

The West Australian

 thewest.com.au

TODAY'S WEATHER © | [More](#)

 Perth 18 | Few showers

 thewest.com.au

Friday, 29 August 2008 | 08:37 AM

New examination of what makes a terrorist

8th August 2008, 17:00 WST

I have always dreamed of a band of men absolute in their resolve to discard all scruples in the choice of means, strong enough to give themselves frankly the name of destroyers . . . No pity for anything on Earth, including themselves, and death enlisted for good and all in the service of humanity . . .

These grim sentiments are expressed by Karl Yundt in Joseph Conrad's 1906 novel *The Secret Agent*. The story also features a character known as the Professor, an expert bomb-maker. Both are committed terrorists. The Professor always has a bomb strapped on him so he can kill, by way of suicide, any police who try to arrest him. And both have a vision of the world politically purified in a deluge of blood.

There is something remarkably modern about *The Secret Agent*. Although based on 19th century attacks by Russian and Polish anarcho-terrorists, some of the nihilists depicted by Conrad could step out of a contemporary news story. A reflective reading of *The Secret Agent* — or the daily newspaper — gives rise to the question: What makes a Muslim turn to terrorism, or support of it?

The most common answer cites the alleged "root causes" — poverty, poor education, lack of democracy. But what is counter-intuitive is a range of data in the social sciences indicating there is no evidence for a connection between these "root causes" and contemporary terror. This approach has been called the "fallacy of grievance-based terrorism". An example of it is US President George Bush's comment: "We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror."

Alan Kruger, a professor of economics and public policy at Princeton University, rejects such equations as misleading, both for policy makers and the general public trying to make sense of the mayhem. "Despite these pronouncements . . . the available evidence is almost unanimous in rejecting either material deprivation or inadequate education as important causes of support for terrorism or participation in terrorist activities," he said "Such explanations have been embraced almost entirely on faith, not scientific evidence."

In a paper titled *What Makes a Terrorist?*, Professor Kruger surveyed the research showing how faulty is the received wisdom in these matters. For example, the Pew Research Centre's Global Attitudes Project provided him with the result of surveys among the populations of Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan and Turkey taken in early 2004. They were asked if suicide attacks in Iraq were justified. "The clear finding was that people with a higher level of education were more likely to say that suicide attacks against Westerners in Iraq are justified," he wrote.

The same conclusion was drawn by Nasara Hassan, a United Nations worker, based on interviews with 250 Palestinian militants. He found "none of them were uneducated, desperately poor, simple-minded or depressed. Many were middle-class and, unless they were fugitives, held paying jobs. Two were the sons of millionaires."

Claude Berrebi, of the RAND think-tank's Institute for Civil Justice, conducted a study of Palestinian suicide bombers. His findings reinforce Mr Hassan's views. When compared with the whole male population aged 16-50 he found terrorists were less than half as likely to come from impoverished backgrounds. Nearly 60 per cent had post-high school education, compared with less than 15 per cent in the overall population.

The same picture emerges where al-Qaida is concerned. Forensic psychiatrist Marc Sageman, author of *Understanding Terror Networks*, points out that around 35 per cent of al-Qaida terrorists examined had a college education, with 45 per cent coming from the skilled professions. And Osama Bin Laden is a multi-millionaire.

Professor Krueger also cites his own primary research when summarising the data. Codifying statistics on country of origin and the targets of hundreds of terrorist actions, 1997-2003, he checked key indicators. Among them were per capita GDP, illiteracy and infant mortality. He found they did not predict who would become involved in terrorism.

Professor Leonard Weinberg, a former UN terrorism consultant, is also critical of the "root-causes" orthodoxy. "Many of these efforts at explanation have not been supported by the evidence," he wrote in a paper examining Western European terrorism between 1950 and 2000. "Arguments to the effect that terrorism is an outgrowth of poverty and economic deprivation have been shown to be false." Again, the data is counter-intuitive. The wealthier the country, the more likely is terrorism. The absence of democracy is also cited as a "root cause" by some commentators. Professor Weinberg says there is no evidence for that proposition either. Indeed, the more democratic a society, the more susceptible to terror.

In short, the Islamist movement is not primarily socioeconomically driven. That is a serious misunderstanding of the enemy. Its impulses are perversely ideological. The central stimulus to contemporary Islamist atrocities is to be found in the rejection of the values deriving from the 18th century liberal and sceptical enlightenment. Its epicentres were Scotland and England. The civic culture that arose from it is central to Western civilisation. It recognises the role of reason in social life, a liberal economy, democratic forms of governance, the rule of law, equality of women, individual liberty and pluralism in religion.

Along with Israel, it is those values Islamists want to wipe from the face of the Earth. As the daily news demonstrates, they have turned the pathological dream of Conrad's character Karl Yundt — "to discard all scruples in the choice of means" — into a malignant reality in pursuit of those aims.

ROD MORAN LITERARY EDITOR

<http://www.thewest.com.au/default.aspx?MenuID=9&ContentID=90029>