THE MYTH THAT POVERTY BREEDS TERRORISM

BY ROBERT J. BARRO

So far, the U.S. war on terrorism has focused on military action against identified terrorists and on improvements in domestic and international security. However, many argue that longer-term improvements depend on lessening the root causes of terrorism, especially poverty and low education. For example, writing in *BusinessWeek* last December, Laura D’Andrea Tyson argued: “We live in a world of unprecedented opulence and remarkable deprivation, a world so interconnected that poverty and despair in a remote region can harbor a network of terrorism dedicated to our destruction. In such a world, our prosperity and freedom at home increasingly depend on the successful development of countries like Afghanistan.” According to this view, a lasting reduction in terrorism entails increases in the levels of income and education in poor countries.

But is this view correct? One hint that it may be wrong is that the September 11 hijackers came mostly from Saudi Arabia, a country that has reasonably high levels of per capita income and schooling. Therefore, terrorists need not come from the most economically deprived segments of society. A recent study at Princeton University by Alan Krueger and Jitka Maleckova, called “Education, Poverty, Political Violence and Terrorism: Is There a Causal Connection?” argues this point. The paper was scheduled for presentation at the World Bank’s annual conference in Washington in April but was pulled from presentation in response to complaints initiated by a Kuwait executive director and later joined by other executive directors. A source at the Bank confirmed that the paper was withdrawn in response to this pressure, as well as fears that a controversial study of terrorist identities would serve to inflame an already highly sensitive political situation in the Middle East. The irony is that the annual conference was created to be a forum in which outside researchers could participate without fear of censorship. Solving problems, such as those in the Middle East, depends on having the reliable information that can come only from this sort of free scientific inquiry.

One piece of the Krueger-Maleckova evidence involves 129 members of Hezbollah who died in action, mostly against Israel, from 1982 to 1994. Hezbollah is now designated by the U.S. as a terrorist organization. Biographical information from the Hezbollah newspaper *al-Adib* indicates that the fighters who died were, on average, more educated and less impoverished than the Lebanese population of comparable age and regional origin.

A similar finding applies on the other side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to Israeli Jewish extremists who attacked Palestinians in the West Bank in the late 70s and early 80s. Many of the extremists were Gush Emunim members. A list of 27 of the Israeli terrorists reveals a pattern of high education and high-paying occupations.

Krueger and Maleckova also examine surveys conducted last December with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. These polls tell us about who supports terrorism, as opposed to who are the terrorists. One set of answers reveals a high level of support for the general policy of attacking Israeli targets. This support is stronger among the literate than the illiterate. In another question, a remarkable 80% of respondents thought that the suicide bombing last June that killed 21 youths in a Tel Aviv nightclub was not terrorism. (The respondents recognized overwhelmingly that this act was regarded as terrorism by international opinion.) Moreover, the Palestinians’ adherence to the view that the mass murder of civilians was not terrorism was independent of education and higher among those working than unemployed. Hence, support for terrorism was not reduced by increases in education and income.

The same patterns apply outside of the Middle East. For example, a study by Charles Russell and Bowman Miller (reprinted in the 1983 book *Perspectives on Terrorism*) considered 18 revolutionary groups, including the Japanese Red Army, Germany’s Baader-Meinhof Gang, and Italy’s Red Brigades. The authors found that “the vast majority of those individuals involved in terrorist activities as cadres or leaders is quite well-educated. In fact, approximately two-thirds of those identified terrorists are persons with some university training, [and] well over two-thirds of these individuals came from the middle or upper classes in their respective nations or areas.”

I can only conjecture about why terrorists tend to have relatively high levels of education and income. One likely explanation is that the poorest, least-educated persons make relatively ineffective terrorists. It is also likely that some forms of education, such as those practiced in the West Bank and Gaza and other parts of the Middle East, tend to promote terrorism.

The main message is that it is naive to think that increases in income and education will, by themselves, lower international terrorism. The goal of reducing poverty remains laudable, but on grounds other than fighting terrorism. To find a lasting solution for the terrorism problem, we have to continue to look elsewhere.