the most impoverished countries are necessarily the ones with the

most political violence. Look at Latin America: the most violent country is Colombia, but it is hardly the poorest in the region. If poverty was the key variable for generating violence, then places like Haiti and Nicaragua ought to be on fire.

The study focused on the origins of terrorists (emphasis is mine):

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.

The article concludes thusly:

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.

Posted by Steven at June 7, 2003 09:37 AM | [TrackBack](#)

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