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Exploding misconceptions

Alleviating poverty may not reduce terrorism but could make it less effective

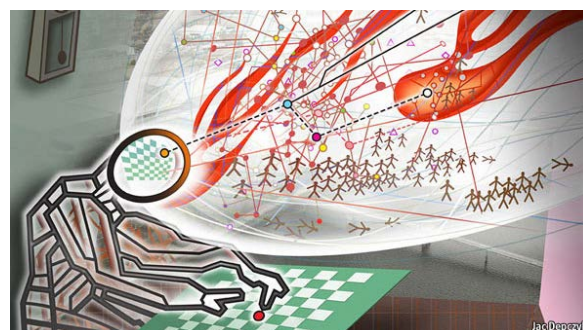
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“EXTREMELY poor societies...provide optimal breeding grounds for disease, terrorism and conflict.” So said Barack Obama, arguing in favour of more development aid to poor countries. Mr Obama is not alone in regarding economic development as a weapon against terrorism. Hillary Clinton, America's secretary of state, has called development “an integral part of America's national security policy”. The idea that poverty could be associated with terrorism is not implausible. If acts of

terror are committed by people with little to lose, then it is reasonable to expect them to be carried out disproportionately by poor, ill-educated people with dismal economic prospects.

Some terrorists certainly fit this profile. Yet the ranks of high-profile terrorism suspects also boast plenty of middle-class, well-educated people. The would-be Times Square bomber, Faisal Shehzad, boasts an MBA and is the son of a senior Pakistani air-force officer. Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who stands accused of lighting a makeshift bomb on a transatlantic flight in the so-called “underwear plot”, had a degree from University College, London, and is the son of a rich Nigerian banker. The suspected suicide-bomber in this week's attacks in Stockholm had a degree from a British university. Are well-heeled terrorists representative or are they exceptions to the rule?

Social scientists have collected a large amount of data on the socioeconomic background of terrorists. According to a 2008 survey of such studies by Alan Krueger of Princeton University, they have found little



evidence that the typical terrorist is unusually poor or badly schooled. Claude Berrebi of the RAND Corporation compared the characteristics of suicide-bombers recruited by Hamas and Islamic Jihad from the West Bank and Gaza with those of the general adult male Palestinian population. Nearly 60% of suicide-bombers had more than a high-school education, compared with less than 15% of the general population. They were less than half as likely to come from an impoverished family as an average adult man from the general population. Mr Krueger carried out a similar exercise in Lebanon by collecting biographical information for Hizbullah militants. They too proved to be better educated and less likely to be from poor families than the general population of the Shia-dominated southern areas of Lebanon from which most came.

There is also no evidence that sympathy for terrorism is greater among deprived people. In a series of surveys carried out as part of the Pew Global Attitudes Project in 2004, adults in Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan and Turkey were asked whether they believed that suicide-bombing aimed at American or other Western targets in Iraq was justified. Their answers could be broken down by the respondents' level of education. Although the proportions varied greatly between countries (with support lowest in Turkey), more schooling usually correlated with more agreement.

Some argue that poverty could be at the root of terror even if terrorists are not themselves poor. Anger about poverty in the countries they are from could cause richer citizens of poor countries to join terrorist organisations. This idea can be tested by looking across countries to see if there is a link between a country's GDP per head and its propensity to produce terrorists. Mr Krueger did precisely this by looking at data on 956 terrorist events between 1997 and 2003. He found that the poorest countries, those with low literacy, or those whose economies were relatively stagnant did not produce more terrorists. When the analysis was restricted to suicide-attacks, there was a statistically significant pattern—but in the opposite direction. Citizens of the poorest countries were the least likely to commit a suicide-attack. The nationalities of all foreign insurgents captured in Iraq between April and October 2005 also produced no evidence that poorer countries produced more insurgents. If anything, there was weak evidence the other way.

What might explain why so many relatively well-off people from relatively well-off countries end up as terrorists? It may be that a certain level of education makes it more likely that people will become politicised. But the kind of people that terrorist organisations demand also matters. Unlike ordinary street crime, which does tend to attract the down-and-out, terrorism is a complex activity. So terrorist organisations prefer to recruit skilled, educated people to carry out their missions. Using a database of Palestinian suicide-bombers between the years 2000 and 2005, Mr Berrebi and Harvard University's Efraim Benmelech find that more educated suicide-bombers are assigned to attack more important targets. Such terrorists also kill more people and are less likely to fail or be caught during their attacks.

The sword is mightier with the pen

The finding that more educated terrorists are deadlier may mean, however, that economic conditions can influence terrorism's effectiveness. Using data on all Palestinian suicide-attackers between 2000 and 2006, Esteban Klor of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and Messrs Benmelech and Berrebi show in a new paper that the skill level of the average terrorist rises when economic conditions are poor. They reckon that high

unemployment enables terror organisations in Palestine to recruit more educated, mature terrorists. So better economic conditions could blunt the effectiveness of terror attacks by reducing the average quality of the talent that terrorist organisations are able to recruit.

There are many reasons to promote economic development in poor countries but the elimination of terror is not a good one. The research on terrorists' national origins suggested that countries which give their citizens fewer civil and political rights tend to produce more terrorists. Politics, not economics, is likely to be a more fruitful weapon in the fight against terror.

(<http://www.economist.com/ecfocterrorism>) (<http://www.economist.com/ecfocterrorism>) "What Makes a Terrorist? Economics and the Roots of Terrorism", by Alan B. Krueger, Princeton University Press

"Economic Conditions and the Quality of Suicide Terrorism", by Efraim Benmelech, Claude Berrebi and Esteban F. Klor, [NBER Working Paper No. 16320](http://www.nber.org/papers/w16320) (<http://www.nber.org/papers/w16320>) , August 2010

"Human Capital" and the Productivity of Suicide Bombers" by Efraim Benmelech and Claude Berrebi, Journal of Economic Perspectives, 2007. A version (with a different title) is available as [NBER working paper No 12910](http://www.nber.org/papers/w12910) (<http://www.nber.org/papers/w12910>)

From the print edition: Finance and economics