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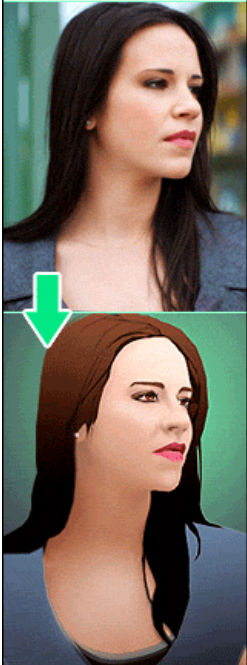
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The Causes of Terrorism: It's Not about Money

by Daniel Pipes  
Mon, 24 Jun 2002  
updated Thu, 27 Dec 2007

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In a 1995 op-ed, "[It's Not the Economy, Stupid](#)," that I expanded in early 2002 as "[God and Mammon: Does Poverty Cause Militant Islam?](#)" I took issue with the widespread assumption that socio-economic distress drives Muslims to militant Islam, finding that this "is not a response to poverty or impoverishment .... The factors that cause militant Islam to decline or flourish appear to have more to do with issues of identity than with economics."

It has been gratifying to see that several studies have since confirmed this conclusion, though they tend to look more at terrorism than at militant Islam. The most recent entry is Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Maleckova in "[Does Poverty Cause Terrorism? The economics and the education of suicide bombers](#)," in the *New Republic*. There, they state:

That poverty is a scourge that the international aid community and industrialized countries should work to eradicate is also beyond question. There is also no doubt that terrorism is a scourge of the contemporary world. What is less clear, however, is whether poverty and low education are root causes of terrorism.

(June 24, 2002)

**June 15, 2003 update:** In "Seeking the Roots of Terrorism," [Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Maleckov](#) conclude more forcefully that "any connection between poverty, education, and terrorism is, at best, indirect, complicated, and probably quite weak."

**July 1, 2004 update:** Most Arab terrorists are "well-educated, married men from middle- or upper-class families, in their mid-20s and psychologically stable"; that's how [Knight Ridder Newspapers summarizes](#) the findings of Marc Sageman, a psychiatrist formerly of the U.S. Navy and CIA, now at the University of Pennsylvania, in his forthcoming book, [Understanding Terror Networks](#).

**Oct. 1, 2003 update:** [Scott Atran](#) summarizes his research, reaching similar conclusions, in *Discover*. In reply to the question, "what's the root cause of suicide terrorism?" he replies: "As a tactical weapon, it emerges when an ideologically devoted people find that they cannot possibly obtain their ends in a sort of fair fight, and when they know they're in a very weak position, and they have to use these kinds of extreme methods." Throughout the interview, he stresses the sanity, education, and high-status of suicide bombers.

A surprising number have graduate degrees. And they are willing to give up everything. They give up well-paying jobs, they give up their families, whom they really adore, to sacrifice themselves because they really believe that it's the only way they're going to change the world



Marc Sageman, author of "Understanding Terror Networks."

**Oct. 3, 2004 update:** Marc Sageman concludes in book [Understanding Terror Networks – reports the Los Angeles Times](#) – from the study of 172 case studies of *mujahidin* (fighters of *jihad*), and that social bonds have more of a force than religion in molding extremists. One excerpt:

Most of the accused or convicted extremists Sageman studied were middle-class or wealthy rather than poor, married rather than single, educated rather than illiterate. With the exception of Persian Gulf Arabs raised mostly in devout households, many extremists became religious as young adults, Sageman found. This reinforces his view

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of the decisive role of the loneliness and alienation of the immigrant experience. Whether expatriate engineers studying in Germany or second-generation toughs on the edges of French cities, young Arab men find companionship and dignity in Islam. The social connection usually precedes their spiritual engagement, he says. In mosques, cafes and shared apartments, religion nurtures their common resentment of real and imagined sufferings, Sageman says.

I would argue that ideas play a more important role than Sageman allows, but the key point is that economics are next to irrelevant in the formation of terrorists.

**Oct. 13, 2004 update:** I have now seen the Sageman book myself and note that he finds that three quarters of his sample of Al-Qaeda members are from the upper or middle class. Moreover, he notes, "the vast majority – 90 percent – came from caring, intact families. Sixty-three percent had gone to college, as compared with the 5-6 percent that's usual for the third world. These are the best and brightest of their societies in many ways." Nor were they unemployed or isolated. "Far from having no family or job responsibilities, 73 percent were married and the vast majority had children.... Three quarters were professionals or semiprofessionals. They are engineers, architects and civil engineers, mostly scientists."

**Nov. 4, 2004 update:** Alberto Abadie, an associate professor of public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, has found – contrary to his expectations – that terrorist violence, both international and domestic, is *not* related to a country's economic advancement and *is* related to it political freedom. He reached this conclusion in a [research paper](#) that examines the connection between terrorism and such variables as wealth, political freedom, geography, and ethnic fractionalization.

He noted two other points of interest. (1) Terrorism is less frequent in truly free and truly repressive societies. It is those in the middle, such as Iraq and Russia at present, that experience this scourge the most. "When you go from an autocratic regime and make the transition to democracy, you may expect a temporary increase in terrorism," Abadie [told the Harvard Gazette](#).

(2) Geography matters. "Failure to eradicate terrorism in some areas of the world has often been attributed to geographic barriers, like mountainous terrain in Afghanistan or tropical jungle in Colombia." This correlation does not surprise Abadie: "Areas of difficult access offer safe haven to terrorist groups, facilitate training, and provide funding through other illegal activities like the production and trafficking of cocaine and opiates."

**Jan. 26, 2005 update:** The Middle East Media and Research Institute (MEMRI) published a [survey of three Arab columnists](#) today, all of whom argue that terrorists are motivated by cultural and religious factors, not poverty. The three (Muhammad Mahfouz, in the *Saudi Gazette*; Abdallah Rashid, in *Al-Itihad*, and Abdallah Nasser al-Fawzan, in *Al-Watan*) cite the role of cultural and religious factors in motivating terrorism, and particularly the incitement by sheikhs who encourage young men to conduct terror operations.

**August 1, 2005 update:** An extremist British Muslim, Hassan Butt, rejects the economics argument in an interview, "[A British jihadist](#)." Asked if the rise of Islamic extremism among British Muslims is rooted in economic disadvantage, he replies:

I think that's a myth, pushed forward by so-called moderate Muslims. If you look at the 19 hijackers on 9/11, which one of them didn't have a degree? Muhammad Atta was an engineer [he was actually an architect and town planner] at the highest level. His Hamburg lecturer said, "I didn't have a student like him." These people are not deprived or uneducated; they are the peak of society. They've seen everything there is to see and they are rejecting it outright because there is nothing for them. Most of the people I sit with are in fact university students, they come from wealthy families. ... this myth - that the only reason these people go for Islam is because they have nothing else to do - is a lie and a fabrication. People who say that should be very careful. Even Osama himself, Sheikh Osama, came from wealth that I could never dream of and he gave it all up because it had no value to him. Who can say he came from an economically deprived condition? It's rubbish.

**Jan. 6, 2006 update:** Elegantly confirming Hassan Butt's view is the news that Shehzad Tanweer, a 22-year-old 7/7 suicide bomber who killed eight Londoners, left an [estate worth £121,000](#) after loans, debts and funeral costs had been paid. The origins of his fortune are a bit of a mystery, given that he had worked part time in his family's chip shop in Beeston, Leeds.

**Nov. 6, 2006 update:** [Claude Berrebi](#) of Princeton University summarizes his 76-page research study, "Evidence about the Link Between Education, Poverty and Terrorism Among Palestinians," as follows:

This paper performs a statistical analysis of the determinants of participation in Hamas

and PIJ terrorist activities in Israel from the late 1980's to the present, as well as a time series analysis of terrorist attacks in Israel with relation to economic conditions. The resulting evidence on the individual level suggests that both higher standards of living and higher levels of education are *positively* associated with participation in Hamas or PIJ. With regard to the societal economic condition, no sustainable link between terrorism and poverty and education could be found,

**Dec. 6, 2006 update:** Broader research by Jean-Paul Azam and Alexandra Delacroix in the *Review of Development Economics*, "[Aid and the Delegated Fight Against Terrorism](#)," finds "a pretty robust empirical result showing that the supply of terrorist activity by any country is positively correlated with the amount of foreign aid received by that country." Taken out of jargon, they are saying that an increase in foreign aid means an increase in terrorism.

**Aug. 28, 2007 update:** Alan B. Krueger, Bendenheim professor of economics and public policy at Princeton University, has turned his essay (see the June 24, 2002 entry above) into a book, [What Makes a Terrorist: Economics and the Roots of Terrorism](#) (Princeton University Press). From its [introduction](#):

Although there is a certain surface appeal to blaming economic circumstances and lack of education for terrorist acts, the evidence is nearly unanimous in rejecting either material deprivation or inadequate education as an important cause of support for terrorism or of participation in terrorist activities. The popular explanations for terrorism—poverty, lack of education, or the catchall "they hate our way of life and freedom" —simply have no systematic empirical basis.

**Sep. 7, 2007 update:** [Steven Stotsky](#) of the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America shows an uncannily close relationship in "Correlating Palestinian Aid and Homicides 2000-2007" between foreign funding to the Palestinian Authority and numbers of homicides. He is cautious about drawing a causal connection from this pattern ("These statistics do not mean that foreign aid causes violence; but they do raise questions about the effectiveness of using foreign donations to promote moderation and combat terrorism") but it sure does look like giving the PA another each US\$1.25 million means an additional death within the year.

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