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After the Sept. 11 attacks, Princeton University doctoral student Claude Berrebi shifted from studying the economics of special education to the socioeconomic backgrounds of Palestinian suicide bombers.
JEFF ZELEVANSKY/SPECIAL TO THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

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Probing the roots of terror
The attacks of 9/11 galvanized a phalanx of scholars to dissect terrorism from every angle. What they've learned so far may surprise you.

By [Mark Clayton](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

It was a bright September day, yet Claude Berrebi felt unsettled, an odd mix of apprehension and exuberance familiar to new graduate students with a lot of decisions to make.

He was glad, though, to be sure of one thing: His doctoral research at Princeton University would focus on the economic impact of special-education programs. It was a solid subject, Mr. Berrebi knew, but it was to be a short-lived certainty.

While he was eating breakfast, an airliner struck a New York skyscraper 50 miles away - and then another. As he watched on TV, tears welling in his eyes, he began to think: What could he do?

For Berrebi and a growing cadre of academicians, the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks have acted as a catalyst, giving a new urgency to their research and steering them in unexpected directions.

Though American higher education sports a well-deserved reputation as

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aloof from current events, some say the ivory towers' research community this time is responding.

In the days and weeks since 9/11, what they have learned about the roots and branches of terrorist organizations has at times buttressed conventional wisdom - and more often defied it.

Who knew, for example, that so many terrorists came from the ranks of the middle class? Or that between 1980 and 2000 the annual rate of suicide bombings multiplied by more than 700 percent?

Early on, the university response was primarily cathartic: campus town-hall meetings, candlelight vigils, forums. Then came courses with "terrorism" in the title. Soon, government dollars began flowing

to hard-science labs on campuses to develop technologies for homeland security. More gradually, terrorism is gaining attention in the "soft sciences" - geography, psychology, economics, political science, history. The focus is the elusive "why" that explains the root causes of terrorism.

Clearly, most researchers have not altered their plans; they are locked into studies that took years to develop. Others have felt terrorism is not fundamental to their studies.

But for Berrebi and others, the shift came quickly. Many of Berrebi's friends on campus knew he was a Parisian who had lived in Israel and lost friends to terror bombings. They pressed him to explain why the terrorists had acted as they did. But he could not explain it, he says. And that void in understanding troubled him.

The economists

"After 9/11, I felt terrorism was no longer a problem of distant regions in a state of clear conflict, but a global threat," Berrebi says. "I realized that I might be able to contribute in a field mostly unexplored ... to be one of those who might help understand the factors that motivate terrorism."

One of the questions that most intrigued him: Did a fetid mix of poverty and lack of education drive some people to commit acts of terror, as pundits often claimed on TV? Berrebi hoped to find out.

Within days, he was conferring with his adviser, economist Alan Krueger, about changing his research topic. Dr. Krueger might have discouraged him: Getting data to support a new thesis would be tough.

But Berrebi had an idea for how to get the information. So Krueger gave the go-ahead, and Berrebi began by focusing on Palestinian suicide bombers. Krueger, meanwhile, would do the same, focusing on Hizbullah terrorists.

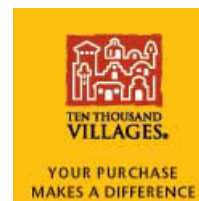
For almost two years, Berrebi prowled the Internet archives of websites belonging to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas. From each, he painstakingly translated from Arabic details about individual suicide bombers, the "martyrs," as the websites called them. Krueger, for his part, culled other data sources for information.

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What the two men discovered surprised them both.

Among Hamas and PIJ members, Berrebi found, only 20 percent were poor - fewer than the 32 percent who qualified as poor among a similar slice of the general Palestinian population between ages 18 and 41. But among suicide bombers, the contrast was even more pronounced: Just 13 percent were from poor families.

Educational backgrounds of people aligned with those groups showed similar results. Among suicide bombers, 36 percent had finished at least secondary school. Only 2 percent had not gone past primary school. It looked as if the pundits might be wrong: The suicide terrorists were fairly well educated and were far from being poor.

Krueger and his co-researcher, Jitka Maleckova, found similar results among Hizbullah's militant wing during the 1980s and '90s. In a recent issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the pair wrote that their research and Berrebi's 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."

Institutional hurdles

Such quick footwork among researchers is hardly the rule.

Academia is coming late to the terrorism issue - if it's really coming at all, says James Kirkhope, research director of the for-profit Terrorism Research Center in Arlington, Va.

In recent years, most of the intellectual heavy lifting on terrorism has occurred at private think tanks, he says. Until Sept. 11, universities had a spotty record, at best, for devoting money and resources to dissecting terrorism. He wonders whether the dribble of new research showing up now in peer-reviewed academic journals will expand - or simply dry up in a few years.

One problem, he and others say, is that terrorism as a research subject cuts across disciplines, meaning it doesn't fit into the typical US approach to academic research.

"If you take it to a political scientist, he'll say it involves too much psychology, law enforcement, and criminal justice," Mr. Kirkhope says. "So it gets deflected into philosophy and moral issues and becomes too wishy-squishy to be of much use."

Others agree that academia presents some serious hurdles to the would-be researcher into terrorism.

"It's still a bad choice if you are aiming to get tenure," says Jessica Stern, a Harvard expert on terrorism. "It's considered a very foolish move, and senior people in the field have said that directly to the more junior scholars. The problem is that it is inherently interdisciplinary and academe is inherently disciplinary."

Still, hypotheses and ideas about terrorism are now bubbling from a pot of academic research that had been almost empty. Indeed, a Monitor database search of scores of social-science research journals across 15 disciplines found a rise in scholarly articles with titles or references to terrorism. Between August 1999 and August 2001, there were 34 references to terrorism either in the text or title of the articles. In the two years since 9/11, however, there were 223.

"It's an area of very new research intensity, using everything from interviews with terrorists to mathematical game theory," writes sociologist Jack Goldstone, at the University of California at Davis, in an e-mail. "The long process of checking ... initial results is not yet done."

The political scientists

Robert Pape, a political scientist at the University of Chicago, was at his typewriter writing a book on great power politics - the broader causes of war and peace - when he got a call about what had happened in New York.

"It stopped my book cold at 8:48 a.m., and two years later it still isn't done," he says. "I've turned my entire attention, all of my research, toward the causes of suicide terrorism."

Most intriguing to him was the suicide component, but Dr. Pape soon learned there was no single repository of information on all prior suicide attacks. So he created one. He scavenged bits of data from researchers and organizations around the world, building a database from scratch for 1980 through 2001. When it was finished, it revealed 188 suicide attacks.

The pattern of rising suicide attacks, he says, was more pronounced than anybody had realized - an oversight that may help explain why few people saw the Sept. 11 attacks coming. Indeed, the total number of terrorist attacks of all kinds had been falling - from more than 660 attacks in 1988 to about 250 in 1998, he says. But suicide attacks, by contrast, were proliferating.

Pape's research revealed that suicide attacks were three per year in 1980, building to 10 per year on average in the 1990s. They came first in Lebanon, then Sri Lanka, then fanned out. Since 2000, there have been about 25 attacks per year, according to his new work, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism."

During that time, the number of people killed per incident has grown, because of the methods of suicide. Though suicide terrorism is 3 percent of terrorist acts, it accounts for half the deaths. "We didn't have the big picture, so we simply missed the fact that suicide terrorism has been climbing like a rocket at the same time" that terrorism incidents overall were declining.

Pape is bothered when pundits call acts of suicide terrorism "random," given that his research shows 95 percent of suicide attacks over two decades came in clusters - and were carried out by groups that announced them in advance and then claimed credit. Moreover, when the target nation changes its behavior or makes concessions, the attacks stop, he notes.

To date, all suicide attacks have been aimed at democracies, including the US, Israel, Turkey, Sri Lanka, and others, he says. In general, he adds, they succeed in creating political pressure. Over the years, suicide attacks have evolved from isolated strikes to a conveyor-belt approach involving complex organizations and systems.

"There's a very heavy element of strategic logic characterizing suicide terror campaigns," Pape says. "Every single country where suicide bombings have occurred has also been one in which an occupying country has placed military forces for a long occupation."

'What we need is actually better defense'

In most cases, groups behind the suicide attacks want a withdrawal of military forces. But Pape's research does not lead him to a simple prescription for US withdrawal from the Middle East.

"What we need is actually better defense, especially border defense," he says. "If I were advising Israel, I would tell them to withdraw quickly from the West Bank and then build a wall 20 feet high and 20 feet thick."

The US, he says, should embark on a policy of energy independence and consider even tighter immigration controls. His research is leading him to explore why some occupied nations do not strike back with suicide terror attacks, notably Bosnia during its NATO occupation.

"I would have to say that 9/11 did change my research program rather dramatically," he says. "I'd like to get back to that book I was working on," he says, then adds wistfully, "but I have a feeling it's going to be a while."

Face-to-face with terrorists around the world

Jessica Stern knows the face of terror. She has seen it in jail cells, in dingy back-street rooms in Pakistan, in Gaza, in Indonesia, in a trailer park in Texas.

In one of the first academic research projects since Sept. 11, Ms. Stern, a veteran terrorism researcher, decided on a novel approach. Unlike most of her colleagues, she opted to interview her subjects face to face to learn why they had committed atrocities.

In "Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill," released in August, Stern lays out common threads linking the motivations of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish terrorist organizations.

Her interviews have led her to members of Al Qaeda, the Jewish Underground, and the US-based cult - The Covenant, the Sword, and The Arm of the Lord - to name a few.

She hit upon this method after a 1998 interview in a Texas trailer park with Kerry Noble, a leader of the Covenant group after his release from prison. Its members had been convicted of murder, firebombing a church, and conspiring to assassinate government officials. They had stockpiled cyanide to poison water supplies.

What struck her most was Mr. Noble's account of spending hours in prayer and Bible study. Yet this man, who felt he had a personal relationship with God, and that God was good, now admitted he had behaved immorally then, though he thought otherwise at the time.

This thread - the incongruity of devout people rationalizing evil acts in the name of good - is one she's followed ever since.

After Sept. 11, her research shifted dramatically, she concedes. The murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl in Pakistan gave her pause, because he had been doing "exactly what I did" to gain access. Since then, she has not returned to Pakistan or Indonesia to interview any of the jihadis because, in all honesty, "I am afraid," she says.

Despite the added difficulty of such research, she's encouraged by what she sees as a flowering of academic study across disciplines. "It's a very good development because so many disciplines are required to understand this phenomenon."

Stern is convinced that, while the animating "why" of terrorism seems dark and difficult, there are answers that can lead to a solution some day.

"The religious terrorists we face are fighting us on every level - militarily, economically, psychologically, and spiritually," she writes. "We need to respond - not just with guns - but by seeking to create confusion, conflict, and competition among terrorists."

"In the end, however, what counts is what we fight for, not what we oppose. We need to avoid giving in to spiritual dread, and to hold fast to the best of our principles, by emphasizing tolerance, empathy, and courage."



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