

21st Century Middle Eastern Terrorism—Roots, Myths, and Realities

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INTRODUCTION:

This study is an attempt to expose Middle Eastern terrorism and its causes and to dispel the myths surrounding it and to make recommendations for the future.

There are many root causes of modern, Middle Eastern terrorism which include structural, facilitator, motivational, and triggering roots. These roots must be understood, so that we can understand the realities of modern Middle Eastern terrorism and dispel the myths, which are potentially leading to an increase in terrorist activities. Some of these myths include strongly linking poverty to terrorism, linking state collapse to terrorism, and the thought that terrorism is a very effective tool that works and should be feared. Middle Eastern terrorism is misunderstood by the general population, and my findings will lead not only to a better understanding of these misunderstandings, but also an investigation of where they originate and how to dispel them. Ultimately, my research and analysis suggests that we consider the following ways to aid our country in the fight against terrorism: better, more responsible reporting of terrorism by the news media, absolutely refusing to reward terrorism in any way or give them any kind of legitimacy, and a serious effort to respond and re-establish effective government in collapsed states.

DEFINITIONS:

Terrorism—“a collective action...a political act taken in the name of a group based on ethnicity, religion, nationalism or ideological orientation” (Bjorgo p. 16). Or, “a set of methods or strategies of combat rather than an identifiable ideology or movement, and that terrorism involves premeditated violence against non-combatants in order to achieve a psychological effect of fear on others than the immediate targets.”

True Believer—individuals motivated by “ideology or the desire to enhance the welfare of the entire group” (Bjorgo 19). These ideologies are carried out by the use of homicide and suicide as a legitimate means to further their goals.

Mercenary—those who are motivated by self-interest and the idea that terrorism will allow them to loot, rape, pillage and plunder, or acquire power and the respect of their followers.

Captive Participant—Their presence can be accounted for by the fear of not going along with the group and participating in the actions of the others. They feel if they do not participate, they will be tortured or killed by those over them, so their actions are based on this fear

Structural Causes—Structural causes effect people’s lives at a level they may not be able to comprehend. Examples of these causes are globalization, modernization, demographic imbalances, class structure, etc...

Facilitator Causes—This cause makes terrorism attractive and possible. Examples include the modern news media, transportation, weapons technology, weak state control of territory, etc...

Motivational Causes—The actual grievances people experience personally, motivating them to act.

Triggering Causes—A direct precipitator of terrorist action. This could be a political mishap, an insane act committed by the enemy, or any event that may call for revenge or action.

FINDINGS:

1. *There are three rationales and motivations behind terrorism—ideology (true believer), greed (mercenary), and fear (captive participant)—they are often indistinguishable from each other. Not all terrorists are the same in their motivations.*

DISCUSSION: It is very significant for one to understand the difference among the three because if all the captive participants are eradicated, the true believers will still be around to spread the ideologies and spread terrorism. We must be aware of the difference because one does not cut off a snake’s tail if he or she wants to kill the snake, he or she cuts off the head. The same idea is true here. The only way to gauge the differences between the three is to determine the “revealed preferences” of the different groups. When the difference between ideology and profit motive is determined, it can be easier to determine the terrorist’s engagement and combat of their adversaries based on their preferred and most favored tactics. Therefore, finding the roots of terrorism can become even more difficult due to the different motivations and reasons behind terrorism, but still very important (Bjorgo p. 19).

2. *One must understand what the root causes of terrorism are to effectively fix the problem.*

DISCUSSION: An acute awareness of the causes/motivations behind terrorism is essential in helping stop terrorism. The four causes studied are structural, facilitator, motivational, and triggering causes. (Refer to definitions section). The main goal with studying these causes is to bring an awareness of why terrorists do what they do and possibly take away some of those motivations.

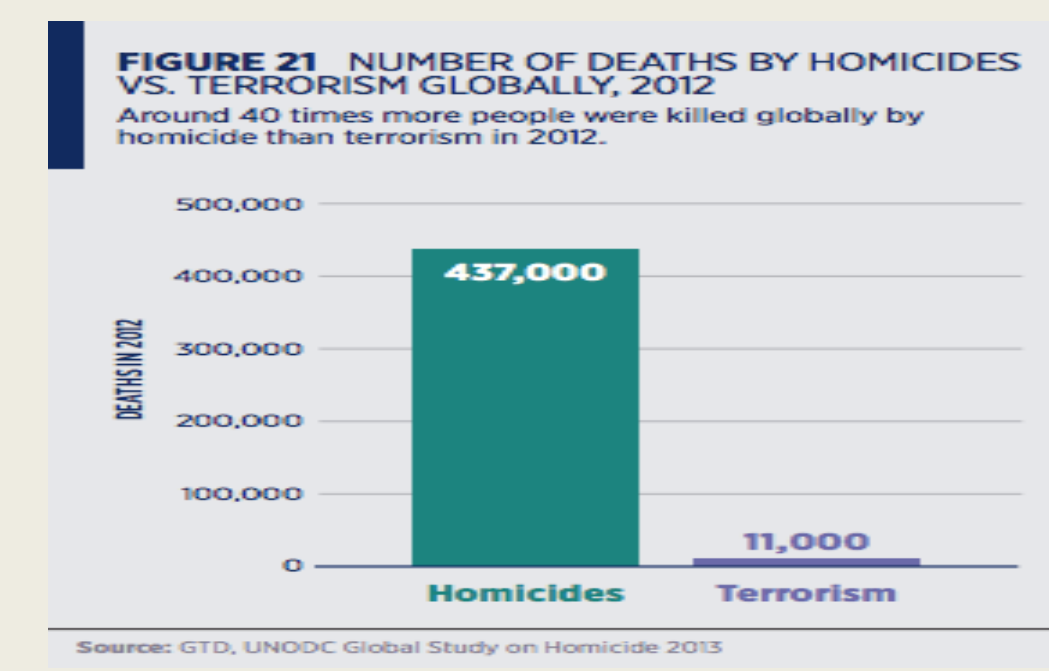
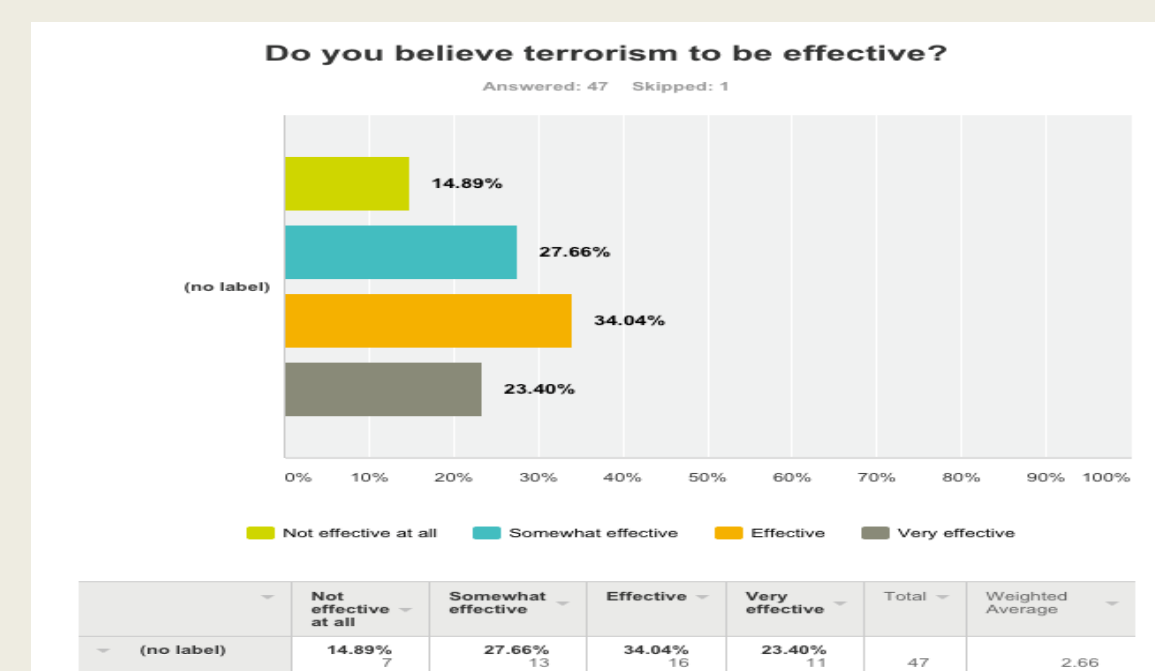
3. *Some argue that trying to understand the root causes of terrorism actually makes it work as a result.*

DISCUSSION: Instead of trying to understand the root causes of it, Alan Dershowitz, an American lawyer and political commentator states “we must commit ourselves never to try to understand or eliminate its root causes, but rather to place it beyond the pale of dialogue and negotiation”. Our message should be, even if there are legitimate grievances, if resorting to terrorism is a method for alleviating that grievance, we will not try to understand or work with any entity that engages in this way, rather we will destroy the ability of your entity to engage in terror. Any other approach will simply encourage terrorism as a means of negotiation (Dershowitz).

4. *The final argument is that while both previous arguments are extremely legitimate and make excellent points, there is a middle ground that can draw from both sides.*

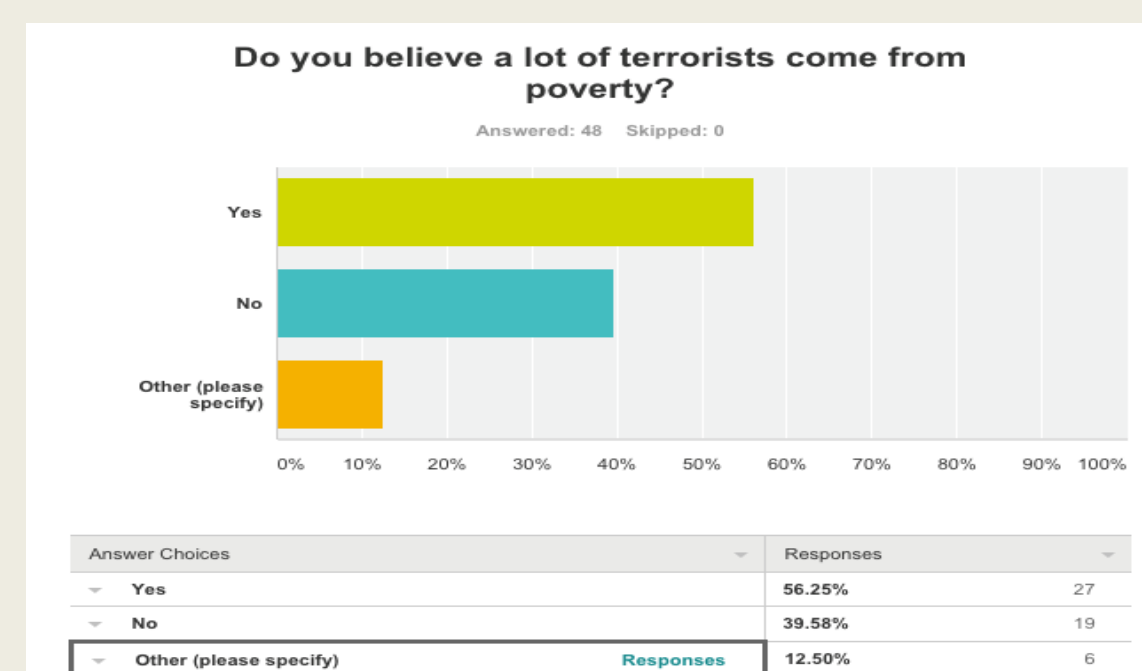
DISCUSSION: According to Karin Von Hippel, an effective counter and anti-terrorist campaign “must incorporate a system that attacks both systems and causes. Dealing with systems involves military, intelligence, financial, legal and police activities to ‘root out terrorists.’” These rooting out techniques will be extremely difficult, but they will be pursued with the utmost diligence. However, they must be pursued carefully and responsibly, being careful not to justify the terrorist’s cause in any way. Terrorists will be removed from society and their operations will be stopped. “The US has acknowledged that all this might take years, without necessarily successfully eradicating all members of al-Qaeda and affiliated organizations, or preventing all future acts of terror” (Hippel). However, the US is determined that these rooting out activities will be the leading priority in the years to come. As mentioned by Hippel, these rooting out activities include fighting the symptoms and causes.

5. *Myth—Terrorism works and should be feared*



DISCUSSION: According to a survey given to 48 Embry-Riddle students, the large majority believed that terrorism is effective. Only 7 believed it wasn’t effective at all. The reality is that homicide is a much bigger problem than terrorism, and an individual is forty times more likely to be the victim of a homicide than a victim of a terrorist attack. Another study showed that out of twenty-eight terrorist groups, including the complete list of foreign terrorist organizations designated by the US Department of State since 2001, they were only successful with their objectives seven percent of the time.

6. *Myth—Terrorism is strongly linked to poverty*

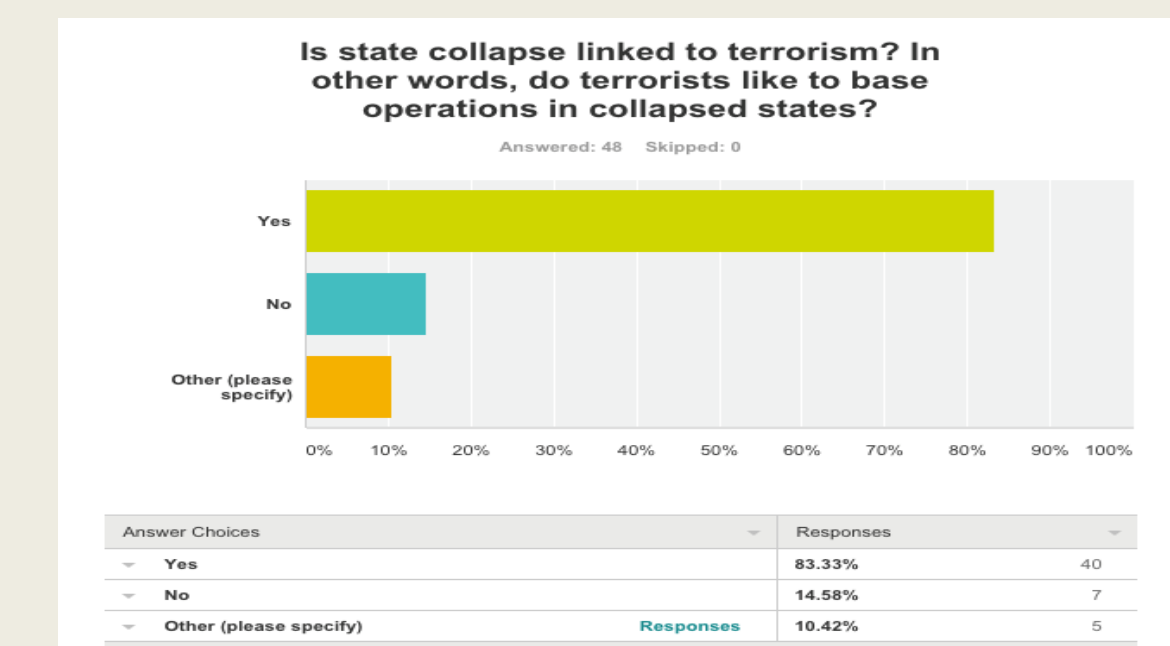


DISCUSSION: According the survey, fifty-seven percent of students believed terrorism was linked to poverty. The previous French foreign minister Hubert Vedrine stated that “We are today threatened by a new simplism which consists in reducing all the world’s problems to the battle against terrorism. That’s not a responsible approach.” Common sense might lead one to believe politicians and news media when they claim a correlation between poverty and terrorism; however, evidence gathered up to this point has not supported that claim; in fact, it has supported the opposite. Alan Krueger, a National Bureau of Economic Research associate, along with his co-author Jitka Maleckova, claim that “any connection between

FINDINGS (Cont’d):

poverty, education, and terrorism is indirect, complicated, and probably quite weak” (Krueger & Maleckova p. 1). In fact, “None of the 19 perpetrators of the September 11 attacks suffered from poverty, lack of education or lack of exposure to the privileged lifestyle of the Western world.

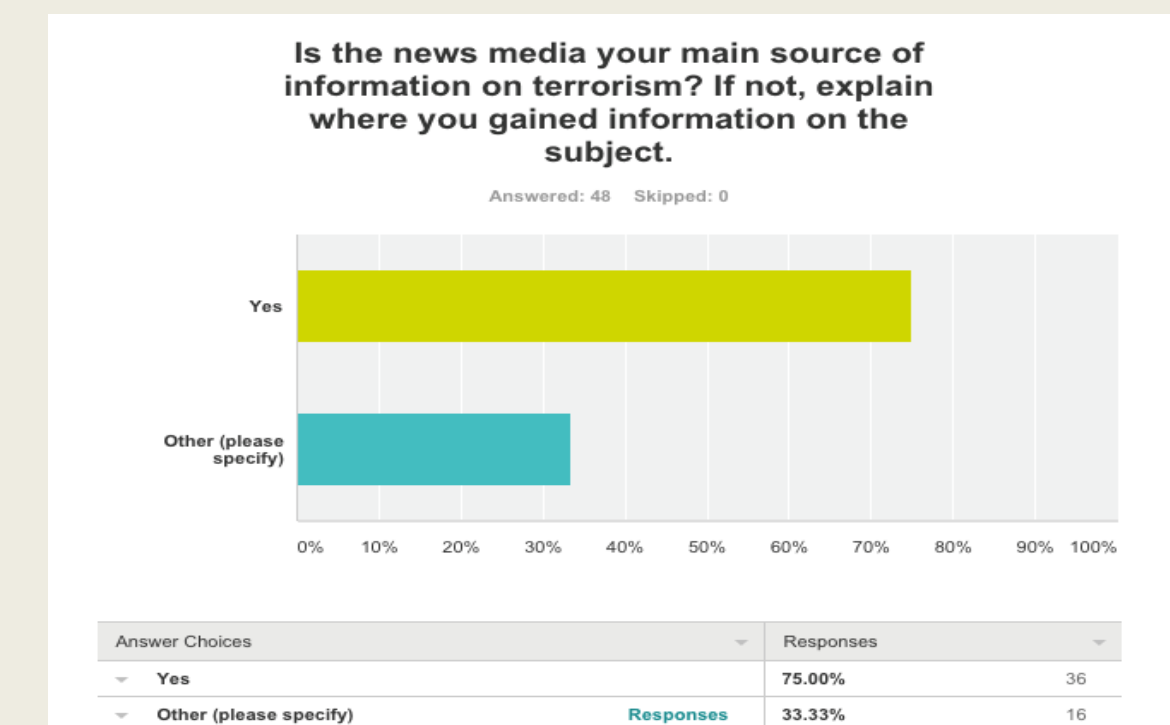
7. *Myth—Terrorism is linked to State Collapse*



Discussion: According to the survey, eighty-three percent of students believed terrorism was linked to state collapse. The idea was that collapsing states such as Afghanistan and Somalia would be breeding grounds for terrorists due to the “weak or non-existent government structures, and the inability of the international community to oversee and regulate trade or movements of people and goods through landing strips and unguarded coastlines” (Hippel p. 31). While some may think this would be a perfect environment for terrorists to conduct their business, it is actually much more dangerous for them to be there. These places are hazardous to terrorists because they are operating in an insecure and foreign environment, where there is little to no security and the infrastructure is unreliable. It is not clear whether terrorists use these parts of states no longer controlled by the government to train and “breed” more terrorists; however, the proof is stacked heavily against it.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. *More Responsible News Media Coverage*



DISCUSSION: According to the survey, seventy-five percent of students claimed that news media was their main source of information on terrorism. What this means is, the news media must be extremely careful when reporting about terrorism, since their reports form the basis of a lot of people’s opinions on the subject. Also, when news media interviews terrorists, whether they like it or not, the terrorists are being treated as a legitimate news source that is worthy of a “serious public discourse” (Nacos p. 22). This elevates the terrorist to the level of a legitimate political actor, which to terrorists rationalizes and legitimizes the use of terrorism. Instead of spreading fear and giving terrorists the publicity they desire, Martha Crenshaw, a professor of political science at Stanford, states that news media should realize that “the actions of terrorists are based on a subjective interpretation of the world rather than objective reality” (Hamelin et al p. 4). This is important because all terrorists have to do is commit an act of violence, then leave it up to the rest of the world to figure out why they did it. The perception terrorists have of political and social events is filtered through their own belief system. “Advertising, political campaigns and news media messages are all built on the premise that behavior follows attitude, and attitude can be changed by delivering the message in the right way at the right time” (Hamelin et al p. 4). The news media could be a positive force for good by doing this very thing and changing aggressive terrorist behavior by sending positive messages and focusing on the good that happens as a result of fair play, and not focusing on the fear and terror and horrible things happening because of foul play.

2. *No Supporting of Terrorists*

DISCUSSION: A second method for improvement in the area of terrorism is to refuse to support terrorism in any way and to punish those who do support them. Palestinian terrorists in the time of John Paul II relied heavily on support for their cause. As their terrorist activity increased, support for them and their cause also increased. There was a direct correlation between the targeting of innocent civilians by terrorists and the legitimization of their leaders who were employing these terror tactics for recognition and support of their cause. If this is the message being sent to terrorists, what would any reasonable person expect them to do? Keep committing acts of terror of course. If they have no reason to stop, they won’t. We absolutely must give them a reason to stop and punish them for their actions instead of rewarding them for their actions. If we reward terrorists for their actions, we are partly responsible for their terrorist actions ourselves.

3. *Re-establish Government in Collapsed States*

DISCUSSION: What the US can do is effectively promote education and employment opportunities, while respecting the local culture. This may be easier said than done; however, it is imperative that we do everything in our power to help these countries without going in and trying to forcefully change things. Support for these opportunities should be directed towards “indigenous civil society organizations, which have a better understanding of how to operate successfully in difficult and often oppressive environments (Hippel p. 36).