



Poverty and Terrorism
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Does poverty cause terrorism?

The short answer is: no. Rather than being a phenomenon of the world's poor, terrorism can just as easily arise among the wealthiest citizens of some of the world's wealthiest societies.

The long answer, however, is a little more complicated: poverty might not turn anyone into a terrorist, but it often makes the terrorists' goals easier to achieve.

If poverty caused terrorism, there probably would not be incidents like the botched attacks on London and Glasgow in June of this year, attempted by what appears to be a terrorist ring of doctors and medical students. Osama bin Laden, himself a millionaire, is the son of a construction magnate with a fortune in the billions. His chief lieutenant in al-Qa'ida, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was a wealthy surgeon. Mohamed Atta, one of the 9/11 hijackers, completed a thesis in urban planning at technical university in Germany. The list goes on.

Alan Krueger, an economist at Princeton University, has conducted a study of the economic backgrounds of terrorists around the world that backs up these anecdotes. "There is no evidence of a general tendency for impoverished or uneducated people to be more likely to support terrorism or join terrorist organizations than their higher-income, better-educated countrymen," he said at the London School of Economics. "As a group, terrorists are better educated and from wealthier families than the typical person in the same age group in the societies from which they originate."

That is, there's little evidence that the deprivation and degradation of poverty – as awful as they are for billions of people around the world who live on less than \$2 a day – are so enraging that they cause people to adopt extremist ideologies, like that of al-Qa'ida. But poverty does create an opportunity for well-funded terrorists to manipulate people for their own ends.

The poor might be enticed to work for terrorist groups if they pay well enough or offer the only employment in town. In Iraq, thousands of children must work to support their families, and many are employed by insurgent groups. The children are paid to make explosives, clean weapons, transport bombs without attracting police attention, and a variety of other tasks. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, these children earn a few dollars a day, often the only source of income for their

families in a country where the unemployment rate is somewhere between 25 and 40 percent. It doesn't matter if the poor care about the terrorists' ideology or goals – if people are desperate enough, they'll make bombs anyway if it means a paycheck.

Poverty creates other opportunities for terrorist groups: poverty allows well-funded terrorists to garner public support by providing social services and performing charity work.

Terrorists around the world spend hundreds of millions of dollars a year on these projects – including some of the most brutal, murderous, and tyrannical groups. Hamas, according to the Council on Foreign Relations, spends an estimated \$70 million per year on schools, orphanages, mosques, healthcare clinics, soup kitchens, and sports leagues in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Hizbollah funds, among other projects, Jihad al-Bina, or “Construction Jihad,” dedicated to rebuilding houses destroyed in fighting with Israel. Terrorist groups from Colombia to Indonesia provide social services where government services are under-funded or nonexistent.

These groups wouldn't spend the money if it didn't produce results – increased popular support. Popular support can mean a lot of things to a terrorist group: supporters might provide recruits and hiding places, or simply not inform on terrorists hiding in their midst when the police come looking. It might also mean increased support for a terrorist group's political wing in elections. Hizbollah won all 23 parliamentary seats in southern Lebanon in 2005, while Hamas won 58% percent of parliamentary seats in the 2006 Palestinian elections. In situations where the terrorist group is competing for legitimacy with government, or seeks to overthrow it, popular support is a valuable tool in the terrorists' arsenal.

This connection between poverty and terrorism was demonstrated in Egypt during the 1990s. One of the terrorist groups trying to overthrow the government, al-Gama'a al-Islamiya (The Islamic Group), was composed primarily of poor Egyptians from the impoverished south of the country. Violence by the Islamic Group increased as poverty increased. Unemployment, rents, and farm foreclosures all rose rapidly in the first half of the 1990s. At the same time, deaths from terrorist violence rose from thirty in 1991 to 415 in 1995, increasing every year. When bread subsidies were cut and prices rose, so too did the rate of terrorist attacks.

The Egyptian government did not miss this connection. In 1996 it initiated a development program that poured tens of billions of dollars into the poor south of the country. Jobs were created, social services were expanded, and bread subsidies were reintroduced. The number of terrorist attacks began to drop every year until 1999, when the number of attacks reached zero and the Islamic Group declared a ceasefire. Meanwhile, other terrorist groups in Egypt, like al-Zawahiri's Islamic Jihad (made up of doctors and engineers from the wealthier north), refused to join the ceasefire and continued to plot attacks.

Of course, there were more factors at play than poverty. The members of the Islamic Group did not commit terrorism just because of poverty in their home villages, and they did not give up the fight simply because the government paid them off with development dollars. Terrorism is not a glorified bank robbery. But the Islamic Group was clearly able to tap into popular resentment over poverty in the south of Egypt to increase its ability to commit violence, and when economic conditions there improved, popular support for the group dropped off.

Hamas and Hizbollah did not win their elections solely because of their charity work, and insurgents in Iraq do not recruit workers only because they can pay. But in each of these cases and more, terrorism is made a much more dangerous threat because poverty allows terrorists to manipulate people more easily. Though poverty does not cause terrorism, the U.S. and its allies must approach poverty around the world as one of the factors that helps terrorists flourish. Eliminating global poverty isn't just a humanitarian issue, but also an issue of national security.