

Poor Crazy Jihad: Why Poverty, Psychology and Religion are not Root Causes of Non-State Terrorism

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*“They hate our freedoms:
our freedom of religion; our freedom of speech;
our freedom to vote and assemble
and disagree with each other
. . .these terrorists kill not merely to end lives,
but to disrupt and end a way of life.”¹*

-President George W. Bush -

Abstract

Since the early 2000s, terrorist groups have been portrayed by the media, scholars and terrorism experts as being driven solely by religious ideology, in part due to the mass sensationalism by the media coverage of 9/11, the 7/7 London bombings, or the November 2015 Paris attacks. Since then, scholars in the field of Terrorism Studies have been including the category of “religious terrorism”² under the umbrella of terrorism. Furthermore, the mass media has also played an incredible role in blaming terrorist activities on poverty and psychological problems. The average American citizen has been conditioned to unconsciously identify the words poor, crazy, Muslim or Islam with terrorism, al-Qaeda, the Taliban or ISIS. This article will argue that neither poverty, psychological deviancy or religion are root causes for non-state terrorism, and that in fact, terrorism is strictly a politically-

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driven phenomenon created by foreign policy. While poverty, mental instability and religion are not root causes for terrorism, these are instrumentalized by Western policy makers as a justification for waging the “War on Terror.”

Keywords: Critical Terrorism Studies, Root Causes, Group Psychology, Religious Terrorism, Suicide Bombers

Introduction

The aim of this article is to elaborate on the three prevalent myths that surround the root causes of terrorism - poverty, psychology and religion - which have been established by traditional studies of terrorism. Al-Qaeda will be used throughout some parts of the article to discuss the notion of terrorism. The choice of al-Qaeda, instead of a more current organization such as ISIS, was determined by a series of factors that have been considered by the authors: firstly, despite the visibility and expansion of ISIS as the main current terrorist threat according to the media, its organization and actions remain confined to a tactical approach that must be understood in a regional geopolitical context. On the contrary, al-Qaeda’s history and activity encompass a strategic global approach deeply rooted in political events that go back to the Cold War. Secondly, the complexity of the issue and the space limitations do not allow for a comprehensive analysis, however, the authors invite the readers to reflect and draw parallels to current events but also propose alternative or complementary perspectives. Thirdly, although during the last three years al-Qaeda’s capabilities seemed to have declined, its global network remains “remarkably resilient”, posing “a greater threat than ISIS in Iraq and Syria in several regions, including Yemen and Somalia”.³ In a few words, al-Qaeda’s actions represent *the* catalyst for the “War on Terror.”

Mainstream Approaches to Terrorism

The sensationalist media, policy makers, terrorism experts and other dominant figures in the political scene have depicted terrorism as a phenomenon influenced by poverty, psychological deviancy and religion since the attacks of 9/11. However, this approach lacks solid research and concrete empirical evidence. Among many others, one of the most influential articles that sparked this discourse was David Rapoport’s article “*Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions*”, which will be discussed later in this section.

Traditional studies on terrorism observe terrorists in terms of a cosmic war waged against the West. According to this point of view, they (the terrorists) see the world as a battlefield between the forces of light and darkness.⁴ In other