

# Does Poverty Cause Terrorism?

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*In a time when our leaders invest immensely to develop effective counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization strategies, it is essential to understand the root causes of terrorism. One of the main claims made by respectable organizations such as the U.N., political leaders, and notable scholars, is that poverty can be attributed as a direct cause of terrorism. As such, scholars have produced a host of literature exploring the extent of association between poverty and terrorism. This study, however, demonstrates that the great majority of both theoretical and empirical research on the association between poverty and terrorism leads to the inevitable conclusion that poverty is not, as it is often perceived to be, a cause of terrorism. This information requires a change in our mindset - how we view terrorism, and use new information to reshape our counter-terror policies to secure our countries.*

\*\*The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

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## Introduction

Is it desperation or is it the hope for a better future that leads to terrorism? Understanding and embracing the root causes that terrorism emerges from goes a long way toward developing effective counter-terrorism strategies and counter-radicalization policies. To that end, this essay examines the specific claim that there is a connection between terrorism and poverty, a primary contributor to the sense of desperation and hopelessness among populations. Drawing on a body of theoretical arguments and empirical research, it ultimately concludes that poverty cannot be attributed as a direct cause of terrorism.

## Theoretical Arguments

Scholars have produced a host of literature aimed at determining the extent of association between poverty and the inclination to engage in terrorist activity. One theoretical argument relates to the theory of the process of radicalization. While there are more than thirty models and theories associated with the radicalization process, experts have identified a common denominator among all of the theories that includes three main elements.<sup>1</sup> The first is an overwhelming sentiment of grievance – a variable that can be associated with various factors, including poverty.<sup>2</sup> The second element is that those harboring the feeling that they are being wronged are cognitively receptive to new ideologies and ideas. The final stage is mobilization. Mobilization is usually a social stage that involves radicalization in groups or by personal acquaintances.<sup>3</sup> Poverty only influences the first stage, that of grievances.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, there are numerous variables that may lead to the grievance stage, and even when poverty is the primary reason for grievance, there are two more stages that must transpire which have no direct correlation

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<sup>1</sup> P. Neumann, "Homegrown Radicalization in Western Europe and North America" (lecture, King's College, London, March 3, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Neil J. Smelser, *The Faces of Terrorism Social and Psychological Dimensions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Tinka Veldhuis and Jørgen Staun, *Islamist Radicalisation: A Root Cause Model* (Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Neumann, "Homegrown Radicalization in Western Europe and North America".

<sup>4</sup> Kim Cragin and Paul K. Davis, *Social science for counterterrorism: putting the pieces together* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand, 2009).

to poverty. Thus, according to this approach the link between poverty and terrorism, if existent, is largely indirect and remains unsubstantiated.

The second theoretical argument is the “U” model, which supports the principle that terrorism is resorted to not by those with the lowest or highest socioeconomic status, but rather by those in the middle.<sup>5</sup> Three billion people, nearly half of the world’s population, are considered poor by the World Bank since they earn less than \$2.50 per day. More than 1.3 billion people are living in extreme poverty and are on the verge of starvation as they earn less than \$ 1.25 a day.<sup>6</sup> If poverty was a direct cause of terrorism, billions of people from undeveloped countries would have long since terrorized the world. The indigent poor are too busy ensuring their survival to consider terrorist ideologies. The elite are also less inclined to engage in terror as they are fairly satisfied with their lot. Those in the middle, however - who may stand to gain from protesting, and stand to lose if they do not - are more inclined toward terrorism.<sup>7</sup>

The third theoretical argument stresses the need to specify and sharpen the definition of “terrorism” in order to make claims about the extent of the connection between terrorism and poverty. This strain of thought maintains that the inconclusive and wide-ranging definitions and connotations of the terminology in question pose a significant obstacle to determining correlation. Terrorism has been used to describe various kinds of violent behaviors ever since the French Revolution. It would be overly ambitious to attempt to identify one root cause as the source for the entire phenomenon of terrorism, accounting for all of its forms. For example, in the 19th century, ‘terrorism’ was mostly used to describe individuals and organizations identifying as anarchists. However, during the French Revolution, the term ‘terrorism’ referred to Robespierre’s terror regime.<sup>8</sup> At the end of the 19th century, anti-colonial attacks were also considered as terrorism and at the 20th century terrorism referred to the actions of extremist right- and left-wing organizations. Even today, the term ‘terrorism’ is used to describe a wide spectrum of behaviors and there

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<sup>5</sup> Rosemary H. T. O’Kane, *Terrorism*, 2nd ed. (Pearson, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Maura K. Leary, "Overview," World Bank, , accessed February 17, 2018, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview>.

<sup>7</sup> Rosemary H. T. O’Kane, *Terrorism*, 2nd ed. (Pearson, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

is no accepted consensus about its definition.<sup>9</sup> How could we attempt to find a single root cause of a phenomenon that has no clear definition? The definitions of all variables must be specified in order for scholars to prove or disprove a connection between them.

## Empirical Arguments

Dozens of empirical studies show that terrorism does not stem from poverty. Abadie, a widely renowned researcher in the field of terrorism, piloted research about poverty and terrorism that was considered exceptional for two main reasons: First, his research takes into consideration both national and international terrorism. Second, he observes poverty according to both international criteria (such as the International Gini Coefficient and the UN Human Development Index), and national criteria, (such as local GDP and local Gini Coefficient).<sup>10</sup> Abadie's research concludes that there is no connection between poverty and terrorism. The findings illustrate that a correlation between the two only exists where significant variables such as ethnic and religious differences and political freedom were excluded. In other words, according to Abadie, a connection between poverty and terrorism only exists when other highly influential elements are not accounted for.

Abadie's research confirms what appears to be the facts on the ground concerning the phenomenon of terror around the world today. For example, Palestinian terrorism that has emerged in reaction to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict substantiates the assertion that terrorism is not directly linked to poverty: numerous studies have shown that both the leadership and foot soldiers of Palestinian militant groups are wealthier than the general Palestinian population.<sup>11</sup> Both the Leftist Weather Underground in the US and the Red Army Faction in West Germany were made up of middle class citizens who claimed to be

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<sup>9</sup> Boaz Ganor, *Counter-terrorism puzzle - a guide for decision makers* (Transaction Publishers, u.s., 2006); Alex Schmid, "Terrorism – The Definitional Problem," *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 36, no. 2 (2004): , <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/jil/vol36/iss2/8>.

<sup>10</sup> Alberto Abadie, "Poverty, Political Freedom, and the Roots of Terrorism," *The National Bureau of Economic Research*, 2004, doi: 10.3386/w10859.

<sup>11</sup> Karin Von Hippel, "Von Hippel, K. (2002). The roots of terrorism: Probing the myths," *The Political Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (August 2002): doi:10.1111/1467-923X.73.s1.4; Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malečková, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (2003): doi: 10.1257/089533003772034925.

fighting the war of the poor.<sup>12</sup> The Ku Klux Klan were also of financially stable means.<sup>13</sup> A study that examines the terror organization Hezbollah also concluded that members of Hezbollah are wealthier than the average citizen in Lebanon.<sup>14</sup> Sageman (2004) conducted a study where he interviewed more than four hundred Al-Qaida terrorists from Southeast Asia, Northern Africa, the Middle East and Europe. His research concludes that the majority of terrorists came from financially solid backgrounds, both by national and international standards. Almost 66% of them had attended college and the same percentage of them held professional or semi-professional occupations.<sup>15</sup> The PKK, IRA, the Revolutionary Armed Force of Columbia and many other terror organizations also reflect the fact that poverty does not necessarily result in terrorism.<sup>16</sup>

Studies that examine methods (including suicide bombings, religious terrorism, lone wolves etc.) and levels of terrorism (individual, organization and state) lend further evidence to the claim that terrorism is not the direct result of poverty. At the state level, it is unlikely that poor countries either sponsor or suffer from transnational or national terrorism within their territories more than do wealthier countries.<sup>17</sup> A study that examined national terrorism among second and third generations of French migrants who were imprisoned due to their involvement in terror activities concluded that it is not poverty, but rather, identity problems that lead them to turn to extremist activities.<sup>18</sup> Osama Bin-Laden and the terrorists that executed the attacks of 9/11 came from wealthy and educated backgrounds.<sup>19</sup> Such was also the case of the terrorists who carried out the London bombing attack in 2005 and in Glasgow airport in 2007. Studies focused on the “lone wolf”

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<sup>12</sup> Robert J. Barro, "The Myth that Poverty Breeds Terrorism," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, June 10, 2010, , <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2002-06-09/the-myth-that-poverty-breeds-terrorism>.

<sup>13</sup> Neil J. Smelser, *The Faces of Terrorism Social and Psychological Dimensions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malečková, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (2003):, doi:10.1257/089533003772034925.

<sup>15</sup> Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Kim Cragin and Paul K. Davis, *Social science for counterterrorism: putting the pieces together* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Siddik Ekici and Ahmet Ekici, *Building terrorism resistant communities: together against terrorism* (Washington, DC: IOS Press, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Alberto Abadie, "Poverty, Political Freedom, and the Roots of Terrorism," *The National Bureau of Economic Research*, 2004., doi:10.3386/w10859.

<sup>18</sup> Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010):, doi:10.1080/1057610x.2010.501423.

<sup>19</sup> Roland Jacquard, *In the Name of Osama Bin Laden: Global Terrorism and the Bin Laden Brotherhood* (Duke University Press Books, 2002).



phenomenon have also ruled out poverty as the impetus for terror.<sup>20</sup> Another study claims that both right-wing and left-wing terrorist organizations are comprised of middle class members.<sup>21</sup> Finally, Juergensmeyer, Kitts and Jefferson maintain that certain types of terrorism, namely, religious, ideological and cyber terrorism are not spurred by poverty.<sup>22</sup>

## Counter-Arguments Concerning Poverty and Terrorism

Despite evidence to the contrary, over the years, many academics and political leaders have come to believe that poverty causes terrorism. In 2002 the UN released a report that unequivocally linked the two phenomena. After 9/11, US President George W. Bush also claimed that the main cause of terrorism is poverty.<sup>23</sup> Former US president Bill Clinton and the former Prime Minister of the UK Tony Blair have also been quoted claiming that poverty causes terrorism.<sup>24</sup> Leading academics such as Joseph Nye, the former Dean of the Kennedy School of Government in Harvard University, and Laura Tyson from the London Business School, have also expressed similar opinions regarding a positive correlation between the two variables.<sup>25</sup>

While this connection somehow seems intuitive to many knowledgeable, reliable and respectable organizations and political leaders, it does not reflect reality. There are several reasons why many scholars and leaders alike have been convinced that poverty causes terrorism.

First, researchers have proven a correlation between poverty and terrorism in several individual parts of the world. For example, researchers have discovered that in Somalia, many adolescents often join terror groups not out of identification with an ideology or out

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<sup>20</sup> Ramón Spaaij, *Understanding lone wolf terrorism: global patterns, motivations and prevention* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Siddik Ekici and Ahmet Ekici, *Building terrorism resistant communities: together against terrorism* (Washington, DC: IOS Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Philip N. Jefferson and Frederic L. Pryor, "On the geography of hate," *Economic Letters* 65, no. 3 (December 1999): , doi:[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0165-1765\(99\)00164-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0165-1765(99)00164-0).

<sup>23</sup> Stuart Gottlieb, *Debating terrorism and counterterrorism: conflicting perspectives on causes, contexts, and responses*(Los Angeles: CQ Press, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Alan B. Krueger, *What makes a terrorist: economics and the roots of terrorism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>25</sup> Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malečková, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (2003): , doi:10.1257/089533003772034925.

of religious beliefs, but because of the opportunity to earn money.<sup>26</sup> Another researcher has discovered that in certain localities of Pakistan and Afghanistan, people also join terror groups due to the economic incentive.<sup>27</sup> It can be concluded that under certain circumstances; in certain periods and in certain localities in the world, poverty is a significant and contributing factor in the decision to participate in terrorism.<sup>28</sup> However, there are two main arguments that undermine this conclusion. First, the fact that there is a connection between poverty and terrorism in a certain locality does not necessarily indicate that this conclusion is valid throughout the world, especially when there is ample evidence suggesting otherwise. The second is that poverty must be accompanied by additional political and socio-environmental predispositions to cause terrorism.<sup>29</sup> For example, feelings of victimhood at the hands of injustice, lack of opportunities for political participation and a triggering event are all factors that have had a direct influence on the decision to engage in terror.<sup>30</sup> Additional factors are the presence of an effective mobilizing mechanism, public support, institutionalized discrimination, structured tension and repression.<sup>31</sup>

Second, decision makers and academics often believe that there is a positive relationship between poverty and terrorism is the fact that De-Radicalization and Exit Programs, as well as national and international plans for countries that are prone to terrorism, include financial aid.<sup>32</sup> However, this does not necessarily mean that financial aid directly counters terrorism by alleviating poverty. First, financial aid is but one of many factors in De-Radicalization and Exit Programs. Examples of other factors are mending broken ties between extremists and their families and providing them with an education

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<sup>26</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, "ICSR Insight - Al-Shabaab: Recruitment and Radicalisation in Kenya / ICSR," ICSR, November 22, 2012, , accessed March 10, 2016, <http://icsr.info/2012/11/icsr-insight-al-shabaab-recruitment-and-radicalisation-in-kenya/>.

<sup>27</sup> Stuart Gottlieb, *Debating terrorism and counterterrorism: conflicting perspectives on causes, contexts, and responses* (Los Angeles: CQ Press, 2014); Audrey Kurth Cronin and James M. Ludes, *Attacking terrorism: elements of a grand strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> Gottlieb, *Debating terrorism and counterterrorism: conflicting perspectives on causes, contexts, and responses*, 63

<sup>29</sup> Richard Jackson, Jeroen Gunning, and Lee Jarvis, *Terrorism: a critical introduction* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981): , doi:10.2307/421717.

<sup>31</sup> Neil J. Smelser, *The Faces of Terrorism Social and Psychological Dimensions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> Rosemary H. T. O'Kane, *Terrorism*, 2nd ed. (Pearson, 2012).

and the ability to attain a profession or skill after periods of incarceration. Furthermore, the De-Radicalization and Exit Programs in Indonesia, which were based solely on materialistic inducement, failed miserably.<sup>33</sup> Second, national and international aid in the form of the De-Radicalization and Exit Programs, international USAID for Yemen and the UK Channel Program for radicalization prevention do not include financial inducements for participants.<sup>34</sup> In fact, the main principle underlying these programs suggests that local leadership must improve political conditions and strengthen social infrastructure in order to prevent pervasive feelings of humiliation and frustration among the public, which is a more likely cause of terrorism than economic conditions.<sup>35</sup>

Third, a well-known argument promulgated by those who believe that there is a connection between poverty and terrorism is rooted in criminologists' theory that there is a clear correlation between poverty and crime. Becker argues that every person, when considering committing a crime, considers the amount of money he is investing, the expected income from the crime, and the amount of risk he is willing to take in committing this crime, all with the aim of maximizing utility.<sup>36</sup> According to this theory, those who are poor and desperate for money will agree to take a larger risk than those who already have enough money to live a crime-free life. In theory, this model of poverty and crime can be applied to terrorism, which may be understood as a sort of crime. However, in practice, the empirical evidence is not consistent with this explanation. A major obstacle in applying this theory to the field of terrorism is that Becker's theory isn't applicable to all types of crime. For example, researchers have not identified a significant correlation with poverty for major crimes such as murder and hate crimes.<sup>37</sup> Terrorism is more similar to serious

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<sup>33</sup> P. Neumann, "Homegrown Radicalization in Western Europe and North America" (lecture, King's College, London, March 3, 2016).

<sup>34</sup> Lorenzo Vidino and James Brandon, "Countering Radicalization in Europe - ICSR," 2012, , accessed March 2, 2016, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/ICSR-Report-Countering-Radicalization-in-Europe.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malečková, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (2003): , doi:10.1257/089533003772034925; Vidino & Brandon, "Countering Radicalization in Europe-ICSR", 19-26.

<sup>36</sup> Gary S. Becker, "Crime and Punishment: an Economic Approach," *The Economic Dimensions of Crime*, 1968, doi:10.1007/978-1-349-62853-7\_2.

<sup>37</sup> Philip N. Jefferson and Frederic L. Pryor, "On the geography of hate," *Economic Letters* 65, no. 3 (December 1999): , doi:[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0165-1765\(99\)00164-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0165-1765(99)00164-0).

crimes such as murder, as opposed to property crimes. Therefore, the application of this theory to the field of terrorism is out of context.

Some scholars argue that if the empirical evidence does not reflect a causal relationship between poverty and terrorism, it may be because a number of terror organizations use a vetting process to accept only the best candidates into their ranks. If it weren't for that vetting process, they maintain, terror organizations would accept many poor and uneducated candidates who feel motivated to join. For example, empirical researchers who examined economic profiles of Palestinian suicide bombers between the years 2000-2005 found that majority of the terrorists were brought up in stable middle-class families, and that some of the Palestinian suicide bombers were members of families belonging to a higher economic class. An additional finding was that there were so many young Palestinians who wanted to volunteer that Hamas and the PLO were able to conduct a vetting process.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the researchers discovered that those who came from wealthier backgrounds and had better education received more difficult and more strategically important missions.<sup>39</sup> It is also evident that the 9/11 attackers and many other members of Al-Qaeda have also gone through a vetting process prior to their training.<sup>40</sup>

However, there are two central points disproving the assertion that vetting processes are the reason that poor people are limited from taking part in terror activities. First, the majority of terror organizations in the world do not have the capacity to employ a vetting procedure or process.<sup>41</sup> Second, a survey conducted by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research in 2000-2005, found that there is no disparity in support for terror attacks among poor and rich Palestinians, and that the majority of the Palestinian population were supportive of the resistance movements' terror attacks, regardless of their

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<sup>38</sup> Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malečková, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (2003): , doi:10.1257/089533003772034925.

<sup>39</sup> Efraim Benmelech and Claude Berrebi, "Human Capital and the Productivity of Suicide Bombers," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 21, no. 3 (2007): , doi:10.1257/jep.21.3.223.

<sup>40</sup> Joe Navarro, *Hunting terrorists a look at the psychopathology of terror* (Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, 2013).

<sup>41</sup> Brian A. Jackson and Dave Frelinger, *Understanding why terrorist operations succeed or fail* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009).

economic or social status. Furthermore, Palestinians who had higher levels of education were more supportive of terrorism.<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the vast majority of theoretical and empirical evidence demonstrates that poverty alone does not cause terrorism. On the theoretical level, scholars argue that poverty can only influence the beginning phases of the radicalization process. They also claim that poor people do not have the luxury of preoccupying themselves with terror ideologies, and that the concept of terror is not defined well enough to make conclusive claims. Moreover, the empirical evidence and reality in today's world confirm the conclusion of these theoretical arguments. Finally, theories that assert that the two variables are connected fail to prove direct causation.

The evidence, therefore, necessitates a change in our mindset: Terrorism is not, as it is often perceived to be, the outcome of total oppression or desperation. Rather, it is a 'luxury' of those who have enough freedom to hope, enough education to plan, and enough money to devote themselves to preoccupations beyond basic subsistence. Thus, this essay concludes that poverty cannot be attributed as a direct cause of terrorism.

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<sup>42</sup> Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malečková, "Education, Poverty and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?" *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (2003): , doi:10.1257/089533003772034925.

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## ABOUT THE ICT

Founded in 1996, the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT) is one of the leading academic institutes for counter-terrorism in the world, facilitating international cooperation in the global struggle against terrorism. ICT is an independent think tank providing expertise in terrorism, counter-terrorism, homeland security, threat vulnerability and risk assessment, intelligence analysis and national security and defense policy. ICT is a non-profit organization located at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, Israel.

More information about the ICT can be found at: <https://www.ict.org.il/>