

Revisiting the poverty-terrorism link in European jihadism

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Many thanks for the invitation to speak. What can I possibly say about poverty and terrorism that is worth 40 minutes of your time? We've all heard enough simplistic claims over the years - from politicians, activists, our grandmothers - about how terrorism must be an act of economic desperation and how more development aid can make it go away. I can assure you this is not my message today.

What I will argue is that we have underestimated the role of economic deprivation in the European context. There probably is a poverty-terrorism link in European jihadism, and we have failed to see it because we have assumed that radicalization dynamics are the same all over the world. But a recent theoretical contribution by the political scientist Alexander Lee suggests there is a difference between rich and poor countries: we can expect terrorists to be middle class in poor countries but lower class in rich countries.

Today I will show that Lee's prediction seems correct for jihadism in Europe. I will present evidence that *on average*, European jihadis are economic underperformers. The question is not whether they are economically marginalized, but to what extent there is a *causal* link and, if so, what the precise mechanisms are and how economic deprivation interacts with other factors. So my talk is a call to take socio-economics a little more seriously.

I'll do four things: I start with a quick recap of the poverty-terrorism debate. Then I outline the theoretical reasons why we should expect radicals in the West to be relatively poor. Then I present empirical evidence that they are indeed poor, in the form of a meta-analysis of large-n studies of European jihadis. In the last part I speculate about possible causal mechanisms.

1) A stale debate

It is fair to say that the academic debate over poverty and terrorism had a short life. It flared up after 9/11 and then died out in the late 2000s. The idea that poverty drives terrorism arose for several reasons: Everybody was scrambling for explanations, it was an intuitive idea, and it appealed to the aid community. There was also evidence from criminology and civil war research that economics matter. So in the early 2000s you had quite a few op-eds and politicians making this claim.

Most terrorist specialists were skeptical, but it was an economist, Alan Krueger, who killed the debate - first with a paper coauthored with Jitka Maleckova in 2003 and then later with the book *What Makes a Terrorist?* Krueger and Maleckova looked at several different types of evidence, including time-series data on hate crimes, cross-regional data on hate crimes, opinion polls in Palestine, biographical data on Hezbollah fighters and Palestinian suicide terrorists, and country-level correlates of terrorism. He found no support for the poverty hypothesis and even some evidence of an inverse correlation. He summed up his findings in a now famous quote: "There is not much question that poverty has little to do with terrorism".

In 2004 came another very influential contribution, namely, Marc Sageman's book *Inside Terrorist*

Networks. It looked at the profiles of 173 al-Qaida-linked militants and found that "three fourths of the global salafi mujahidin were solidly upper or middle class." This provided a crucial complement to Krueger & Maleckova because the latter did not have data on transnational jihadis.

So basically Krueger & Maleckova and Sageman each put one big nail in the coffin of the poverty argument; one at each end of the coffin. Then came a whole series of smaller nails, in the form of more studies showing jihadis in the Muslim world being quite well educated as well as attitude surveys showing poorer people being not more likely to support extremism. A clear consensus emerged: poverty is not a strong driver of terrorism, and if anything it may work the other way around.

It was widely assumed that this held true for jihadism everywhere, including in the West. In Europe we seemed to get a steady trickle of evidence confirming it.

We saw several examples of relatively well-off European Muslims who became terrorists. A good example was the "doctor cell" that perpetrated the attack on Glasgow airport in 2007 - several of them were medical doctors.

We also saw attitude surveys suggesting that better-educated respondents were more likely to approve of terrorism.

We even saw one study - written by Dounia Bouzar - suggesting that French jihadis were majority upper class, of ethnic French extraction, and children of educators.

This and other evidence seem to fall in line with Krueger & Maleckova, Sageman and the rest. Done deal, right?

Well, several things made me question the situation.

First, the rich jihadis that got attention in the media could be anecdotes. Yes there was a doctor's cell, but how many *other* doctor cells have there been? What if the rich guys are outliers? There are smokers who live to a 100; it doesn't mean smoking doesn't cause cancer.

Second, regarding attitude surveys: they do not tell us very much about recruitment to militancy at all, because responding to questions is risk-free. Actual involvement is a whole different ballgame.

Third, the one study that shows French jihadis to be rich kids is severely flawed. Dounia Bouzar ran an organization that helped families whose kids were radicalizing. She included in her sample only people whose parents contacted her with a concern.

Naturally, resourceful parents were more likely to contact her than the less resourceful ones, and parents of converts were presumably more likely to be worried than Muslim parents.

But to me, the most important reason to reconsider was a really important theoretical innovation that was published a few years ago, namely Alexander Lee's *World Politics* article "Who becomes a terrorist?".

2) Alexander Lee's resource threshold model

Lee's model combines two key ideas. The first is that of the *resource threshold*: that you have to be above a certain threshold of intellectual and economic resources to be politically active. Below that level, you are too busy putting food on the table. Above that level - and here is the second idea - the *opportunity cost* mechanism kicks in. So the more you have to lose, the less likely you are, on average, to engage in high-risk activism. There will always be idealists who defy high opportunity costs, but

usually, people with really *great* prospects don't sacrifice everything. It follows that most terrorists will come from the segment right above the resource threshold, or what Lee calls the "lower end of the politically active class."

Lee's key insight is that the resource threshold is going to be at a *different income percentile* in different countries depending on how rich the country is. In India it may be at the 50th percentile because so many people lack basic goods. But in a country like Norway it may be at the 2nd or 5th percentile. And if terrorists come from the strata just above the threshold, they should be middle class in poor regions like the Middle East, and lower class in rich regions like Europe.

It is an enticing hypothesis. We know that transnational jihadis in the Muslim world are often middle class. We also know that other radical groups in Europe have drawn recruits from the lower classes. Neo-nazis in Europe are not known for their many high achievers. IRA members were overwhelmingly working class. A possible exception was the extreme leftist groups of the 1970s and 1980s, which had many students, but even they were less well-off than their reputation.

So what about jihadis in Europe? Haven't Krueger & Maleckova and Sageman already shown that they are middle class? Actually, no, they haven't. Krueger & Maleckova only looked at Islamists in Palestine and Lebanon. They included no data whatsoever on jihadis in the West.

Sageman on his part, was speaking mainly about al-Qaida members from the Middle East, North Africa and South East Asia. Interestingly, if you look closely at his data, you see that his Maghreb cluster includes 18 French nationals, and Sageman actually

points out that this subset is much less well educated than the rest. So the least well-off in all of Sageman's sample are the Europeans. Alexander Lee was on to something.

3) A review of the evidence

So I wanted to test Lee's prediction and address the basic question, how poor are European jihadis? The problem, of course, is data. There isn't a good dataset of European jihadis coded for economic variables. The closest thing we have is Edwin Bakker's studies from 2006 and 2011 and the recent update by Pietro Moro, which together have a sample of about 500 individuals. But they are not focused on socioeconomics; they lack important variables like education, and they lack many values on the variables it does code for. Also, they only include attack plotters, not foreign fighters.

What we do have, however, is tens of studies that profile smaller samples of jihadis, of the type "The profiles of Spanish jihadists" or "The German Foreign fighters in Syria". So what I did was to collect all the large-n studies that we have and *aggregate* them, to see if we could get a better picture.

I ended up with a list of 27 items that describe a sample of over 10 people and have hard data on at least some socio-economic variables. The list may not be complete, but I think I have all the most important studies. Then I created a spreadsheet with an entry for each study. I included columns with information about the sample size and the inclusion criteria, and I had a series of columns in which I put all the findings on socioeconomics that the articles contained (for income, education level, job type, unemployment, criminal background, and whatever other socioeconomic variables the studies contained). Then I assessed the data from each and coded each

study for the extent to which the population was underperforming, compared to the national average.

You may wonder why I didn't pool the raw data from all the studies and do a proper statistical meta-analysis. This was impossible, first of all because almost none of the studies have made the raw data available, and second because the studies code for different variables and have different coding rules.

There are obviously lots of methodological problems here, like the fact that each study codes things differently and that there is a mix of foreign fighters and domestic plotters. We can go into all of that in the Q&A. For now I just want you to look at the *general* picture that emerges from the aggregation.

For one, a clear majority of studies describe populations that seem to be underperforming. I coded 19 of the populations as clearly underperforming, 4 of them as unclear and 4 of them as apparently on average or overperforming.

When I say underperforming, I mean that the population has on average low education, high unemployment, high conviction rate or some other negative indicator. Let me give you some examples. First, take Bakker's 2011 study, which we should weight more because it has a large n (336) and covers all Europe. Bakker uses an aggregate variable for social status where people are either low, middle, or upper class. For the 93 people with values, the distribution is 56% lower class, 39% middle class, 5% upper class. Of the 71 people for which he has education info, 30% have completed university, which is less than the EU average (33%) even *without* considering reporting bias. An actual degree is much more likely to be reported than the absence of one, so it is conceivable that only 22 people of the whole

sample (ie 7%) had a university degree. Moreover, at least 20% had a criminal record, and Edwin writes that "the relative number of unskilled workers and unemployed in the sample is very high compared to national averages" (pp. 136-137).

Another important exhibit is the report on German jihadis in Syria that German security services published last year. It is significant because it included all known Syria travellers, an n of 677. Of the 232 people on whom there is educational data, only 12% started university and only 1,6% completed. Very few had a stable career, and 33 percent had a prior criminal record.

If you think this is bad, wait till you hear about the Dutch or the Norwegians. De Poot and Sonnenschein 2011 describe 113 people involved in terrorism investigations in the Netherlands using police data. It finds 50% unemployment, a 67% conviction rate, and nobody who completed university. Weenink studied 140 Dutch foreign fighters and found nobody with a degree, nobody with a steady career, 47% convicts and 6 *homeless* people. In Norway, the security service recently released a study of 137 radicalized individuals; of these, 4 had started higher education, 0 had completed, 64% were unemployed or in sporadic employment, and a full 68% had a criminal background.

The other 14 samples I coded as underperforming show similar or only slightly better results.

I mentioned 4 samples whose performance is unclear. They are all unclear because the data are bad, not because the performance is borderline.

Finally there are 4 studies that do not suggest underperformance. One of them is Dounia Bouzar's study, which we can discard for the reasons I

mentioned earlier. We are left with three studies: Sam Mullins' PhD thesis, which has data on 112 UK plotters, Altunbas and Thornton on 77 UK plotters, and Reinares and Garcia-Calvo who studied 84 people involved or killed in Spanish cases. Mullins finds his folks to have a profile that is "roughly comparable to the general population"; of those with educational data, 33% have a university degree (EU average), 24% unemployed, 16% have criminal records. Altunbas and Thornton, which is one of very few controlled studies, finds UK jihadis to be roughly like the "UK Muslim average". Reinares and Garcia Calvo find that among their Spanish jihadis, 24% (of those with data) have a university degree, only 5% were completely unemployed, and 22% had a prior conviction. Notice that I am being generous here, because neither of these samples is performing great. They are *at best* comparable to the national average or the Muslim average (which is low). And these samples are the cream of the crop of European jihadis.

Now, obviously not all European jihadis are poor or underperforming; there is variation of at least three types.

For one, I see indications of a change over time. The samples from the 2010s perform worse than the samples from the 2000s. This could be due to a general proletarianization of the movement. It could also reflect a difference between domestic plotters and foreign fighters. (The samples from the 2000s are mostly plotters; those from the 2010s are mostly foreign fighters). Perhaps Syria attracted more opportunists than the jihadi networks of the 2000s.

Another variation is between countries. It seems that the UK jihadis have been somewhat better off than those on the continent and in Scandinavia. (I say

"seems" because we don't have data on the British Syria travellers.) Why this may be I am not sure; it is one of the questions that merits research.

Finally we have variation between individuals. In many of the samples the variance is significant, and there is often a minority of quite resourceful people. This tallies well with Petter Nesser's work on the ideal types of European jihadis - the entrepreneur, protégé, misfit, and drifter - and his finding that the entrepreneurs tend to be resourceful individuals. There clearly are idealists out there who could have had good careers but chose militancy. I think in many cases, this idealism is a personality trait. I should also say that these entrepreneurs are very important, because they are the ones who make things happen. They are an argument against overstating the significance of socioeconomics.

These variations notwithstanding, it is pretty clear that *as a group*, European jihadis belong on the lower half of the socio-economic ladder. There are methodological questionmarks, but the data we have are pretty clear to me. The burden of evidence is on the other side; if you believe European jihadis are well off, you have to demonstrate that most of these 27 studies are wrong.

4) Possible mechanisms

Of course, saying that jihadis are underperforming is not the same as saying that they became jihadis *because* they were underperforming. It is entirely possible that this is a simple correlation, reflecting the fact that Muslims *in general* are underperforming in Europe. Unfortunately we don't have data to say how jihadis compare to young Muslims who are *not* jihadis.

However, we cannot exclude the possibility that socioeconomics have some sort of causal effect. I can think of at least five different mechanisms by which it would operate.

The first and least likely is objective suffering - that you rebel because you are frustrated with being poor.

The second is social mobility closure - that you rebel because you do not get as good a job as you feel you deserve given your qualifications.

The third is horizontal inequality (or the "Robin hood mechanism") - that you rebel not because you yourself are poor, but because *your group* is poor and you attribute this to systematic injustice.

The fourth is opportunity cost (the one that Lee highlights) - that you rebel in part because you have little to lose.

The fifth is neighbourhood effects, that poverty comes with *side effects* that increase the risk of radicalization. For example, if you are unemployed, you have more time to go to the mosque or surf the Internet, where you may be lured into radical activism. Similarly, if you live in a poor, immigrant-heavy neighbourhood, you are more likely to come into contact with Islamist organizations. And if you live in a bad neighbourhood, there is a higher likelihood that you have negative experiences with the police.

I haven't tested any of these hypothetical mechanisms, but in my view all of them are plausible, except the first (I don't think many people become jihadis out of frustration over being poor). They are not mutually exclusive, and they are not incompatible with other factors such as network effects, peer

pressure, attraction to ideology, or psychological dispositions.

Conclusion

Time to conclude. In this talk I have raised two questions, but I have only answered one. Are European jihadis underperforming? Yes, for sure. Is the underperformance causing the militancy? Perhaps.

The bottom line for me is that there is enough evidence to take socioeconomics a bit more seriously than we have thus far. We can no longer dismiss it by pointing to anecdotes of rich jihadis or evidence from the Middle East. We have get away from the notion that to invoke socioeconomics is somehow exonerating jihadis, or that if socioeconomics matter, then ideology and other factors do *not* matter. We must also get away from the notion that jihadis need to be *destitute* for economics to be a credible explanation. There are many ways in which *relative* underperformance can play a role.

For academics, "taking it more seriously" means at least three specific things.

First of all, we need to stop saying "there is no single terrorist profile". This is at best a trope and at worst a lazy excuse for not doing statistical work. *Of course* there isn't a single profile, but *populations* can still be described. Not all terrorists are the same, but for any given variable, there is a *median* terrorist.

Second, we must build better datasets. We need datasets with a larger *n* and with better information on socioeconomic variables. I have a suspicion that the data collection so far has been half-hearted, because the assumption has been that these variables don't matter.

Third, we need to dig deeper into the causal question. We have to draw on the best social science methods to test hypothetical causal mechanisms like the ones I've mentioned. Perhaps the results will be weak or negative, but we won't know until we have done the work.

Of course, I do not want to overstate the significance of socioeconomic deprivation. Deprivation is clearly neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for radicalization. The causal effect, if there is one, is likely probabilistic, not categorical, meaning that it *predisposes* for radicalization, in the same way that smoking predisposes you to cancer without guaranteeing that you get it.

If it turns out that there is a causal effect, then this has important policy implications, although mainly at the macro-level, not at the micro or tactical level. For one, it gives policymakers an even greater incentive to improve social mobility among Muslims in Europe. Today there is little question that Muslims constitute an economic underclass in Europe. This is bad enough from a social justice point of view, but if we think economic deprivation contributes to radicalization, then it is also a security problem. It gives us even more reason to improve schools in immigrant-heavy areas and to work harder against discrimination on the labour market.

Second, it gives policymakers another reason to keep immigration at sustainable levels. We know that most migrants from the Muslim world enter the lower end of the labour market, because they arrive with low education. Their children often stay in the same social class because their fortune, like everyone else's, is shaped by their parents' social capital.

If we believe that economic deprivation contributes to radicalization, then we must also recognize that high levels of low-skill immigration from the Muslim world may cause security problems in the long term.

Yesterday we heard Rik Coolsaet say that many of the immigrant kids in Moleenbek and elsewhere feel they have no future, like they don't belong here. Scott Atran, Robert Leiken, and others have been saying the same thing. When I look at the motivations of the people who joined Islamic State, one word stands out, and that is *escapism*. Many left because IS offered a utopia, many times brighter than the future they saw here. This malaise is clearly not all about lack of economic opportunity, but I do believe economics is a bit more important than we in the terrorism studies community have tended to think.

Thank you.