



“The incompetence charge has gained such traction that even many Republicans buy it.”

— RICHARD LOWRY [April 2 Issue](#)

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david frum's diary

Wednesday, March 14, 2007

Terrorism and Poverty

A very thought provoking analysis in *Fortune* confirms definitively that terrorists are not recruited from the ranks of the poor.

A study looked at the biographies of 285 [Palestinian] suicide bombers as published in local journals, from 1987-2002. And this found that those who carried out suicide attacks were, on the whole, richer (fewer than 15 percent under the poverty line, compared to almost 35 percent for the population as a whole) and more educated (95 percent with high school or higher) than the rest of the population (almost half of whom went no further than middle school).

There's more.

So, is there no economic dimension to terrorism? There may, be, but not in the way the conventional wisdom would have it.

Consider a chilling, but compelling recent paper by Efraim Benmelech of Harvard and Claude Berrebi of Rand. The two ask, in effect, what makes someone become a suicide bomber? Their answer: "Since there are returns to human capital in both the productive and the terror sectors, high-ability individuals will become suicide bombers if the expected payoff from suicide bombing is higher than their skill-adjusted expected lifetime earnings in the productive sector."

They test this proposition using a data base of 148 Palestinian suicide bombers from 2000-05. And they find that older and more educated suicide bombers are assigned to higher-profile targets, kill more people, and are less likely to fail or be caught. In short, there is a match between human capital, in this grossly distorted sense, and the desired goal.

And as for the bombers themselves, these authors argue that the bombers have

made, what is for them, a rational choice: There is enough moral, psychological and sometimes financial payoff from the act of killing many people to offset the economic loss of their death. Therefore, the terrorist manager assigns the most deadly tasks to the highest-caliber people; otherwise, they will not bother. In an awful way, it makes sense, and it seems to be true. Caught and failed suicide bombers are conspicuously less educated than those who carry out their tasks.

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