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The Three Causes of Terror: Their Myths, Truths and Shocking Facts

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(English 1903)

The Assignment: Students were to compose a 10-12 page researched paper on a subject related to their major or program of study, using no fewer than 10 sources for support.

Terrorism is a word we hear a lot these days. It is applied to most people who violently resist the West in the Middle East; sometimes they're referred to as insurgents. With the declared 'War on Terror' advancing steadily, it has become increasingly important for us, as a nation, to understand why we are at war. The days of enveloping your enemy in a sea of propaganda are all but gone; the citizens of democratic nations at war are becoming more and more aware of who their nation is actually fighting. With this developing awareness, we begin to get more curious about our enemies, and so we search for the answers to what actually made them our enemies. We've come to understand that there are three accepted main causes of terrorism. The first is explained as an issue of economic and educational issues; we are essentially fighting ignorant, poor young adults who have been swayed to fight for one side. The next is religious, the very nature of Islam breeds terrorism and the religion itself is flawed, perhaps violent. The third and final accepted cause is the Middle East and the West clashing; by sticking our noses in their affairs and allowing our culture to seep into theirs, we are essentially promoting conflict. Which of these three are myths and which of them are facts can only be answered with an examination of them all.

Before we look into the proposed causes of terrorism, we must first understand what terrorism actually is. It is important to start with the fact that terrorism is an entirely subjective word; what may be considered a terrorist act to one party will undoubtedly be considered an act of the exact opposite nature by someone else. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics* states that:

> [terrorism is a] term with no agreed definition among governments or academic analysts, but almost invariably used in a pejorative sense, most frequently to describe life-threatening actions perpetrated by politically motivated self-appointed sub-state groups. But if such actions are carried out on behalf of a widely approved cause then the term 'terrorism' is usually avoided. In short, one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter (Carlton).

The subjective nature of terrorism creates remorse for those viewing it as a third party, as described by Benjamin Netanyahu "Since freedom fighters have also used violence in their struggles, and since freedom is so dear to free men, many in the democracies are almost automatically filled with sympathy for the terrorists and their causes" (Netanyahu). How then are we to define such a debatable term?

There are two absolutes when you wish to define terrorism: the spread of terror and the killing of civilians. The very nature of the word terrorism demands the use of terror be an essential ingredient. When a radical Islamic terrorist cell drives a large van full of crude explosives into a civilian building, then their goal is to spread terror. They are not attacking a military target; they are attempting to deliver a violent statement and they are killing supposedly innocent civilians to do it. They are saying (and usually will say directly via released video tape) that this will continue to happen unless our goals are achieved; that is terrorism. The risk to the general population may be

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very low, but the terror spread from a previous attack says to them that it could happen again; this is a very potent weapon, as explained in shocking detail by Joseba Zulaika and William A. Douglass; "the consequences of the terrorism scare are enormous. Consider its effects during the Persian Gulf War [as shown] during January 1991 an estimated 10 million people were dissuaded from taking an international flight" (8).

An explosion in the distance; smoke rises into the sky. Many people gather to the site of a new attack, perhaps the first in their nation for some time. A terrible scene is displayed in front of these witnesses; twisted metal and bodies are strewn about everywhere. Why? That is the first question they ask, and it has two answers. One is the direct cause: what was the reason for this particular attack? The architects of the attack will commonly answer this in a released statement; their intentions are to make the public aware of what motivated them to do such a thing. The second is an answer that lies deeply buried. The root causes of terrorism cannot be simply explained in one sentence; they are far too complex. Sometimes, when we look for an answer at the foundation of a movement, all we get is more questions; it is the same with terrorism. An example is the common belief that Islam itself is to blame for terrorism; the religion is inherently flawed, so the theory says, and this flaw breeds terrorism. When we look at that answer, we wonder where they got it from; why is Islam flawed? Why has such a flawed religion lived on if all it does is promote violence? To understand the real causes of terrorism, we must be prepared to answer the questions they spawn.

The Ignorant Poor

The Middle East is poor, with poverty comes ignorance, and with ignorance comes violence. Our government took that path of thinking after September 11th. "Many here today have devoted their lives to the fight against global poverty, and you know the stakes. We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror" (CNN Transcripts). The Bush Administration was grappling with the daunting task of explaining an enormously complex issue to the American public. The deepest answer that the Administration came up with was that the conditions in the Middle East are a spawning ground for radical thinking. If people are poor, then that means they aren't adequately educated for today's world; if they are not educated, then they are ignorant; if they're ignorant, then they can be easily swayed to one side or another. These are the ingredients to terrorism, according to some, and they are not entirely unfounded. During the Crusades, the Christian soldiers sent to the Holy Land were not the most enlightened of people; this is no secret. The leaders of the Western world during that time controlled the population. When the Pope called for a crusade, off they went. Does that sound shockingly similar to what we witness in the Middle East through CNN? Perhaps, but it is not that simple.

> We have considered data from a public-opinion poll conducted in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Palestinians were asked whether they supported attacks on Israeli civilian and military targets. Breaking down the data by education and occupation indicates that support for violence against Israeli targets is widespread in the Palestinian population, and at least as great among those with higher education and higher living standards. (Malecková, Jitka 28)

In an article called "Poverty Causes Terrorism?" Tim Blair claims that the "problem is, it's almost impossible to find an actual poor terrorist. Osama bin Laden is worth more than the combined annual earnings of the people his goons killed in the WTC. The goons themselves were middle-class (19). Tim Blair later makes the humorous point that "wealth and education themselves do not terrorists make, otherwise the Young Liberals would be smuggling Semtex instead of guzzling champagne" (19). The counter-argument could be made that while it is indeed true that education

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does not at all rule out radical thinking, those we see actually committing terrorism are of the highest quality of a large pool of candidates. The 'goons' that were sent to do what is now known as the 9/11 attacks could have only been the most trusted of men that the Al Qaeda network could acquire. Indeed, four of them had to take flight lessons while remaining unsuspicious to those around them, while being on student visas; not an easy task. The evidence is undisputable, however; the rich are just as likely as the poor to be classified as terrorists by the West.

The Religion of Violence?

If economic factors are not to be blamed for terrorism, then what other possible causes do we have? There must be some underlying issue that is pushing and shoving the young men and women of the Middle East to commit barbaric acts. Could Islam be to blame? As noted earlier, religion is a very powerful force in persuading the public to take part in a cause; there is a reason why the West classifies terrorism in the Middle East as Islamic terrorism. Why then should we ignore the elephant in the room? The Bush Administration has until recently steered clear of bringing Islam into any form of discussion on terrorism and certainly has never publicly gone near the claim that Islam actually causes terrorism. This has not deterred the American public from looking into the issue in its own special way. For example, we all remember the reported attacks on American Muslims after 9/11. While these may be inexcusable acts of violent ignorance, they display an opinion in the public about the links between Islam and terrorism. A closer look into this possible cause is very much warranted.

Islam has long been advertised as a religion of peace, probably due to the fingers that have always been pointed at it. To support this notion that Islam is peaceful, it should be mentioned that the Koran itself forbids the murder of civilians and that the majority of Muslims in the world are, in fact, supporters of peace (Tariq 429). If the Islamic religion promotes violence, then why do we refer to the terrorists as radicals? The responsible few of us make the distinction because we know that the Koran, much like the Bible, is open to interpretation, and the radical's particular interpretation is not exactly well received by much of the Muslim world. Make no mistake that Islamic terrorism is very threatening, as noted by Jeffery D. Simon: "Religious terrorism has several characteristics that make it a particularly potent form of violence. One is the moral justification for committing the seemingly immoral acts of kidnapping and killing people. Believing that God is on one's side is a powerful incentive to action" (310). It is important to note the distinction between Islamic radicals and Islamic fundamentalists. If these radicals were indeed fundamentalists of Islam, then they would be peaceful, as strictly governed by the Koran (Cigdem). However, Ziauddin Sardar from *The New Statesman* disagrees with the notion that Islam has nothing to do with terrorism: "But Islam has everything to do with it. As Dr Ghayasuddin Siddiqui, director of the Muslim Institute, points out: 'The terrorists are using Islamic sources to justify their actions. How can one say it has nothing to do with Islam?'". We cannot directly blame Islam for the interpretations of its text, but it is used as the groundwork for legalizing the terrorist's actions, that is a fact. Sardar later goes on to say that "the fight against terrorism is also an internal Muslim struggle within Islam. Indeed, it is a struggle for the very soul of Islam".

Islam, as Sadar pointed out, is in a battle with itself. The radical Islamic terrorist's beliefs are quite extraordinary to view as Luciano Pellicani gives us an inside look. "By insisting on the division of the world into two parties, the party of God and the party of Satan, implacable mutual enemies and destined to fight each other in a battle of cosmic-historic significance" (Pellicani, Luciano 46). The Western world is fighting an enemy which has deemed it the worst of evils; it is no wonder why young Islamic men and women kill themselves for such a cause. This "perversion" of Islam wields perhaps the most terrifying propaganda machine the world has thus yet witnessed, and the cure, as Sadar eloquently points out, is Islam.

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Islam as a religion cannot be blamed for terrorism no more than Christianity can be blamed for its violent past. The fault lies in those who interpret and change the particular religion to their own desires. They see that Islam, like any other religion, is a powerful tool to control massive groups of people, so they exploit it. The use of Jihads to call upon the young Islamic population to fight is a famous method. If any of these young Muslims are to reject the call to arms, then they risk being outcasted and deemed an inferior Muslim for refusing to fight the current infidels (Bar). It is the responsibility of local religious leaders to promote peace and stability. When these young ambitious Muslims are led to believe by their elders (who are perhaps veterans of the Afghanistan-Soviet war) that violence is the only path, then this creates another generation of fighters, and another, and so on. This process of thinking feeds upon itself and grows, the longer it is allowed to exist the harder it will be to eradicate it. This brings us to our final cause.

"The Clash of Civilizations"

The West and the Middle East are two entirely different worlds that have recently begun to share cultures, with the West being predominantly the one who does most of the sharing, this is not surprising; stronger nations always in turn exhibit strong cultures and it is no secret that the Middle Eastern nations are weaker than their Western cousins. The advancement of technology is an important ingredient to this mixing; Middle Eastern power houses such as Iran and Saudi Arabia have been witnessing their citizens adopting Western culture, much to the displeasure (or horror) of Arab and Persian leaders ("Blogs Opening Iranian Society?"). Can this merging between two radically different cultures be a source of conflict? Is it the spark that lights up the gas-filled room? Jack A. Goldstone certainly thinks so and he likes to refer to this as a "clash of civilizations" (497).

This third proposed cause is in actuality a blending of the two other theories and is overall the most accurate explanation. The idea that terrorism is fueled by the West and the Middle East cultures clashing together has religious and economic variables intertwined with it. It was pointed out earlier that Islam and the economic problems of the Middle East cannot be directly blamed; this is true, but they are two important catalysts. An example of this is demonstrated by Goldstone's analysis of al-Qaeda's goals: "For al-Qaeda and its followers, the goal is nothing less than the removal of Western influence from as many lands as possible and the spread of a "purified" Islam into all those lands occupied by the faithful" (506). This is clearly religious in nature, yet the main goal is to expel the West. Another consequence to the West and Middle East clashing is the West actually being blamed for the Arab world's troubles. "If poor people blame themselves for their condition, they work to overcome it. If they blame a corrupt or evil government, they may rebel against it. If they blame a foreign power or culture for undermining their society, they may mobilize" (Goldstone 507).

This third cause may be terrifying to some, how can we possibly not cause conflict? Luciano Pellicani powerfully describes what the Middle East must feel under Western cultural pressure. "… the radioactive power of modern civilization is so great that it subjects other civilizations to a kind of cultural bombardment that cause a painful crisis of identity" (Pellicani 41). The world is indeed too small and advancing too quickly to develop a policy that allows us to stay away from the Middle East; we are slowly becoming as connected to them as we are to Europe, but there is hope in that fact. It would not be preposterous to say that terrorism or conflict in general is going to get worse, it very likely will. Those in the Middle East who wish to retain their culture and maintain their Islamic "purity" are going to react violently if needed, and we know that they have already deemed it necessary. As the violence does escalate, however, the variables creating this conflict will slowly be erased, as the West and the Middle East slowly begin to accept one another. These individuals who wish to keep the Middle East free from Western influences will eventually be forcibly pushed out from the public eye. It is an inevitable fate for them. Our relationship with them has changed greatly since the Crusades; they are no longer a distant mystical enemy that must be eradicated.

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Conclusions

There are three widely accepted causes of terrorism: religious, economic and culture. We have come to find out that while religion and economic situations play an important role they are not alone. It is irresponsible to blame either for Islamic terrorism; they are just not strong enough factors on their own. It is important to understand the theoretical causes of terrorism, because doing so also allows us to see the extremist's point of view. The simple solution to stopping international Islamic terrorism would be to break off contact with the Middle East entirely; this is impossible and ultimately unproductive. Our current dependence on oil alone forces the West to play a touch and go game with the Middle East. If we are to defeat terrorism then we must understand that the violence we see in the Middle East truly is not our fight, it is the world's and we need to confront it as such.

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