

# Discuss and Evaluate the Relationship between Poverty and Terrorism

Written by Adam Groves

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ADAM GROVES, JAN 4 2008

Following the September 2001 attack on America's 'World Trade Centre', the 'causes of terrorism' has been a subject of intense investigation and speculation. Despite the educated and generally wealthy backgrounds of the 9/11 hijackers, poverty has been cited by numerous world leaders and respected academics as a central and direct cause of terrorism in the twenty first century. For George Bush, 'the lesson is clear... There can be no safety in looking away or seeking the quiet life by ignoring the hardship and oppression of others. Either hope will spread or violence will spread, and we must take the side of hope' (Washington Post, 09/15/05).

However, recent studies have suggested that there is little or no direct causal link between poverty and insurgent terrorism. I will begin this essay by briefly summarizing these studies, before going on to suggest possible explanations for their (perhaps surprising) results. I will argue firstly, that relatively wealthy people are more likely to be politically engaged, and therefore may identify with terrorists' aims more than people in poverty. As a consequence wealthy individuals may be quicker to resort to terrorist tactics themselves. Secondly, I will propose that 'terrorism' could be a competitive, high-skill profession, and people may have to improve their skills and social standing specifically to join terrorist groups. Alternatively terrorism might only be available to those privileged enough to have already acquired the necessary skills and social standing. Finally, I will conclude that poverty does have a role in facilitating (rather than causing) terrorism by creating an environment in which people are more likely to justify and support the use of terrorist tactics.

Before I begin my argument however, I must establish working definitions for both 'poverty' and 'terrorism'. I will define terrorism as: 'premeditated, politically motivated violence' (US State Department, 2005), perpetrated with the aim of evoking a 'state of fear (or terror) in a particular victim or audience' (Crenlinsten, 1987) 'in order to achieve political aims' (Ganor, 1998). It is also worth noting that I am focusing on insurgent terrorism, as state terrorism may have different causal factors. I will define poverty as an income level that is insufficient to sustain an individual (and

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their dependents) in terms of food, housing, clothing, medical requirements, and other basic needs.

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## **Studies on the Relationship between Poverty and Terrorism:**

P J Smith wrote in 2002 that, 'before the 11 September attacks, experts generally considered suicide bombers to be usually poor, [and] not particularly well-educated' (Smith, 2002: 37). However, numerous studies and surveys, both prior to and since September 2001, have suggested that people who resort to terrorism are normally far from below the poverty line.

In 1977 Russell and Miller found that the majority of terrorists they surveyed came from middle class backgrounds. Similarly, following interviews conducted with Islamists in Egyptian jails, Saad Eddin Ibrahim (1980, 440) concluded that they were usually from middle class families, and were 'significantly above the average in their generation'.

More recently, Krueger and Malečková (2002: 28-29) have suggested that a living standard above the poverty line may be positively associated with membership of Hezbollah, and the Jewish extremists they analysed were overwhelmingly from high paid jobs. Likewise, in a study of four hundred international terrorists associated with Al Qaeda, Marc Sageman (2004) found that three quarters came from upper or middle class backgrounds and over sixty percent had been to university, leaving him to conclude that 'these are the best and brightest of their societies in many ways.'

Taking a different approach, Berrebi (2004) fails to find a relationship between economic conditions in Palestine and the number of attacks against Israel, and Brynjar and Skjølberg (2004: 11) report that socio-economic changes have been 'mostly irrelevant in explaining fluctuations in [political] violence in Northern Ireland'.

Also using a country-wide analysis, Daniel Pipes observes that Kuwait's Islamist party is traditionally dominant in parliament despite the wealthy nature of the state. He also argues that Muslims in Europe and North America are normally wealthier than the general population, and yet this has not stopped the flourishing of militant Islam in the West (2002).

Malečková (2005: 41) concludes from these studies, that 'neither the participants nor the adherents of militant activities... are recruited predominantly from the poor... [and] poverty on a national level does not predict the number

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of terrorist attacks carried out by individuals coming from a country'. If anything, there seems to be a more convincing relationship between wealth and terrorism.

There are criticisms of these studies. Having quoted a senior member of Hamas claiming he has difficulty choosing from the 'hordes of young men' who are desperate to become terrorists, De Mesquita (2004: 1) argues that if screening is occurring, it's not possible to draw conclusions about the pool of willing applicants merely by analyzing those who do become terrorists. Li and Schaub (2004: 237) point out that the definition of poverty is also problematic, as wealthy people (who are more likely to be better informed about the world) may not define their wealth with relation to their fellow countrymen. Berrebi acknowledges in his own work that there were also practical difficulties with inferring levels of poverty.

However, if we accept the broad findings of these studies, where does this leave the relationship between poverty and terrorism? In the remainder of the essay, I will propose some possible explanations for these results, before concluding that whilst not a direct cause of terrorism, poverty does have a key role as a facilitator of political violence.

## **Politically Engaged Counter Elites:**

In a recent article for a Canadian think-tank, Kunz and Frank (2004: 4) propose that poverty is more than simply a lack of financial resources and is better understood as a form of social, economic and political exclusion. Such an understanding has important consequences for the widely held assumption that people in poverty might be more likely to engage in terrorism because they have nothing to lose. Could it in fact be the case that wealthy people are more likely to take part in terrorism because they are politically more engaged?

Antonio Gramsci argued in the early 1930s, that the ruling elite in Western Europe maintained hegemony by creating a political and social consensus through non-coercive agencies of socialisation such as unions and schools. Gramsci argued that as a result, the masses unconsciously gave their consent to the elite. If Europe's working classes were to escape this 'false-consciousness', Gramsci believed a counter-hegemony would need to be created. He argued that this could be achieved via the establishment of a 'critically self-conscious' revolutionary elite; i.e. intellectuals who, realising the reality of the situation, would lead the masses against the political elite whilst always maintaining contact with the social base (Gramsci, 1971: 334).

It could be argued that terrorists are an example of such 'critically self conscious' revolutionaries. There are clear

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parallels between Gramsci's theory of counter hegemony and Hudson's analysis (1999: 49:50) that terrorism is often resorted to by 'well-off young people... attracted to political radicalism out of a profound sense of guilt'. Kramer (in Pipes, 2002) has proposed that militant Islam in particular is a movement dominated by a 'counter-elite' who have become marginalised. If one accepts the analysis of terrorists as a 'critically self conscious' counter elite, then it is perhaps logical that studies regularly show them to be wealthy and educated individuals.

Equally, whilst terrorism is a highly contested concept it is generally accepted that for violence to be terroristic it must be politically motivated. As Pipes (2002) points out, there exists a 'universal phenomenon' that political and ideological engagement increases when people reach a 'fairly high standard of living'. Similarly, Paxson (2002: 3-4) notes that the 'one firm conclusion' which can be drawn from Krueger and Malečková's study (2002), is that wealthy and educated individuals are more likely to be politically 'opinionated'. Conversely, Kunz and Frank (2004: 5) emphasise that individuals in poverty are often restricted to thinking about the 'necessities of life' rather than participating in politics. The clear relationship between wealth and political engagement goes some way to explaining why few terrorists are in poverty.

## **Terrorism as a High-skill, High-wealth Profession:**

Daniel Lerner concluded from his studies of the Middle East that rather than being the 'have-nots' of society, extremists tended to be the 'want-mores' (1964: 368). I propose that terrorism could be a high-skill, high-wealth profession, which attracts motivated and privileged individuals.

Nasra Hassan (2001) quotes a senior member of the Palestinian militant group al-Qassam as commenting, 'fending off the crowds who demand revenge and retaliation...; that becomes our biggest problem... When one is selected, countless others are disappointed'. This competition raises the possibility that disaffected young people may have to work towards becoming terrorists, because as Berman notes, terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda are not going to use 'semi-literate mercenaries' if educated people are available (in Gold, 2004: 7). In other words, terrorism could be a profession, open only to those who have the opportunity, confidence and motivation to gain the required skills.

It is a possibility that some individuals might seek to further their wealth, education and social status especially to gain the 'skills' necessary to become a terrorist. The position of terrorists as mere criminals has become blurred recently following the declaration of a 'war on terror', a phrase which suggests professional soldier status. In addition, figures such as Osama Bin Laden are now role-models for many disaffected people and there is significant evidence that terrorism is glamorised in some educational systems (Marcus, 2003; Daily Telegraph, 22/07/2005). Individuals,

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influenced by the idea of terrorism as a profession worth aspiring to, may seek to improve their education and social status in order to become terrorists.

Having conducted hundreds of personal interviews throughout the Middle East over ten years, Lerner concluded that the wealthy elite were confident and ambitious. Perhaps unsurprisingly this was in stark contrast to the sense of dependence which he observed in poorer individuals (1964: 342-343). As discussed in the previous section, aside from having greater confidence, elites also tend to be more politically aware and engaged. I suggest that such elites may see terrorism as a 'profession' which allows them to express any political anger they feel, whilst also achieving personal success. It could be the case that relatively educated and wealthy individuals with high aspirations are attracted to large terrorist groups because they provide visible opportunities for huge personal influence and power; something that in many countries would otherwise be very difficult to attain (Curtis, 2003: 4).

Finally, people in poverty may also be excluded from terrorism due to the costs of obtaining the necessary materials. Berrebi (2004: 18) reminds us that a 'certain degree of wealth' is required to purchase weapons, which are often only available via expensive black-market channels. Without the initial capital necessary to buy equipment, it may be difficult to become a terrorist.

In summary, far from being an 'occupation' dominated by 'have-nots', maybe terrorism requires attributes and opportunities more commonly associated with privilege. I suggest that in order to become a terrorist, one may require not just the ideological motivation, but also the opportunity (and money) to gain the necessary skills; the confidence to take action on ones own accord; and adequate wealth to buy necessary materials.

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## **Poverty as a Facilitator of Terrorism:**

Having reviewed the evidence from numerous studies, I have suggested some possible explanations as to why a direct causal link has not been found between poverty and terrorism. This is not to say that no link between poverty and terrorism exists, but rather to suggest that 'terrorism is better understood as emerging from a process of interaction between parties, than as a mechanical cause-and-effect relationship' (Bjørge, 2005: 258). I will now argue that poverty has a role in facilitating terrorism by providing a moral 'justification'; by creating support for terrorist tactics amongst the general population and by contributing to structured inequalities which lead to frustration and political violence.

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Issues such as poverty are important for extremists in order to legitimise their actions. This is evident in Hamas leader Mahmud az-Zahar's claim that 'It is enough to see the poverty stricken outskirts of Algiers or the refugee camps in Gaza to understand the factors that nurture the strength of the Islamic Resistance Movement' (in Pipes, 2002). Liu and Ehrlich (2002: 186-187) observe that although some terrorists are very wealthy themselves, the socioeconomic conditions in their nations often 'provide a good basis' for moral indignation. Although no direct causal link exists, poverty is 'exploited' by extremists for their own ends (O'Neil, 2003: 1). Terrorist organizations use issues such as poverty in order to 'exhort the individual to act on behalf' of the masses (Brynjar and Skjølberg, 2004: 31). Therefore, whilst a terrorist might not be poor, poverty remains an important factor behind terrorism.

Poverty also has an important role in creating support for the use of terrorist tactics. As noted by Gunning (in Gurr, 2005a), FARC in Colombia, Hizbollah in Lebanon, the Tamils in Sri Lanka, the Provisional IRA in Northern Ireland and Brigade Rosso in Italy have all drawn much of their support from marginalized socioeconomic groups. This observation is supported by a 2004 MacCulloch study: using data based on surveys from over a quarter of a million people, he concluded that the less poverty there is, the less support there is for revolutionary violence (pg 836). However, it is important to note the possibility that support for terrorism may not be a consequence of poverty itself, but rather a consequence of political instability (of which poverty is often a symptom).

Some academics believe that the global economic system leaves the majority of people in peripheral countries with little prospect of escaping poverty, meaning that terrorism and internal conflict often result. Critics of globalisation (see discussion in Hegre, Gissinger and Gleditsch, 2003: 252) argue that some countries are unable to sustain long-term economic development due to the nature of the global economic system. The result of this, Brynjar and Skjølberg report, is that poverty becomes structural and leads to 'predatory and praetorian' political systems, 'which in turn fosters endemic social unrest and civil violence' (2004: 29).

Whilst prolonged poverty has been observed to lead to apathy (Lazarsfeld and Zeisal in Gurr, 1970: 34), there is also significant evidence that structural problems within a country can lead to terrorism. Schmid (2005: 228) reports that 'almost a quarter of terrorists in Kashmir cited 'joblessness' as a recruiting motive', and Sassen argues (2002: 315-316) that 'socioeconomic devastation' in the 'global south' provides a landscape where terrorism can thrive. Structured poverty and inequality within countries 'are breeding grounds for violent political movements in general and terrorism specifically'. (Gurr (ed.), 2005: 20).

Although they do not exist in a mechanistic cause-effect relationship, poverty facilitates terrorism by enabling terrorists to rationalise their acts; by creating a basis of support for terrorist tactics and by contributing to structured

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inequalities which increase the likelihood of political violence.

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## Conclusion:

Having summarised numerous studies which show there to be no direct causal link between poverty and terrorism, I have proposed the following explanations for their results.

Firstly, I have used Gramsci's theory of hegemony to show that terrorists could be considered 'critically self conscious' counter elites. It is to be expected that such elites are above the average in wealth and education. I have also demonstrated that terrorism requires one to be politically engaged. People in poverty often do not have the time or resources to actively take part in politics.

Secondly, I have suggested that terrorism could be a competitive, high-skill, high-wealth profession which attracts motivated and privileged individuals. People without the necessary capital to fund a terrorist campaign may not be able to become terrorists. Similarly, individuals who don't have the necessary skills (or the opportunity to gain the necessary skills) may not be chosen to take part in terrorist activities. This argument has important policy implications for the concept of a 'war on terror'; a phrase which credits terrorists as professional soldiers and may therefore increase the number of people interested in engaging in terrorism.

Finally, I have argued that although there is no direct causal link between poverty and terrorism, poverty does have a role as a facilitator. It is important in allowing terrorists to justify their acts; it helps provide a base of support for the use of terrorist tactics and it contributes to structured inequalities which increase the chances of political violence in general and terrorism specifically.

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*Written at: Aberystwyth University*

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## **About the author:**

Adam Groves has an MSc in Global Governance and Diplomacy from Oxford University and a BSc in International Relations from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. Adam co-founded the website in November 2007.