

Should Official Development Assistance be used to combat radicalisation?

Written by James Robertson

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JAMES ROBERTSON, SEP 19 2011

Official Development Assistance (ODA) is viewed as an important tool in the fight against terrorism. This aid includes all the contributions of donor government agencies which go to developing countries with the aim of promoting economic development and welfare (OECD, 2003). Radicalisation is understood to be 'the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas that could lead to acts of terrorism' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark, 2007: p. 8), thus preventing radicalisation is key to preventing terrorism. There are two common arguments in favour of using development aid to combat radicalisation. The first rests on the assumption that poverty is a root cause of terrorism, and drives individuals into the desperation which makes radical ideology appealing. Those holding this view often advocate a "new Marshall Plan" to alleviate world poverty and thus eliminating the root cause of terrorism. This idea continues to be popular, although it is contradicted by much of the available evidence. The second argument accepts that radicalisation is not a preserve of the disadvantaged, but argues that aid can still be used in various ways to fight radicalisation. These methods can be summarised as disincentivisation, coercion, and appeasement. Both of these arguments are fundamentally flawed and have resulted in the adoption of policies which have done little to combat radicalisation, but have severely hampered the provision of aid to those who need it.

Towards a "New Marshall Plan"?

The first major influence on the use of development aid to combat radicalisation has been termed the 'rooted in poverty hypothesis' (2003: p. 406) by James Piazza. When George Bush famously declared that 'We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror' (2002), his words were consistent with one of the dominant assumptions on terrorism, namely that the desperation of poverty makes individuals more susceptible to radicalisation. Bell and Renner argue that 'people whose hopes have worn thin, whose aspirations have been thwarted, and whose discontent is rising are far more likely to succumb to the siren song of extremism' (Bell & Renner, 2002). The popularity for of this hypothesis may lie in that it provides a simple explanation for a complex phenomenon that many struggle to comprehend.

This assumption has created a belief among many that 'The United States and the other industrial nations should launch a global "Marshall Plan" with the goal of providing everyone on earth with a decent standard of living' (Bell & Renner, 2002). Like the original Marshall Plan, these calls are based less on benevolence than on a belief that aid can be used to combat the spread of a malevolent force (Jackson, 1979: p.1051). Just as in the post-Second World War world it was assumed that by combating poverty the spread of communism would be prevented, today it is believed by many that increasing living standards will spell the end of terrorism.

This hypothesis is, however, largely contradicted by research. In one of many studies on the topic, Piazza uses three indicators of economic well-being – the human development index, the GINI coefficient (which measures the equality or inequality of a state) and the calories per capita – to determine any causal link between poverty and terrorism. His results showed no correlation between terrorism and any of these economic variables (2006: p. 165-170). These facts are not just academically established but recognised by counter-terrorism organisations operating on a practical level. An NYPD document advises that radicalised individuals are likely to come from 'middle class backgrounds; not economically destitute' and to be 'educated; at least high school graduates, if not university students' (Silber & Bhatt,

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2007: p. 23).

If we accept the conclusion of Jitka Malečková that 'even if poverty is not a root cause of terrorism, it is a cause of much suffering around the world, and this should be enough reason to pursue policies to eradicate it' (2005: p. 42), then the fallacy of the rooted in poverty hypothesis is inconsequential. However the mistaken assumption that there is a direct causal connection between poverty and terrorism has contributed to the securitisation of ODA, without this positive side-effect.

Development aid as a precision tool

The second key influence on the use of aid to counter radicalisation is based on the recognition that there does not necessarily have to be a direct link between poverty and terrorism for development assistance to be an effective tool. Individuals from across the spectrum of society can be influenced by economic methods. USAID declares prominently on its website that it 'plays a critical role in President Barack Obama's national security strategy to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda and to prevent its capacity to threaten the United States' (USAID, 2011), but does not attempt to achieve this through the worldwide alleviation of poverty, but instead adopts a more selective and targeted approach. Development aid can be used in this way for three distinct purposes: disincentivisation, coercion and appeasement.

Individuals need not to come from the poorest sections of society to be motivated by the financial opportunities that terrorist organisations can present, or to be susceptible to economic sanctions. This is position adopted by Cragin and Chalk of RAND, who state that in the cases they examined, although 'extremist groups recruited across the class spectrum... among other motivating factors, inductees were attracted to the financial opportunities that were provided by terrorist organizations' (2003: p. xi). Assistance can be targeted towards those seen as the greatest threat. In its assessment tool for the allocation of development aid the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark suggests that 'First, it must be determined who are at risk of being radicalised. Following this identification, it becomes possible to outline specific areas of intervention that could be considered' (2007: p. 16). Thus, if appropriate, Cragin & Chalk suggest that development aid can be used to combat radicalisation by 'providing the members of these communities with viable alternatives to terrorism' (2003: p. x). They argue that this succeeded in Northern Ireland, claiming that among other reasons for the success of the peace process, the emergent Catholic middle class was disincentivised from a return to violence by increased economic opportunities.

The coercive potential for development aid stems from the ability of donors to withhold it. Although Cragin and Chalk warn against overuse of this tool, as it can increase instability and uncertainty, they maintain that 'development assistance can be made conditional on the absence of violence, creating a useful "stick" to discourage support for terrorists' (2003: p. xiii). Writing before the election of Hamas, they cite Palestine as a successful example of this use of ODA.

Development aid could also be used to improve the image of the West in the developing world. Scholars such as Charles Curtis believe that the only way to reduce the terrorist threat to America and the rest of the Western world is to 'do much more to counter the hatred directed against us' (2006: p. 32). Senator John Kerry argues that the relief effort in the wake of the Kashmir earthquakes was an example of the great potential of aid to appease this anti-Western sentiment. Both America and the extremist group Lashkar-e Taeba organised relief camps, but the American effort was far more effective. Kerry remarked that 'For a brief period, America was going toe-to-toe with extremists in a true battle of hearts and minds – and actually winning.' (2009) This seems to demonstrate the potential of aid – humanitarian and developmental – to demonstrate America's goodwill towards those who might harbour anti-Western sentiments.

The pitfalls of the manipulation of ODA

The use of development aid to counter radicalisation is ineffective, at times counter-productive, and detrimental to those in greatest need. By targeting assistance to those areas deemed to be at greatest risk of being radicalised, other areas in similar poverty are neglected. This marks one of the major departures from the original Marshall Plan.

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Whereas Marshall Aid was available to all, and even controversially accepted by communist Yugoslavia, the use of development aid for counter-radicalisation purposes is highly selective and targeted. The consequence of this is that 'ODA has further been drawn into close proximity with security concerns rather than needs.' (Aning, 2010: p. 23). An Oxfam report on how security concerns have affected aid shows that donors focus on providing aid to areas regarded as a threat to their own interests; 'Since 2002 one-third of all development aid to the 48 states labelled "fragile" by the OECD has gone to just three countries: p. Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan' (2011: p. 2).

Beyond distorting the provision of aid, there is also little evidence that it succeeds in reducing the threat of radicalisation. Cragin and Chalk concede that 'Although social and economic development – when properly supported and implemented – can inhibit terrorism, development alone cannot eliminate it' (2003: p. xiv). But in many cases, even using development assistance as just one tool in a multifaceted response to radicalisation is deeply misguided. By using development aid as a "stick", perceived grievances may be increased. Bans on providing financial assistance to terrorist groups can 'effectively criminalize not only assistance to groups themselves, but both humanitarian and development aid provided to areas and authorities under the control of such groups' (Oxfam, 2011: p. 21). Development aid to the Gaza has been severely restricted since the election of Hamas, resulting in a great increase in the levels of poverty.

The use of development aid to appease anti-Western sentiment is similarly ineffective. Senator Kerry argued that after the humanitarian success of the relief effort in Pakistan 'The question is: how can we most effectively demonstrate the true friendship of the American people for the Pakistani people?' (2009) This demonstrates a concern with appearances rather than substance. The securitisation of aid means that its value becomes based upon its visibility, rather than its effectiveness. This is a self-defeating goal, as 'perceptions of Western aid donors in areas of strategic aid remain overwhelmingly negative, not least because beneficiaries recognize the strategic motivations of highly visible, unsustainable aid projects' (Oxfam, 2011: p. 23). This has been seen in Afghanistan, with the building of schools by NATO's reconstruction teams. While highly visible, these buildings are considered by locals to be at far greater risk of attacks by insurgents and consequently far less effective than the lower-profile alternative of provision of funding for community based schools.

Conclusion: the counter-productive abuse of ODA

ODA should not be used to combat radicalisation. The rooted in poverty hypothesis has not only been repeatedly discredited, but it has also failed to result in a global effort to alleviate poverty. There has been no new Marshall Plan, but instead attempts have been made to use ODA as a precision tool, targeting only the areas and people deemed at highest risk of radicalisation. Attempts to disincentivise individuals by providing alternative means of income may result in some loss of recruits and support for terrorist organisation, but will never eliminate them. While development assistance may prevent the radicalisation of some individuals, it may equally result in the radicalisation of others. By denying assistance to areas in great poverty but under the control of designated groups, perceived grievances may be worsened, and cynically funding the most visible projects only deepens scepticism of Western motives. As the Oxfam report concludes, 'the effectiveness of aid – both in meeting urgent needs and in tackling entrenched poverty – is being undermined by the pursuit of narrow military and national security interests in some of the world's poorest and most vulnerable places' (2011: p. 5). This is an unjustifiably high price for little concrete benefit in terms of countering radicalisation.

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