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A Matter of Pride

Why we can't buy off the next Osama bin Laden.

While there are deep and divisive fissures across the political spectrum over how to combat terrorism, there is a surprising level of agreement as to its cause. "We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror," George W. Bush told an audience in Mexico in 2002. "Today, billions of people live on the knife's edge of survival, trapped in a struggle against ignorance, poverty, and disease. Their misery is a breeding ground for the hatred peddled by bin Laden and other merchants of death," Howard Dean declared during his 2004 presidential run. Kim Dae Jung, the former dissident who became the president of South Korea and won the Nobel Peace Prize, agrees: "At the bottom of terrorism is poverty." And the editors of the *New York Times*, arguing that reducing duties on exports from Pakistan can

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play a significant role in the war on terrorism, wrote in 2004, "Economics cannot be separated from national security. Young Pakistanis who can't get jobs in factories that export to America sometimes go to training camps to learn how to kill Americans."

This analysis, at its root, is an optimistic one. It holds out the prospect that widespread prosperity can be a universal solvent for political violence employed by stateless actors and states alike. Conflict, in this view, is not endemic to the human condition; it is simply a relic of primitive stages in social development, which can be corrected by enlightened policy. Liberals tend to prefer the idea of a global or regional "Marshall Plan," while conservatives and libertarians claim that cutting subsidies and promoting free trade will produce development in poor countries. Despite their different prescriptions, many on the left and right agree that fighting world poverty is important in the fight against transnational terrorism since it removes the attractiveness of these revolutionary and utopian worldviews.

But it is a mistake to treat human beings as profit-maximizing rationalists who can be persuaded to put aside their differences in order to collaborate on a common project of promoting global prosperity. Individuals and communities often have incompatible secular or religious visions of the good society. And, for better or worse, human beings are social animals, deeply concerned about rank and status, both as individuals and as members of communities. Ambition and humiliation, personal and collective, inspire more political conflict than economic deprivation. In short, if our goal is to understand the conditions that give terrorist movements popular appeal and to understand how virulent ideologies spread from madmen and isolated sects to mass movements, our emphasis must be on subjective perceptions of national, religious, and ethnic humiliation, rather than on the humiliation, genuine as it may be, which is associated with poverty.

Revolutionary Violence

In order to understand the roots of both terrorism and war, we must free ourselves from conceptual confusions. Terrorism and war are tactics that have been used to promote radical ideologies, depending upon whether revolutionaries control a government or not. And to understand radical ideologies, it is necessary to understand radical ideologues, few of whom have been found among the ranks of the poor.

A stateless group that uses terrorism while out of power may, if it gains control of a state, attempt to promote the same goals by the instruments of traditional statecraft, such as war, espionage, and perhaps state-sponsored terrorism.

Communist leaders like Vladimir Lenin, Josef Stalin, and Mao Zedong went from being underground terrorists to heads of state, and in doing so changed their tactics for expanding control drastically, even while their revolutionary ideologies remained relatively intact. In a similar vein, Osama bin Laden and the other al Qaeda leaders would prefer to control at least one government as opposed to being forced to operate as a stateless organization. Ayman al Zawahiri, al Qaeda's chief strategist, concluded his 2001 biography, *Knights Under the Banner of the Prophet,* with the following observation: "Liberating the Muslim nation, confronting the enemies of Islam, and launching jihad against them require a Muslim authority, established on a Muslim land that raises the banner of jihad and rallies the Muslims around it. Without achieving this goal our actions will mean nothing more than mere and repeated disturbances."

The key factor, then, is not whether a group is stateless or controls a state, but whether or not it is promoting a revolutionary ideology that justifies both terrorism and interstate war to promote its goals. If today's militant Islamism is understood in these terms—as a revolutionary ideology whose adherents seek to gain state power and exercise it to realize their vision—then it can be viewed as the latest in a series of revolutionary political doctrines of the past few centuries, which included radical Jacobin liberalism, anarchism, communism, and fascism and other forms of radical nationalism.

While some of these revolutionary faiths found their greatest support in poor countries, others took root in some of the richest and most educated societies in the world. And even in poor countries, revolutionary extremists have almost invariably come from the comfortable and well-educated upper or middle class. Revolutions may be waged in the name of the poor and dispossessed, but they are usually made by the relatively rich.

The members of al Qaeda are no exception. They are not the dispossessed, but the empowered. Many studied for high-end careers in medicine and engineering at universities, rather than at some dirt-poor *madrassa*. The top lieutenant to bin Laden is an upper-class Egyptian doctor; al Qaeda's top military planner has a degree in psychology and spent time in California as an IT specialist. Rifia Ahmed Taha, an Egyptian terrorist and a co-signatory of bin Laden's 1998 declaration of war against America, is by training an accountant. Mamdouh Mahmud Salim, another top al Qaeda official, studied electrical engineering in Iraq and went on to a successful business career. And even bin Laden himself studied economics and later spent time working at his family's giant construction business.

Looking more broadly, consider the work of former CIA case officer—and now forensic psychiatrist—Marc Sageman. After studying the backgrounds of

172 al Qaeda members and associates for his 2004 book *Understanding Terror Networks*, he concluded that this was not a group of feckless, unemployed no-hopers. In his sample of jihadist terrorists, two-thirds had gone to college; they were generally professionals; their average age was 26; three-fourths were married; and many had children.

Similarly, Peter Bergen and *Los Angeles Times* researcher Swati Pandey examined five of the most spectacular anti-Western attacks of the past decade or so—the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center, the bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa five years later, the September 11 attacks, the Bali bombings of 2002 that killed 200 Western tourists, and the London attacks of July 2005 that killed 52 commuters. Of the 79 Islamist terrorists involved in these attacks, 54 percent had attended college, which compares favorably to the 52 percent of Americans who have done so. Around a quarter of the terrorists had studied at universities in Europe or the United States, an elite activity for the mostly Middle Eastern and Asian terrorists involved in the attacks. Moreover, Robert Leiken of the Nixon Center has found that of 373 Islamist terrorists arrested or killed in Europe and the United States from 1993 through 2004, few were desperate refugees from the Third World. Leiken discovered that an astonishing 41 percent were Western nationals who were either naturalized or second-generation Europeans or converts to Islam. Leiken also found twice as many French nationals as Saudis among the terrorists.

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To that end, the Library of Congress issued a study in 1999 asking, "Who becomes a terrorist and why?" and concluded that there were only a few "major exceptions to the middle- and upper-class origins of terrorist groups" and that terrorists generally "have more than average education." In other words, asking, "Who becomes a terrorist?" turns out to be much like asking, "Who becomes a Rotarian?"

This recent research demonstrating that terrorism is a largely bourgeois endeavor echoes the work of French academic Gilles Kepel during the mid-1980s, which focused on 300 militants prosecuted for the 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. Of those who were of working age, 17 percent were professionals (such as engineers), 24 percent worked as government employees, 41 percent were artisans or merchants, 9 percent were in the military or police, and only 5 percent were unemployed. Of those who were students, around a third were studying in the elite faculties of medicine and engineering.

With their middle- and upper-class backgrounds, the leaders of al Qaeda represent not an exception but the rule among militants who use terrorist methods in the Middle East. According to Claude Berrebi of the RAND Corporation, 57 percent of Palestinian suicide bombers have at least some post–high school education—as opposed to only 15 percent of their age cohort. While one-third of Palestinians are impoverished, only 13 percent of Palestinian suicide bombers hail from poor backgrounds. In fact, Palestinian pollster Kahalil Shikaki found that the readiness to commit suicide attacks actually rises with one's education level.

In a paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), Princeton's Alan Krueger and Jitka Maleckova of Charles University in Prague also found scant proof of a connection between personal poverty and participation in international terrorism. Hezbollah militants killed during the 1980s and 1990s were as likely to be well-educated and well-off as they were to be uneducated and poor. Abu Nidal, the Palestinian terrorist, came from a wealthy Jaffa family. Krueger and Maleckova's study shows similar backgrounds among Israeli Jewish extremists who plotted to destroy the Dome of the Rock mosque. They "were overwhelmingly well-educated and in high-paying occupations. The list includes teachers, writers, university students, geographers, an engineer, a combat pilot, a chemist, and a computer programmer."

Beyond the Middle East, the leftist terrorists in Western countries between the 1960s and the 1980s tended to come from similar elite backgrounds. In West Germany, the majority of members of the Red Army Faction (the Baader-Meinhof gang) were middle class, like most of the members of Italy's Red Brigades and the Weathermen in the United States. Notorious terrorist Carlos the Jackal is the son of a wealthy Venezuelan lawyer. Militants in Latin American movements like Sendero Luminoso (the Shining Path) and the Tupamaros and Monteneros likewise tend to be educated and from the upper strata of society. The "black bloc" anarchists who fly around the world to commit acts of vandalism in cities that host IMF and World Bank meetings are obviously affluent (just consider the cost of airfare alone). And Lenin, Mao, Pol Pot, and Fidel Castro all hailed from relatively affluent families. Even Adolf Hitler was the son of a prosperous Austrian civil servant. He had enough money from his mother and aunt to live a bohemian existence in the expensive metropolis of Vienna in his youth. This pattern would not have surprised Aristotle, for whom ambition was a more powerful incentive to sedition and revolution than deprivation: "Men do not become tyrants in order to avoid exposure to cold."

In the face of this evidence, many invoke twentieth-century Germany as Exhibit A in the argument for the deprivation thesis. The Great Depression, the

argument goes, with the immiseration of much of the German middle class, helped to create the conditions for Hitler to be appointed chancellor and to consolidate power. But while it was a factor in Hitler's rise, the Depression does not explain why his National Socialists were better able than other groups to capitalize on public discontent. Their appeal was to followers in all social classes, and their ideology of racial nationalism, anti-Semitism, and plans to make Germany a superpower long antedated the global crash of 1929. As the sociologist Michael Mann wrote in his book *Fascists*, the data show that the Hitler movement received strong support from middle-class and elite Germans, including college students and academics. "Supposedly, the best guarantor of a free society and of democracy is a dense network of sociability centered on voluntary associations," Mann writes. "Unfortunately, the Germany that became Nazi was exactly this, a very dense 'civil society'—and the Nazis were at its very heart . . . Led by Nazis it became a strong but evil civil society."

Humiliation

What motivates someone to join these revolutionaries, terrorists, and murderers, if not economic conditions? In a word, humiliation. Look again at Nazi Germany. While economically weak in between the world wars, what really motivated many to embrace Nazism was that they lost World War I, and the conditions of that loss. Hitler's goal, supported by much of the German elite and the vast Prussian officer class, was to reverse the verdict of World War I and proceed to create a Eurasian empire capable of dominating the world. No concessions by the Western democracies short of acquiescence in National Socialist imperialism would have satisfied Hitler and like-minded Germans. Indeed, the outcome of World War I enraged Arab nationalists as well as German nationalists—and it still does today. Bin Laden sees the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which led to the carving up of the Ottoman Empire, as the beginning of Arab humiliation. For bin Laden, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, like the Versailles agreement for Hitler, is a humiliation that must be avenged and reversed: "We still suffer from the injures inflicted by . . . the Sykes-Picot Agreement between Britain and France which divided the Muslim world into fragments," he said.

The central role of communal humiliation in inspiring terrorism is the key finding of University of Chicago political scientist Robert Pape's study of suicide bombers, *Dying to Win*. According to Pape, two factors have linked Tamil, Palestinian, Chechen, and al Qaeda suicide bombers. First, they are members of communities that feel humiliated by genuine or perceived occupation (like the perceived occupation of the sacred territory of Saudi Arabia by virtue of the presence of U.S. bases, in the eyes of bin Laden and his allies). Second, suicide

bombers seek to change the policies of democratic occupying powers like Israel and the United States by influencing their public opinion—in a sense making the occupying power suffer the same level of humiliation they have felt.

The "humiliation theory" of radical violence helps explain why so many terrorists come from middle-class or wealthy backgrounds. Unlike economic deprivation, national or religious humiliation can be painful to all members of a community. In fact, communal humiliation is likely to aggrieve the affluent members the most, precisely because their freedom from a day-to-day struggle to survive liberates them to brood over slights to the community in which they are natural leaders. It may also explain why so many are willing to sacrifice innocent bystanders for their cause. They are fighting for an abstract idea of national, ethnic, or religious pride, not the masses.

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To be sure, humiliation can be an outgrowth of poverty. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman has suggested a variant of the deprivation theory, citing the sense of personal and collective humiliation associated with poverty: "Sure, poverty doesn't cause terrorism—no one is killing for a raise. But poverty is great for the terrorism business because poverty creates humiliation and stifled aspirations and forces many people to leave their traditional farms to join the alienated urban poor in the cities—all conditions that spawn terrorists." This has the merit of making humiliation a possible intermediary between poverty and political violence. But the possibility of a connection between poverty and humiliation nevertheless fails to provide a sufficient cause. A 2002 UN study of the Arab world showed that it has the second-lowest per capita growth of any region worldwide, which seems to support the deprivation thesis. But consider that while sub-Saharan Africa has done even worse economically, and while it has been the location of major terrorist attacks (the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Kenya by al Qaeda, for example) and is the home of 160 million Muslims, the region has not given birth to either an indigenous terrorist group or a radical ideology. To be sure, impoverished Sudan briefly served as a base for al Qaeda's (overwhelmingly affluent) Saudi and Egyptian leadership. But it was never more than that. It will always be the case that well-organized, well-funded, and well-educated terrorists will make use of failed states, but those states are rarely if ever the source of terrorism. As historian Walter Laqueur has noted, "In the forty-nine countries currently designated by the United Nations as the least developed hardly any

terrorist activity occurs." And in the same way that poverty is never the primary cause of terrorism, prosperity is hardly the cure. Alexis de Tocqueville was only the first of many to recognize that revolutions often occur in times when populations experience rising expectations about living standards. At least in some societies, the diffusion of wealth and education may help radicals recruit new allies.

Depriving the Jihadists of Allies

Regardless of where they stand on this debate, it is clear to most that no conceivable concessions, short of acquiescence to their scheme of expunging Western influence from the Muslim world and bringing Taliban-like regimes to power throughout it, can appease bin Laden, his followers, and his allies. Moreover, "Marshall Plans" for the Middle East, however justified they may be on other grounds, will not make al Qaeda and its sympathizers feel less humiliated. For instance, as a result of the 1978 Camp David peace accords the United States has transferred tens of billions of dollars to Egypt. This transfer of aid coincided with the worst period of terrorism in Egypt's history; Islamist terrorists assassinated President Anwar Sadat in 1981 and killed more than 1,000 other Egyptians during the 1990s.

The first priority, therefore, of an anti-radical strategy must be defending the people, territories, and interests of the United States and other targeted regimes against terrorist attacks. Passive defenses to keep terrorists out are important, along with active security measures. Israel has successfully reduced the infiltration of suicide bombers by means of its security fence, and Saudi Arabia is building a fence of its own to prevent terrorists from crossing into and out of Iraq. While making it more difficult for terrorists to inflict damage, the United States must work with other nations, including unsavory ones, to apprehend jihadists if possible and kill them if necessary. The military has a role to play in some circumstances, but this is primarily a task for international police and intelligence collaboration. Disrupting clandestine cells and networks is particularly important, because of the role of peer-group socialization in the making of jihadists.

While bin Laden and his allies must simply be defeated, their appeal to potential new recruits can be limited by policies that reduce feelings of collective humiliation in the Arab and Muslim worlds. According to a recent National Intelligence Estimate, the American occupation of Iraq is now inspiring jihadists in the way that the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories, Russian control of Chechnya, and Indian rule over Kashmiri Muslims long have done. Ending the humiliating occupation of Muslim populations by non-Muslim

nations will remove some of the major grievances that jihadists use as a recruiting tool. Conversely, to perpetuate these deeply resented occupations in the name of fighting "Islamofascism" will only help the jihadists.

In addition, major Muslim nations that are sources of jihadist recruits must change too. Along with fighting non-Muslim occupiers, al Qaeda seeks to topple governments in Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan. Al Qaeda draws many of its recruits from closed societies that are intolerant of dissent; it is no coincidence that Saudis and Egyptians play such a key role in al Qaeda. If there were more open societies in the Muslim world, there might be more political space for Islamists who reject terrorism when out of power and who, if they gained power, would abide by the norms of the international system. This would likely reduce the appeal of al Qaeda as an alternative to conventional political participation.

Reducing poverty in the Middle East and around the world is a laudable goal in itself, for humanitarian reasons. But it would be a mistake to treat prosperity as a universal solvent that can deprive jihadists like bin Laden of allies and sympathizers in populations that feel humiliated by foreign domination or frozen out of politics. Ultimately, both foreign occupation and domestic autocracy are political problems that must find political, not economic, solutions. The campaign against jihadism and the campaign against global poverty are both justified. But they are not the same war. D