



## World

### ENDING THE MYTH OF THE POOR TERRORIST

The jihadists who carried out the Easter massacre in Sri Lanka were educated members of their country's elite, a background that's closer to the terrorist norm than the exception

By [Claude Berrebi and Owen Engel](#)  
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Last week's Easter Sunday bombing, targeting Christian worshipers in Sri Lanka, was one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in modern history. The massacre, in which some 250 people were killed, showed signs of sophisticated coordination and planning and was quickly linked to the Islamic State, a group that, whatever role it is ultimately found to have played, is known to possess the technical expertise and operational network necessary to carry out this kind of attack. The bigger surprise for many has been the background of the nine Islamist terrorists, including one woman, who carried out the suicide bombings. Far from the common image of hardscrabble terrorists driven to desperate acts by their desperate lives, the Sri Lankan bombers were members of their country's elite. "Most of the bombers are well-educated [and] come from economically strong families. Some of them went abroad for studies," Sri Lanka's junior defense minister, [Ruwan Wijewardene](#), told a press conference. One suspected attacker went to law school in Australia while two others, brothers, grew up sons of a wealthy and well-established businessman.

Contrary to persistent myths surrounding terrorism, the background of the Sri Lankan attackers is closer to the norm than the exception. Researchers have been demonstrating for years that most terrorism is committed by individuals who are, on average, wealthier and better educated than the median level in their respective society. But going back to Sept. 11, 2001, when 19 radical Islamic terrorists from al-Qaida hijacked four commuter planes and attacked the United States, a false consensus began to form among American politicians and experts scrambling to confront this new threat, that linked terrorism to poverty, ignorance, and hopelessness. In 2002, President

George W. Bush **declared** that America “fights against poverty because hope is an answer to terror.” His secretary of state, Gen. Colin Powell, **agreed**. “The root cause of terrorism does come from situations where there is poverty, where there is ignorance.” The Bush administration’s perceptions about terrorist roots was soon echoed by rival American politicians and **leaders around the world**.

Nearly two decades later, Americans **still view terrorism** as a serious threat, and terrorist attacks occur almost daily: in Sri Lanka, in the ongoing Israel-Palestinian conflict and elsewhere across **South Asia** and the **Horn of Africa**. Major terrorist operations have also been carried out by jihadist groups acting in the West who have attacked **France, Germany, Spain, United States, United Kingdom** and **Holland** among others. In the years between Sept. 11, 2001, and last week’s attack in Sri Lanka, most politicians have tempered their views on the roots of terrorism, but the idea that the phenomenon is based in poverty and ignorance persists.

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Just over a month ago, a **speech** by the leader of the British Labour Party, Jeremy Corbyn, was discovered that showed him expressing sympathy with Hamas suicide bombers. In the clip, he suggested that young men in Palestine turn to terror because of “hopelessness” and a lack of other options. At first glance, it seems logical that terrorism and hardship are intertwined. Wouldn’t the poor and desperate, who have less to lose, be more likely to engage in destructive activity? This line of thinking can be traced directly back to the **traditional economic theory of crime**, put forward by Nobel laureate economist Gary Becker, and the **traditional economic theory of suicide**, put forward by economists Daniel Hamermesh and Neal Soss. On the surface, it would seem to make sense that the same indicators for a propensity toward crime and suicide, namely a lack of resources or education, would also be found in the type of people prone to carry out a terrorist act, which is criminal and often suicidal. For politicians, the grouping of these three issues—poverty, poor education, and terrorism—makes it easy to solve the problem. If you reduce poverty or promote education, terrorism will drop. But reality does not cooperate with political expediency and most researchers and economists soundly refute the idea that terrorism is dependent on poverty and ignorance.

To begin, let’s look at research done on relations between microeconomic conditions, or economic conditions at the individual level, and terrorism. Since 2001, several studies (by some of the world’s leading economic minds such as the former chairman of Obama’s White House Council of Economic Advisers, **Alan Krueger**) have investigated the relationship between individual economic conditions and terrorism. These studies collected data on the characteristics of key terrorist groups such as Hezbollah militants, Muslim terrorists who lived and operated in the U.S.

between 1993 and 2008, and deceased martyrs from the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) from 1987 to 2002. None of the **statistical analyses** found a definitive link between terrorism and poverty at the individual level. Just the opposite, in fact—the major **comprehensive empirical studies** generally suggest that terrorists are more likely to come from better financial backgrounds, belong to a higher socio-economic group, or simply be above the poverty line. The definite **conclusion**: Economic effects at the individual level do not have an impact on terrorism.

Many of these same studies also investigated the relationship between education and terrorism. The conventional view predicted that terrorists would hold lower levels of education or be uneducated and thus have fewer employment alternatives to terrorism than their better educated peers. Here, **researchers** again refuted the conventional conclusion, finding that terrorists are not only not uneducated on average but, in fact, tend to have achieved **a higher education level** than the average in their respective region.

So much for the idea of the poor, blighted terrorist driven to desperate acts by his individual desperation. But that did not put all such theories to rest; there still remained the effect of macroeconomic conditions at the societal level. Perhaps, researchers pondered, it was not lack of education or individual poverty that motivated acts of terror, but instead larger societal-scale poverty that raised levels of terrorism.

Initial academic research seemed to support conventional wisdom that poverty and terrorism were fundamentally linked. Preliminary **findings** on economic recessions and expansions, indeed, concluded that economic contractions increase the probability of terrorist activities and that attack venues were characterized by low economic openness. However, serious flaws were soon exposed in these works as critical researchers pointed out that these studies focused on places that were the locations of attacks (i.e., the targets) and not the actual places or nations where the terrorists were from (i.e., the origins of the perpetrators). Newer, more refined research, such as work done by the economists **Krueger and Laitin**, sprang up in response. These new studies on the macroeconomic-terrorism relationship reached the opposite conclusion: The GDP per capita in the terrorist's country of origin doesn't seem to affect terrorism frequency. In fact, the findings of these analyses suggested that when a nation's GDP per capita improved, they were more likely to produce terrorist perpetrators.

A look at history seems to support these findings. According to several measures of economic wellness, the beginning of the year 2000 showed the **economy of the Palestinian territories** at its best. That is the same year, in the fall of 2000, following the failure of the Camp David Summit, when Palestinians began a terrorist campaign known today as the **second intifada**. The massive rise in bloody terrorist attacks, though often depicted as evidence of how abject Palestinian living conditions were, actually began in a time of economic strength for the Palestinians. As violence rose, however, the economic strength of **the Palestinian territories** appeared to decrease. In 2005 when, after the deaths of over 1,000 Israelis and 3,000 Palestinian civilians and militants, the violence of the intifada began to subside, the Palestinian economy was at one of its weakest phases in recent history.

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the available evidence: Economic conditions and education levels at the individual level did not appear to affect terrorism, and GDP per capita in an individual's country of origin does not affect terrorism frequency. By the mid-2000s, most experts and scholars seemed to abandon the conventional view of terrorist roots. Yet a new theory



emerged about the link between poverty, education and terrorism that attempted to incorporate this new information.

In 2005, **Ethan Bueno de Mesquita** from the University of Chicago produced a theory that focused on the relationship between the supply and demand of terrorists. According to Bueno de Mesquita, a huge group of individuals wanted to be terrorists, and “... if terror organizations select suicide terrorists from a large supply of volunteers, they are able to choose better qualified suicide terrorists under bad economic conditions.” The terrorist groups, given their choice, would select individuals from better economic background or those who have obtained higher levels of education. This premise, that terrorist groups get to pick from large amounts of volunteers appears to mainly come from anecdotal evidence. Bueno de Mesquita quotes a senior member of Hamas as saying the group’s “biggest problem is the hordes of young men who beat on our doors, clamoring to be sent.” In short, there is a large “supply” of potential terrorists who want to fight perceived injustices which allows terrorist groups to screen these applicants and select higher quality candidates, or those with higher education and financial levels.

As Bueno de Mesquita’s screening theory gained traction in some circles, two key studies investigated the general premise that quality of terrorists is related to their wealth, age, and education. In 2007, researchers **Benmelech and Berrebi** found that older, more experienced, and more highly educated terrorists, or higher quality terrorists, tend to kill more individuals, cause more damage when assigned to key targets, and are more likely to evade authorities. To further this research and possibly draw relations to societal level economic conditions, an additional study focused on the relationship between economic conditions and the characteristics of terrorists. **Benmelech, Berrebi and Klor** found that worsening economic conditions in one quarter (such as greater unemployment) increases the probability that the next quarter’s suicide terrorist is better educated, older and more experienced. These studies became the first to indicate that while worsening economic conditions do not increase the number of attacks, it was potentially correlated to an increase in the effectiveness and sophistication of suicide terrorist attacks. These findings appeared to support the Bueno de Mesquita theory that terrorist groups screened for higher quality candidates.

However, the latest research raises some new questions about the comprehensiveness of Bueno de Mesquita’s model. In 2015, a new Palestinian terrorist campaign erupted. The attacks were substantially different than previous waves of Palestinian violence as the assailants typically worked alone instead of within a greater terrorist group. Because of this individualistic terrorist threat, the campaign is often referred to as the “Lone Wolf” intifada. The violence subsided in 2017, and an ongoing study by Berrebi and **Weissbrod** is working to analyze the characteristics of the individuals involved. So far, the study has found that while there are many high school dropouts in this new kind of self-selected terrorism, there are also many who are highly educated and from affluent backgrounds. Overall, both the number of highly educated professionals and university graduates among the terrorists, and the number coming from wealthier backgrounds, are well above average. What the research suggests is that although terrorist organizations may eliminate the lowest quality terrorist candidates, as claimed by Bueno de Mesquita and others, separate factors beyond the screening process must play a part in forming the connection between higher education, wealth, and terrorism.

What is clear by now is that nearly all current research shows that terrorists tend to be wealthier and more educated but we still need to test new theories to find out why. If Bueno de Mesquita’s screening model isn’t the entire story, one alternative theory could be that the educational content

could itself be radicalizing, thus the more schooling someone receives in a given society the more likely it becomes that they could engage in terrorist acts. Another possible theory is that terrorism is a modern, deadlier form of political protests and revolts that have, throughout history, often been started by the intellectual communities. A third alternative may be that individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds do not have the luxury of participating in revolt as they must worry about feeding their families and the struggles of everyday life.

There are many more unexplored theories that may help to further explain the roots of terrorism, yet one thing is certain: The conventional view is far too simple. Politicians like Jeremy Corbyn need to stop treating terrorist threat as though it is a unidimensional problem which is solvable by raising individual wealth and education. Corbyn's paeans to the noble suffering of hopeless Hamas terrorists rests on a myth. The massacre against Christians in Sri Lanka was not committed by desperate volunteers drawn from the wretched of the earth. The terrorists who carried out that mass murder were well-educated members of their society's upper middle class, a background that is not exceptional in the broader context of terrorism and, if anything, suggests that the perpetrators were representative of a common socio-economic class of terrorist.

As terrorism evolves further, we must treat this issue as one impacted not just by poverty, education or terrorist organizations, but other factors as well. This step will allow for greater research in order to fully understand the mechanisms of terrorism and begin to find real solutions that reach beyond political expediency.

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