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PHI 579 – Religion, Revolt, Terrorism, & War

Is Poverty A Root Cause of Terrorism?

A natural response to the September 11th terrorist attacks against the United States has been an attempt to understand their root causes. Only by understanding the causes of terrorism can we win the war against it and prevent future attacks. The notion of being able to empirically study anything, even terrorism, is the essence of Westernism. If we can understand it, then we can control it. Unfortunately, most political, religious, and business leaders alike, as well as journalists and academics have abandoned empirical study in favor of a commonly held myth, that poverty is the root cause of terrorism. Colin Powell has said we will follow through on our campaign against terrorism by going after its root: poverty (CNN Money). At the World Economic Forum in February, Gloria Arroyo, president of the Philippines, went so far as to say "terrorism and poverty are twins"(BBC News). The belief that poverty is to blame for terrorism is repeated so frequently by so many that few people question its truth. It is such a widespread and strongly held belief that those who espouse it don't even bother to offer evidence for it? Is this because it is indeed self-evident and needs no empirical support? Or, is it because there is no empirical data to support it?

Those that dare question the poverty-terrorism link often point out that most of the September 11th highjackers were well-educated middle class Saudis. The Socio-Economic Status of these terrorists implies that the root causes of terrorism are, to quote Sean Wilentz, a Princeton Historian, "money, education, and privilege"(Pipes). This could be discounted as merely anecdotal evidence or the exception that proves the rule. However, the empirical data, which clearly contradicts the belief that poverty is a root cause of terrorism, cannot be dismissed so easily.

- In a 1980 study of imprisoned Islamic militants in Egypt, social scientist Saad Eddin Ibrahim found that the typical member is "from the middle or lower middle class, with high achievement and motivation, upwardly mobile, with science or engineering education" (Pipes).
- At times a full 25% of Turkey's Islamic militant party, the Saadet Party, have been engineers. (Pipes)
- In the 1980's several countries that experienced great economic growth experienced a surge in militant Islam at the same time. (Pipes)
- Conversely, Bangladesh, Yemen, and Niger are three of the poorest Muslim countries and they have not become hotbeds of militant Islam. (Pipes).
- A study of 16 Palestinian suicide bombers found that economic circumstances were not a decisive factor (Pipes).

This data is hardly exhaustive but one need only superimpose a "terrorism" map over a "poverty" map to see that there is no poverty-terrorism correlation let alone causation. Why then, has this explanation of terrorism been so readily accepted?

Quite simply, it is uncontroversial. Those who have the power to alleviate or even eradicate poverty, and the human suffering associated with it should do so. *This* is a properly basic belief and as far as I know the statement "We must do all we can to eliminate global

poverty" has **never** derailed a political career. Blaming poverty allows us to ignore the difficult and politically dangerous questions. Among them: "Is the Islamic belief in Jihad inherently dangerous?", "How can we silence "hate speech" of Imams without betraying our own cherished values of free speech and freedom of religion?" and "How deep and widespread is hatred of our Western culture?" Blaming poverty for terrorism also allows us to erroneously believe that we can buy security. Simply by increasing foreign aid, forgiving debts and eliminating tariffs we can prevent future "September 11ths". This is a very dangerous idea. Providing wealth without eliminating hatred will only provide our enemies with the means to wage war against us. Testifying before the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate, Richard Pearle eloquently made this point: "If we accept poverty as an explanation we will stop searching for a true, and useful, explanation. We may not notice the poisonous extremist doctrine propagated, often with Saudi oil money, in mosques and religious institutions around the world" (AEI). Referring to Egypt, he states, "It is not a stretch to say that U.S. taxpayer dollars are helping to pay for the most inflammatory anti-American ranting" (AEI).

A more plausible explanation for terrorism than poverty is the alienation and envy that result when economic success has been achieved, yet a corresponding increase in political power has been denied. Martin Kramer, author of the *Middle East Quarterly,* describes likely terrorists as people who "by virtue of their education and/or income are potential members of the elite, but for some reason or another they are excluded….they have a grievance, their ambition is blocked, they cannot translate their socio-economic assets into political clout" (Pipes). It is much more logical to believe that people who have money, exposure to Western lifestyles and a variety of political philosophies via education and travel, and are frustrated by their own lack of power are far more likely to become terrorists than people who spend every waking hour focused on survival. Add to this religious fanatics actively recruiting these young men and offering them the ultimate political power, that of Allah and the result is terrorism.

If Richard Pearle and Martin Kramer are correct, as I believe they are, how then do we combat terrorism? One could argue that we must export our core Western values along with our dollars, withholding aid from those governments that deny their citizens basic civil liberties. Others will argue that Westernization is not the answer as many terrorists are Western-educated and have experienced the freedom and prosperity of the West. Multiculturalists and relativists will claim that forcing our customs and values on others is cultural imperialism and therefore wrong. It is ironic that some of these relativists believe that material wealth (the epitome of Americanism) is the answer to the terrorism problem or as Osama Bin Laden said "Because America worships money, it believes that other people think that way too." These people may be very surprised when Islamic extremists use the money we send them to buy weapons instead of new cars.

I do not pretend to have an answer to this complex problem. I only wish to illustrate that if we assume that poverty is the cause of terrorism we will never seriously address the complex religious, cultural, and political conditions that lead to the mass murders of September 11th. This failure to determine and eradicate the true causes of terrorism will leave us vulnerable to future attacks.

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