

## 7 Is terrorism the result of root causes such as poverty and exclusion?

**YES: Do structural factors explain terrorism?**

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### **Introduction**

In the context of social sciences, it is a widely accepted assumption of human behavior that aggression is the outcome of frustration. When we do not obtain something to which we feel entitled, we feel anger and frustration, which, in turn, leads to violent actions aimed at removing the obstacle to our achievement. When we are horrified by acts of terrorism, by drawing this simple chain of causality we attempt to explain the motivations of those who carry these acts out. It is no wonder that millennia before psychologist John Dollard (1939) and his research team published their influential book linking frustration and anger resulting from social structural strains to aggressive behavior, Aristotle famously pronounced, 'poverty is the parent of revolution and crime'. Since the time of Aristotle, most of us have taken for granted the link between the gaps in the social fabric and political violence. In fact, looking at the numbing loss of non-combatant lives from attacks by sub-national groups, one can reach one of two conclusions: these are the work of insane minds, or that those who perpetrated the attacks have little to live for. These associations are reinforced when we come to the most puzzling of the attacks where the perpetrators willingly sacrifice their own lives to kill others.

Confusion about the motives of these actors was pervasive at the sight of the horrific attacks of 9/11. Reflecting the widespread view of the 'mad men of history', Senator John Warner (Atran, 2003a: 1), the then Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee commented: 'Those who would commit suicide in their assault on the free world are not rational'. The accusation of insanity, however, obviates the need of causal explanations of the violent actions. The argument that the terrorists suffer from psychological problems or some personality disorder has been put to rest by trained psychiatrists and psychologists from diverse parts of the world for nearly three decades (McCauley, 2007; Horgan, 2005a, b; Merari, 2005; Merari and Friedland, 1985; Post, 1984, 1990; Post, Sprinzak and Denny, 2003; Silke, 2003a; Taylor, 1988; Taylor and Quayle, 1994). None of the credible observations of terrorist personalities and behavior yields any reason to believe that the common foot soldiers fighting organized societies are psychologically different from the rest of the population. In fact, while there may

be doubts about some of the leaders' states of mind, the followers, by and large, seem to be free of diagnosable maladies of the mind (Post, 2004).

With insanity eliminated as an explanation, the other often-cited reasons for terrorism and political violence are the various manifestations of social structural imbalance. The reasoning for this line of argument is simple. These structural imbalances, such as poverty, lack of education, blocked economic opportunities, income inequality, or lack of political freedom, prevent people from achieving their full potential. Inability to achieve what people believed to be their rightful entitlement creates frustration and anger, which leads to violent acts of political protest. Echoing this view, after the 9/11 attacks a number of prominent politicians and political decision makers almost reflexively pointed toward social structural imbalances of all sorts as generators of violence. Thus, Laura Tyson (2001), the former Chief of Presidential Council of the Economic Advisors under the Clinton Administration, called for a Marshall Plan as part of a frontal assault on terrorism. The former South Korean President and the Nobel Peace Prize winner, Kim Dae-Jung, in his acceptance speech, clearly stated (Malečková, 2005): 'At the bottom of terrorism is poverty'. While some sought the end of economic plight as a solution to the problems of sociopolitical violence, others pointed toward a 'freedom deficit'. President George W. Bush emphatically told the nation: 'They (the terrorists) hate us for our freedom', and proclaimed democracy as the antidote for terrorism. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the theoretical basis of these claims against actual evidence.

### **Theories linking social structure to terrorism and political violence**

The long, circuitous path of scholarship that links Aristotle to Karl Marx to the sociologists of the 1960s had uniformly looked at the wrinkles in the social structure as the primary generators of political malevolence. Karl Marx saw a binary world divided between the rapacious bourgeoisie and the hapless proletariat who are alienated by the lack of control over their own fruits of labor. The rise of Communist and Socialist-led revolts around the world reinforced a belief in the direct causal connection between a shared feeling of deprivation resulting from structural imbalances and rebellion.

The social structural theory received a boost in the 1950s and early 1960s with contributions from a number of prominent sociologists, such as Coser (1956), Dahrendorf (1958), and Smelser (1963). Among these authors, Smelser perhaps offered the most comprehensive theory of mass movements. He argued, *inter alia*, that structural strains felt within a society add to the 'generalized belief' of protest, which brings about social upheavals. As examples, Smelser cited cases from prerevolutionary Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam and many other third world countries. In this theoretical framework, political violence, however, was seen as an outcome of institutional and social structural imperfections found only in so-called 'third world' nations. In the democratic West, citizens were thought to be empowered by their ability to voluntarily form lobbying groups and to change the offending social order, thereby eliminating the need for violent revolutions. Yet in the 1960s and 1970s, reality stood in the way of this rosy requiem of social conflict in the West. Observing the absence of a systematic analysis of social conflict, the prominent political scientist Harry Eckstein lamented (1964: 1):

When today's social science has become intellectual history, one question will certainly be asked about it: why did social science, which had produced so many studies on so many subjects, produce so few on violent political disorder?

The conundrum for social scientists arguing for structural factors as root causes of conflict in the 1960s and 1970s was that the fires of protest were burning brightly in the cities of North America and Western Europe, where the gradually rising tide of economic prosperity had made life easier for most. To solve this riddle, a group of political scientists offered the 'relative deprivation' theory. The proponents of this theory argued that violence was taking place in the affluent nations because aggressive behavior is not generated by the presence of absolute poverty but of its relative perception (Gurr, 1968, 1970). It is interesting to note that the concern for social science during this period involved mass movements. Social scientists, at this time in history, had precious little to say about terrorism.

### **Studying terrorism: the moral dilemma**

In its early stages, terrorism studies had to overcome a deep ideological obstacle. At the end of the twentieth century, while social scientists were exploring the root causes of social movements, there was one area within the broad range of conflict studies where the literature was conspicuous in its near absence: terrorism. With the exception of a few noteworthy early efforts (Laqueur, 1977; Crenshaw, 1981; Rapoport, 1988), few noted scholars in the field of social sciences had contributed anything on terrorism. This conscious aversion can perhaps be traced directly to the ideological implication of the term: it is impossible to separate the political implications of the term 'terrorism.' Therefore, not surprisingly, most of the early contributors to the field were associated with think tanks, intelligence communities, or policy institutes than more ideologically sensitive educational institutions (Wilkinson, 1977; Jenkins, 1982; Freedman and Alexander, 1983; Hoffman, 1998/2006; Post, 1984).

However, this moral compunction disappeared after the devastating 1995 Oklahoma City bombing and then, of course, the 9/11 attacks. Facing the increasing menace, the ideological inhibitions quickly evaporated. The number of books published with 'terrorism' in the title in the decade that follows was many multiples of the total number of similar books in the previous half a century (Gupta, 2008: 3). Inevitably the authors, reflecting the demands of the general public, policy-makers and the members of the intelligence community, attempted to explore the root causes of terrorism. Their inquiry turned them toward the question of social and economic structural factors.

### **The structural factors**

The accumulated macro and micro data on terrorism offered a new challenge to the social science theory builders. The possibility of a link between terrorism and factors of structural imbalances can be sought at the individual level (micro), or at the aggregate level (macro). The macro-level analyses hypothesize that those individuals who would be drawn to participate in acts of terrorism are personally deprived individuals with low levels of educational and economic achievements. The macro-level aggregate analyses, in contrast, would show a correlation between macro-economic and political data with observed acts of terrorism.

It was, however, quickly realized that the link between frustration and demonstration of anger felt at an either individual or societal level is a complex one (Krueger and Malečková, 2003). By casting a cursory look, we can clearly see that none of the 9/11 attackers came from an impoverished background. In fact, some came from the wealthiest segments of their countries of origin. Several, including the supposed leader of the group, Mohammed Atta, were highly educated individuals. Similarly, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the so-called 'Underwear bomber', came from a highly privileged Nigerian family, as did Faisal Shahzad, the Pakistan-born US citizen, who attempted to plant a bomb in the middle of Times Square.

Those who examined the question of the individual participants' socioeconomic background in a systematic way have generally found that the participants tend to be better educated and from a higher economic class than the rest of the population (Hassan, 2001; Bueno de Mesquita, 2003). These findings may reflect two different arguments.

First, despite the fact that Marx saw history as an eternal struggle between the proletariats and the bourgeoisie, he believed that in reality, it would be extremely difficult to recruit the poor proletariats for revolution (Fernbach, 1974: 77). He saw the leadership for a violent overthrow of the system coming from the disaffected members of the upper class of society. Lenin similarly had a dim view of the proletariat participating in the revolution, particularly at leadership positions (Lenin, 1969: 40). This reluctance for the poor to be recruited in a revolutionary force can be accounted for by the high opportunity cost of their participation, because they are busy eking out an existence which may be threatened if they take time off for revolutionary activities (Popkin, 1979; Gupta, 1990).

In more recent days, some scholars have argued that the relative absence of participants in terrorism from the poorest segments of society might reflect a selection bias, particularly when a large pool of motivated volunteers is available for the group to choose from (Krueger and Laitin, 2008). In such cases, it is likely that the best-educated and the best-trained ones, who can fit in with the target population, will be chosen. In contrast, when the pool of volunteers is comprised of poor and uneducated and the target population is demographically similar to the groups', it is likely that the attackers are not going to be different from the rest of the population. Thus, in areas where there is domestic insurgency, such as in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen and Pakistan, the terrorists may be drawn from the poor and uneducated.

If the micro-level evidence points to a confusing pattern, so does the macro-level evidence. Krueger and Malečková (2003) and Piazza (2003) did not find any direct correlation between terrorism and structural factors, such as per capita GDP, education, or poverty. By using scatter plots and obtaining simple regression equations, Gupta (2008) corroborated the results of the previous studies. Even democracy and political freedom produced but a weak correlation with violent rebellion (Krueger and Laitin, 2008). Only the index of state failure showed a strong correlation with incidents of terrorism (Gupta, 2008). Thus, after an exhaustive examination, Krueger and Laitin (2008: 178) concluded that: 'To sum up, our data analysis up until now confirms . . . that the economic foundations of terrorism are at best only indirect'.

While in search for the root causes of terrorism, there is another factor that is worth remembering. When we consider cross-national terrorism data, we see that while many countries across the spectrum experience terrorism, it is the poorer ones that experience prolonged and widespread violence. Sambanis (2004) defines civil war as one that causes more than 1,000 deaths over a specific period. If we broaden our definition of terrorism to include such a wider spread of violence, there are convincing results of statistically significant correlation between terrorism and per capita income and unequal distribution of income (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Nafziger and Auvinen, 2002; Sambanis, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

I began my discussion by arguing that there are two possible explanations of terrorism: insanity or factors of social structural imbalances, which create a widespread feeling of frustration and anger. We saw that there is no evidence that the followers in a violent dissident movement suffer from any mental illness or exhibit any specific personality type. From all the disparate observations it seems clear that in their psychological makeup they are indis-

tinguishable from the rest of the community. Hence, it must be the economic and political grievances. Unfortunately, as we have seen in the above discussion, the data analyses paint a muddled picture. If the most potent generators of grievances, such as poverty, unemployment, income inequality and even lack of political freedom have but weak correlation with cross-national variations of terrorism, then how do we explain it? There are two sets of explanations: the first is methodological, the second conceptual.

In order to discern the effects of structural factors, researchers by and large use cross-national studies. This is because most of the structural factors are extremely slow-moving variables. For instance, factors such as measures of income inequality, poverty, literacy and educational attainments of nations do not change perceptively within a short period of time. Therefore, in order to detect their impact on violent political dissent we are forced to use cross-national data. Yet the comparability of such datasets is often in question. Hence it is possible that these measurement errors are casting some shadows on the accuracy of estimation.

Second, I have argued (Gupta, 2008) that in these analyses we are missing one important factor. When terrorists are interviewed, they all talk about their resentment toward the extant political system; they complain about factors of poverty and income inequality. They talk about the lack of economic opportunities, injustice, discrimination, repression and intolerance facing their communities. Even when they themselves are from a well-off background, they tell researchers that they have been moved by the plight of their fellow community members. Why then do these factors not show up in our empirical analyses? I posit that without grievances there can be no political movement. However, these grievances only serve as the necessary conditions. This is because none of these movements reflect spontaneous explosions of anger and frustration. The reason for this is that they come up against the irrefutable logic of the collective action problem, first demonstrated by Mancur Olson (1968). That is, all political movements, in the end, aim to attain public goods that are to be distributed within the community, regardless of participation by others. In a dissident movement, until it gains a certain amount of momentum or public support, the costs imposed by the organized society fall primarily on those who are the first to openly express their disaffection with the established system. Therefore, every 'rational' member of the community would wait for some people to stick their necks out. With everyone behaving rationally, no movement would ever start.

This collective action problem cannot be solved within the strict framework of economics. Olson (1968: 161–162) was clear in arguing that the reason someone would assume the risk of being a dissident is a matter of social psychology and not of economics. Therefore, I argue that in order to fully understand the motivations behind mass movement in general, and terrorism in particular, we must expand the fundamental assumption of economic rationality to include the group. That is, as social beings, we all strive to maximize not just the utility of our own selves, but also that of the group in which we claim our membership. Hoffman (1998/2006: 43) is therefore correct in stating that: "The terrorist is fundamentally an altruist: he believes in serving a "good" cause designed to achieve a *greater good for a wider constituency*" (my emphasis). Because economics and 'rational choice' models cannot fully explain altruism (Rose-Ackerman, 1996), for an explanation of such behavior we must look outside the disciplines that equate rationality with selfishness.

Although evolutionary logic has imbued us with the inescapable need to belong to groups, our choice of groups is not automatic; it depends on the work of leaders we may call 'political entrepreneurs'. The economist Joseph Schumpeter pointed out in 1912 that market interactions alone do not explain long-term movements in the economy. He emphasized the work of entrepreneurs, who through their innovations cause economic evolution. Similarly, some scholars have emphasized the need to have 'political entrepreneurs' to provide a shape of

collective identity for a movement to start and sustain. These are the leaders, the Mohandas Gandhis, the V. I. Lenins, the Maos, the Martin Luther King Jr's, and the bin Ladens of the world, who are able to channel the collective anger felt within their community to create a full-fledged political movement. Hence, the presence of grievances is only the necessary cause for political violence. For sufficient cause, we must look for leadership. Because of this intervening factor of leadership, when we examine the data we can only find a weak correlation between the structural factors and political violence.

Schumpeter (1912/1939) introduced the concept of entrepreneurs – those rare individuals who can take the existing innovations and advances in technologies and create large enterprises that can move an economy (or the global economy) along. However, what he did not address was the question of why these entrepreneurs arrive on the global stage from certain countries at specific periods of time? The noted economist William Baumol (1990) attempted to answer this by arguing that it is the incentive structure within the structure of an economy that creates what he calls 'productive', 'unproductive' or even 'destructive' entrepreneurs. Baumol, of course, does not examine the case of radical political leaders, but he argues (1990: 893) that:

while the total supply of entrepreneurs varies among societies, the productive contribution of the society's entrepreneurial activities varies much more because of their allocation between productive activities such as innovation and largely unproductive activities such as rent seeking or organized crime.

He establishes his hypotheses by drawing historical examples from Ancient Rome and China, the Middle Ages in Europe and the Renaissance. Baumol points out that a society that provides incentives for creative activities which may go against the accepted norms, practices and ideologies help supply crops of creative entrepreneurs, while those that develop institutional restrictions on free ideas tend to produce unproductive or destructive entrepreneurs.

We can extend his logic to see that the Arab/Islamic nations have largely been non-democratic, where the only expression of even moderate dissent or expression of frustration can take place within the confines of religious discourse. As a result, these societies have channeled their frustration, anger and a perception of humiliation through religious fundamentalism. Even in the democratic societies in the West, the hysteria created by the 9/11 and other attacks and a prolonged involvement in warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan have isolated Muslim youths, particularly in the Western European nations, such as France, the UK, Spain and even in the US (Sageman, 2008). This has created conditions where the radicalization of youth can take place. It is therefore of little surprise that these countries have produced the leaders of the next generation of al-Qaeda.

Finally, I should mention that terrorism is not a separate form of political violence. If we define it as attacks on a non-combatant population, then we must view it as a strategy employed by the group leadership. The most obvious manifestation of this strategic use of violence can be seen in the orchestration of suicide attacks. Despite the apparent implication of extreme emotion, a number of studies have found that suicide attacks are exquisitely timed to achieve certain political goals for the dissident group (Kydd and Walter, 2002; Berrebi and Klor, 2003; Pape, 2003; Gupta and Mundra, 2005; Hafez, 2007).

Hence, we can conclude that factors of structural imbalances do cause terrorism and political violence. However, such movements require the rise of leaders, who can frame the economic and political issues, give a widespread feeling of deprivation the concrete shape of a movement, and take appropriate strategic actions.