

The Futile Search for Roots of Terrorism

"Islamic terrorism, just as its Marxist or secessionist version in the West and Latin America was, is a matter of power—who has it and how to get it—not of poverty."



By Michael Radu

Socioeconomic grievances, or so some assert, explain (though they do not justify) terrorism in general and Islamic terrorism in particular—the factors Al Gore famously called this past February "another axis of evil in the world: poverty and ignorance; disease and environmental disorder; corruption and political oppression," all of which lead to terrorism. But do they?

It is hubris to attempt to explain terrorism in general, let alone in its many different forms across time and place. The following observations are therefore intended only to refocus the debate, not to "explain" terrorism.

The desire to identify "root causes" and so be able to correct them is natural. Root causes "have" to be there—at least in the American mind. There must be an explanation for the inexplicable: why a teenaged Palestinian girl would blow herself up in an attempt to kill as many Jews as possible, or privileged young men of the Arab world plot to kill themselves while murdering thousands of American civilians. But much as the frequently asked question this past fall, "Why do they hate us?" had flawed premises and yielded flawed answers, framing the question as "What are the root causes of terrorism?" leads too easily to looking at the usual suspects: "poverty," "injustice," "exploitation," and "frustration." Like the man in the parable who looks for his lost keys under the streetlight instead of where he lost them because "the light's better," it's easier to look in these familiar areas than to face and address the real problems.

Those who hold to "poverty as the root cause" do so even though the data does not fit their model. Even leaving aside multimillionaire Osama bin Laden, the backgrounds of the September 11 killers indicates that they were without exception scions of privilege: all were either affluent Saudis and Egyptians, citizens of the wealthy Gulf statelets, or rich sons of Lebanon, trained in and familiar with the ways of the West—not exactly the victims of poverty in Muslim dictatorships. Many poor Egyptians, Moroccans, and Palestinians may support terrorists, but they do not—and cannot—provide them with recruits. In fact, Al Qaeda has no use for illiterate peasants. They cannot participate in World Trade Center-like attacks, unable as they are to make themselves inconspicuous in the West and lacking the education and training terrorist operatives need.

Indeed, ever since the Russian intellectuals "invented" modern terrorism in the 19th century, revolutionary violence—terrorism is just one form of it—has been a virtual monopoly of the relatively privileged. Terrorists have been middle class, often upper class, and always educated, but never poor. The South American Tupamaros and Montoneros of the 1970s were all middle class, starting as cafe Jacobins and graduating into urban terrorism, as were their followers among the German Baader-Meinhof Gang, the Italian Red Brigades, France's *Action Directe*, the Sandinista leadership in Nicaragua and, before it, Fidel Castro's Cuban revolutionaries. Considering the composition of many of the anti-globalist groups today, it is a safe bet that middle class, prosperous, and self-righteous as they are, they will soon provide the

recruits of a new wave of terrorism in the West—as we may already be seeing in the revival of Italy's Red Brigades.

To say that economic conditions are not the root cause of terrorism is not to say that there are no conditions that correlate strongly to political violence and terrorism. There are phenomena we should be concerned about in this regard, it is just that they are far less obvious than poverty and much more complex to address.

Environmentalist extremists, their animal rights friends, anti-international corporation militants, anti-genetically modified plants fanatics a la José Bove—the world's best known vandal—none of them poor or underprivileged, have already demonstrated a propensity for violence and should be expected to do so in more deadly and organized manners in the future.

That is where the Osamas of the world meet the Western rejectionists of what the West is all about: rationality, individual as opposed to collective rights and interests, secularism, and capitalism. True enough, there is little common ideological ground among French Trotskyite Arlette Laguiller (who, with colleagues, reached 10 percent in the polls in the first round of France's presidential elections) and Marxist-cum-separatist groups like the Turkish PKK, the Basque ETA, the Sri Lankan LTTE, and the Irish Republican Army. But they share a common enemy. That enemy is the Western culture of democracy (which is correctly declared un-Islamic by all ideologues of Islamic terrorism), capitalism (hated in a very ecumenical way by Marxists of all stripes and Islamists), and individualism (opposed by Marxist totalitarians dreaming of Marx's stateless communist Utopia, as well as by Islamic believers in a new Caliphate to lead the community of Muslims worldwide).

But, we are told, the Islamic states are poor and undemocratic, which justifies rebellion against their tyrannical rulers. Why is that so, and what can be done about it by Muslims and others? Perhaps most Muslim countries are undemocratic because they are Muslim. When given an electoral choice in 1992 in the first and last democratic elections in the Arab world, most Algerians preferred the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) over the secular (and corrupt) ruling socialist party—although perfectly aware that FIS's ideology meant not just "one man, one vote" but "one man, one vote, one time." Which raises a very uncomfortable question for both conservatives in the U.S., who routinely blast the lack of democracy in the Arab world, and the human rights fundamentalists such as Amnesty International on the left, who support absolute democracy and at the same time condemn the Islamist disregard of all freedoms, as in Iran.

The apologists of Marxism and Islamism also need to answer another basic question. Did such regimes as, say, Iran, Afghanistan under the Taliban, or the late regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union actually make the life of ordinary citizens better, or worse? And why would "democracy" be better in Saudi Arabia morally, ideologically, and practically, where the chances of an Islamist getting elected are at least as great as in Algeria? Does it make sense for the European Union to condemn Turkey for proscribing (constitutionally, one might add) Islamist parties? Does Brussels really believe that an Islamic-governed Turkey is better than the current, secular Turkey, a NATO ally?

The poor in Muslim states may be the popular base of terrorist support, but they have neither the money nor the votes (who votes doesn't count, who counts them does, in Stalin's immortal words) the privileged do. Ultimately, Islamic terrorism, just as its Marxist or secessionist version in the West and Latin America was, is a matter of power—who has it and how to get it—not of poverty. Accepting this as a fundamental aspect of terrorism does not suggest any immediate solutions, but can direct further study toward better explanations of terrorism and theories with some potential predictive value.