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Debunking the Poverty-Terrorism Myth

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Some bad ideas refuse to die. Like the apparent causal link between poverty and terror. In the elevated mood of the World Economic Forum, the French President Jacques Chirac -- who could not reach there due to bad weather -- attempted to sound statesmanlike in a live, televised address. Embracing several popular causes, he called on the world's richest nations -- and people, given his audience -- to give billions of dollars in aid to poor countries. Doing so was in their own interest, he said, because in our interdependent world, political unrest, uncontrolled migration, and extremism are "breeding grounds of terrorism," and removing poverty would help resolve those problems.

The big assumption here is that there is a causal link between removing poverty and eliminating terrorism. President Chirac is hardly the first world leader to confuse a good cause -- removing poverty -- with a weapon to fight terror. Last December, Pakistan's leader Gen. Pervez Musharraf, suggested in a television interview in Britain that terrorism's root causes lay in social inequality, illiteracy and poverty. "We are fighting [terror] in the immediate context, but . . . not . . . in its strategic, long term context. What gives rise to a young man or woman to give up her or his life?" Gen Musharraf asked, adding that "illiteracy and poverty," which he called "breeding grounds of extremism and terrorism," need to be resolved.

The general has had to walk a tightrope in supporting the war on terror, given the sympathy for the Taliban and al Qaeda among many Pakistanis. If only for domestic political reasons, he has to appear "to understand" the extremists' views. But by acknowledging that poverty may cause terror, he gives that nihilistic idea -- terrorism -- the semblance of rationality it does not deserve.

Why blame them alone? Think of James Wolfensohn, the outgoing president of the World Bank, who claimed 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." In March 2002, President George W. Bush succumbed to this seemingly seductive logic, arguing at a global anti-poverty conference in Monterey: "We will challenge the poverty and hopelessness and lack of education and failed governments that too often allow conditions that terrorists can seize."

Early next month, to mark the first anniversary of the Madrid train bombings, the Club of Madrid, an independent organization of former heads of state which supports initiatives aimed at strengthening democracies, is sponsoring a summit on "Democracy, Terrorism and Security." A member of its advisory council, Karin von Hippel (a senior research fellow at London's Centre for Defense Studies), while acknowledging there is no "general" link between poverty and terrorism, nonetheless maintains in a recent essay: "Terrorists use the plight of the poor as one justification for committing violence, and for broadening their appeal. Therefore a serious effort to fulfill the Millennium Development Goals . . . would remove one of the platforms commonly used by terrorists."

A bad idea, repeated often by authoritative people, can appear good; it is therefore time to debunk the bogus link between poverty and terror.

Some development experts assert that if only more money were spent to alleviate poverty, terrorism would disappear. Poverty breeds a sense of deprivation among the poor, and because in their view the current economic system perpetuates inequality, it would compel the poor -- driven to desperation because of social injustices -- to turn to terror. This is reductive revolutionary rhetoric masquerading as an explanation. What's surprising is not the vacuity of this idea, but its resilience. It plays on collective guilt, seeking to rationalize the unjustifiable.

Think of the millions of poor people who live in abject conditions in Africa and Asia. They suffer from widespread diseases and persistent malnutrition. Parents can't assume that their children will have a better future than their own. Many of these countries have experienced strife and violence. But the poor there do not routinely blow up buses or turn their bodies into bombs. To suggest that the poor will become terrorists unless their plight is addressed is gratuitous; worse, it insults them -- most poor lead dignified lives, trying heroically to improve their lives when they have little control over their destinies. The poor value life -- their own, of their families, and of their neighbors and others around them.

Terrorists don't. Consider that 15 of the 19 hijackers involved in the Sept. 11 attacks were from one of the wealthiest countries in the world (Saudi Arabia), and were from middle class, if not rich families; their leader, Osama Bin Laden,

a Saudi billionaire. They didn't lack material wealth; they lacked the sensitivity to value human life.

It is possible to break the casual, not causal, link between terror and poverty. In a lucidly argued paper, "Education, Poverty, Political Violence, and Terrorism: Is there a Causal Connection?" (National Bureau of Economic Research, July 2002), economists Alan Kruger of Princeton University in the U.S. and Jitka Maleckova of Charles University in Prague conclude that any connection between poverty, education, and terrorism is, at best, indirect, complicated, and probably quite weak.

Unlike the poverty-leads-to-terror platitudes, the Kruger-Maleckova hypothesis is backed by evidence. They analyze opinion polls among Palestinians, which showed strong support for attacks against Israeli targets among students, merchants, and professionals. The unemployed were 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," the economists show. Another study by Claude Berrebi, also at Princeton, showed that over half of the Palestinian suicide bombers had attended school after high school, while less than 15% of the general population in the same age group had any post-high-school education.

Likewise, statistical analysis of Hezbollah activists in Lebanon showed that those who lived above the poverty line or had higher education were more likely to join the Hezbollah. Lest their research be dismissed as an attack on Islam, the economists showed that extremist Israeli Jewish settlers of Gush Emunim were overwhelmingly from better-paid occupations.

If poverty does not explain terrorism, what would? To understand that, turn to Nasra Hassan, who wrote an extraordinary essay based on encounters with extremist youth and their families in "An Arsenal of Believers," in the *New Yorker* in 2001. She offers the experience of indignities suffered, of political humiliation, and of desperation borne out of a sense of futility, as possible explanations of why some people turn to terror. In other words, it is politics, not economics. That doesn't make terrorism right; but it at least does not confuse the cause.

By all means open markets, liberalize trade, and encourage investment to increase opportunities for poor countries to lift their people out of poverty. But don't expect terrorism to decline as a result.

People who cannot sway their opponents with reasoned arguments, through civilized negotiations, may turn to terror. Suggestions that poverty somehow explains terrorism, insult the poor. It is time to bury that innuendo.