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Poverty Creates Terrorists? (FrontPageMagazine.com) By Jamie Weinstein 04/16/09)

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“The reason the World Trade Center got hit is there’s a lot of people living in abject poverty out there who don’t have any hope for a better life,” bombastic CNN founder Ted Turner opined during a lecture at Brown University in 2002. As successful as Turner is as a businessman, he is foolish as a political commentator, and this statement was no exception.

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Since Sept. 11, 2001, politicians, pundits and academics have sought to explain what factors create terrorists. Like Turner, many have lazily sought to tie terrorism to poverty. Though obnoxiously loud, the Ted Turners of the world can be easily ignored on such matters. But when linkage between poverty and terrorism is propounded, as it has been in one way or another, by the likes of former Secretary of State Colin Powell, former President Bill Clinton and former British Prime Minister Tony Blair among many, many other influential figures, it is worthy to ponder whether such analysis could possibly have merit.

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So what does the evidence say?

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Several studies have been conducted both before and since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks (some better than others), which have looked at the social make-up of terrorists. In one study by Princeton-trained economist Claude Berrebi, 335 members of radical Palestinian Islamist terrorist organizations Hamas and

Palestinian Islamic Jihad were analyzed. The terrorists surveyed were mainly “shahids,” or martyrs (read murderers), over a period from 1987 to 2002. The results of his survey, and its comparison to the Palestinian population as a whole, delivered a striking indictment to the “poverty creates terrorists” crowd.

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Berrebi discovered that 16 percent of the radical Islamist terrorists he surveyed could be considered poor compared to 31 percent of the male Muslim population between the ages 18 and 41 in the Palestinian territories as a whole. Thirty-three percent of the terrorists could be considered “well off” compared to only 20 percent of the Muslim male Palestinian population between 18 and 41 years of age. Additionally, while 10 percent of the terrorists were considered “very well off” according to the survey, 0 percent of Muslim Palestinian males between 18 and 41 could be considered the same. The study also indicated that the radical Islamist Palestinian terrorists were generally more highly educated than the male Muslim Palestinian population between 18 and 41.

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Given the evidence, Berrebi was left to conclude, “If there is a link between income level, education and participation in terrorist activities, it is either very weak or in the opposite direction of what one intuitively might have expected.”

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In another study by terrorism expert Marc Sageman, 102 Islamist radicals involved in global jihad were analyzed. Like Berrebi, Sageman could find no correlation between poverty and terrorism with only about a quarter of the jihadis he looked at able to be classified as coming from impoverished backgrounds. “[M]embers of the global Salafi jihad,” Sageman writes in his book Understanding Terror Networks, “were generally middle-class, educated young men from caring and religious families, who grew up with strong positive values of religion, spirituality and concern for their communities.”

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One study of Islamist radicals in Egyptian prisons (and elsewhere) in the late 1970s by Saad Eddin Ibrahim also helps explode the poverty- produces-terrorists myth. “The typical member of the militant Islamic groups,” Ibrahim discovered, could be “described as young (early 20s), of rural or small-town background, from the middle or lower- middle class, with high

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achievement and motivation, upwardly mobile, with a scientific or engineering education, and from a normally cohesive family.” He went on to conclude that if the Islamist radicals he analyzed were out of the ordinary in any way, it was “because they were significantly above the average of their generation” in education, financial background and motivation.

There are other studies that further buttress the conclusions of these studies. The anecdotal evidence is also overwhelming if less statistically significant. Of course, it is well known that the leaders of these jihadi movements come from less-than-impo-

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verished backgrounds. Osama Bin Laden comes from the extraordinarily large Bin Laden family fortune of Saudi Arabia, for instance, and Al-Qaeda number two Ayman al-Zawahiri is a trained doctor. But the leaders aren’t the only ones who weren’t living hand to mouth when they became radicalized. The lead foot soldier of the 9/11 attacks was Mohammad Atta. Far from being enmeshed in poverty, he was a graduate student in Germany when he became radicalized. One of the 2005 London bombers left an estate valued over \$150,000. The 2007 Glasgow terrorist attack, which fortunately only resulted in the death of one of the perpetrators, was carried out by a medical doctor and an engineer. On and on it goes.

So, no Virginia, poverty is not a primary factor in producing terrorists. It is about time we put this myth to rest once and for all. (Copyright ©2009 FrontPageMagazine.com 04/16/09)

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