January 6, 2013

Jake Hawkesworth

Some Comments on your Econ 753 Term Paper

Dear Jake,

I think you made an excellent choice in replicating Krueger’s work on “What Makes a Terrorist?” There is obviously a lot at stake in coming up with a solid answer to the question. When I initially read Krueger’s work on this, I was skeptical as to how much could be accomplished by a pure econometric approach. I remain skeptical after reading your replication. However, I do think there is a lot that can be gained through econometrics. The approach just needs to be framed much more carefully, within a broader non-econometric setting. I take that to also be your own conclusion, as expressed in the first two sentences of your conclusion on p. 7.

In terms of your alternative modeling, the issue of history of wars is an innovative idea. It gets at the point that terrorists can feel grievances other than being poor. Then your point on relative GDP levels gets at the point of what we mean when we speak about people being “poor”. Do we mean absolute or relative poverty? When does one feel more aggrieved? Your approach is well taken, by focusing on relative poverty. However, it is probably true that, econometrically, you are not capturing too much more than Krueger himself though his inclusion of GDP of both home and target countries. This point came up in your oral presentation.

It would be great if you would somehow continue thinking about this systematically. I think you are not too far off from having a publishable paper. It may be that we would want to begin by classifying systematically the major cases of terrorism in recent decades, then thinking about commonalities. Then we could consider: if there were real efforts at fighting poverty going on in each of these cases, would we have evidence that this might diminish the allure of the terrorists? Also, we might want to consider whether the terrorists are accomplishing success in terms of the goals they explicitly set out. These are just some thoughts, that may or may not be of use.

Overall, it was great having you in class this past semester (though I am sorry I missed so much with my injury). I really hope you will keep up with this kind of work. You did an excellent job in the class, especially given that you are an undergrad and this was a class for Ph.D. students.

Warm regards for the New Year,

Bob Pollin