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## The Myth That Poverty Causes Terrorism Refuses to Die

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Despite the fact that the perpetrators of the September 11 terrorist attacks came mostly from middle- or upper-middle-class families, as have scores of other terrorists, many Westerners were still surprised to learn that the suicide bombers who killed hundreds in Sri Lanka on Easter were likewise educated and well-off. **Claude Berrebi** and **Owen Engel** explain the extensive research that disproves the persistent myth that poverty causes terrorism:

Since 2001, several studies . . . have investigated the relationship between individual economic conditions and terrorism. These studies collected data on the characteristics of key terrorist groups such as Hizballah, Muslim terrorists who lived and operated in the U.S. between 1993 and 2008, and “martyrs” from 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, to belong to a higher socio-economic group, or simply to be above the poverty line. . . .

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. [But] 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 the frequency of terrorism. In fact, the findings of these analyses suggested that when a nation’s GDP per capita improved, it became more likely to produce terrorists.

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.

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