Fighting Radicalism, not ‘Terrorism’: Root Causes of an International Actor Redefined

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While debate over the root causes of terrorism rages in the West, extremists continue to lure destitute radicals to their cause. Counter-terrorism needs to place the breeding grounds for these impoverished sympathizers at the center of their efforts. A new strategy and a new method ought to be adopted to prevent radicals from becoming a threat in the form of terrorism. “Fighting radicalism with human development”—specifically social and economic development—should emerge as a new public narrative and long-term objective for a smarter effort at strategic counter-terrorism.

A polarized debate about the underlying causes of violent extremism in the Islamic world has taken place among western policymakers, analysts, and academics ever since the cataclysmic terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Broadly speaking, two major views have emerged. In one camp, the center-left maintains that the struggle against the root causes of terrorism should prioritize social and economic development. Inspired by modernization theory, this camp sees social and economic development as the precursor of democratization. It also considers educational and economic empowerment as the best antidote against radicalization and terrorist recruitment. Since poverty and ignorance often provide a breeding ground for radicalism, socioeconomic development appears compelling as an effective antidote.

This correlation between socioeconomic deprivation and terrorism is strongly rejected by a second group of analysts. Their logic is simple: most terrorists are neither poor nor uneducated. In fact, the majority seem to come from middle class, ordinary backgrounds. Terrorism is therefore perceived almost exclusively as a ‘security threat’ with no discernible socioeconomic roots or links with deprivation. Not surprisingly, this second group defines the fight against Islamist terrorism with a single-minded focus on state actors, jihadist ideology, counter-intelligence, and coercive action.¹

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Both camps make valid points. Yet, they also share important shortcomings. The root causes of terrorism and violent radicalism are extremely complex, multifaceted, and often intertwined. They resist simplification and easy categorization. It should therefore be stated from the outset that there is no unique panacea or simple formula to ‘end’ terrorism and radicalism. In the absence of ‘one size fits all’ measures, only a long-term and multi-pronged strategy, aimed at strengthening the institutional underpinnings of development, democracy, and security will achieve effective results.

Such a strategy will have to take into consideration the tension between the two camps outlined above. This article argues that the best way to bridge the important gap between the ‘development first’ camp and the ‘security first’ camp is to drop the notion of a ‘war against terror’ in favor of a ‘strategic campaign against radicalism.’ The tools with which to engage this long-term campaign will come to us by focusing on ‘human development’—not just economic growth—in countries where political, economic, and social conditions foment radicalism. In short, ‘fighting radicalism with human development’ should emerge as a new public narrative and long-term objective for a smarter effort at strategic counter-terrorism.

**Prioritizing Radicalism Rather than Terrorism**

Terrorism has multiple causes. Attempts to create a single typology of terrorism or generic profiles for terrorists are often misleading. An ideal breeding ground for recruitment emerges when various social, cultural, economic, political, and psychological factors come together. And even when such negative dynamics converge, different terrorist networks have different political objectives. Despite such complexities and diversity, all terrorist groups share one common objective: the willingness to kill or harm civilians for their cause. This is why terrorism is ultimately a major security concern.

Therefore, there is no point in denying that counter-terrorism is primarily about securing the homeland and protecting civilians with utmost vigilance in safety measures, intelligence gathering, law enforcement, interagency coordination, and, when necessary, the use of force. Terrorist networks would not be deterred by anything less than the strongest security measures. The debate about the root causes of terrorism, however, is not about counter-terrorism. Advocates of the root cause approach are interested in fighting the conditions that create terrorism, not the terrorists themselves. This is why the case for social and economic development in the Islamic world should not be made in the context of counter-terrorism. The development agenda is not about terrorists themselves, but rather those most susceptible to the goals and messages of terrorism. It is precisely within this broader context that a political vocabulary is needed that goes beyond the narrow confines of terrorism and counter-terrorism.

Fighting ‘radicalism’ rather than ‘terrorism’ provides a better paradigm and framework for a number of reasons. First, radicalism more accurately reflects the political and ideological dimension of the threat. No matter
how diverse the causes, motivations, and ideologies behind terrorism, all attempts at premeditated violence against civilians share the traits of violent radicalism. Second, while terrorism is a deadly security challenge, radicalism is primarily a political threat against which non-coercive measures should be given a chance. There is nothing preordained in the possible transition from radicalism to terrorism. All terrorists, by definition, are radicals. Yet all radicals do not end up as terrorists. In fact, only a few radicals venture into terrorism. At the same time, it is clear that most terrorists start their individual journey towards extremist violence first by becoming radicalized militants. Since radicalism is often a precursor to terrorism, focusing on radicalism amounts to preventing terrorism at an earlier stage, before it is too late for non-coercive measures.

Finally, radicalism, unlike terrorism, has social dimensions. There are radicalized societies where acts of terrorism find some sympathy and degree of support. It is impossible to talk about terrorism as a social phenomenon, however. There are no ‘terrorist’ societies. The relative popularity of certain terrorist networks in the Islamic world can only be explained within the framework of such radicalized societies where extremist violence finds a climate of legitimacy and implicit support. Such radicalized societies are permeated by a deep sense of collective frustration, humiliation, and deprivation relative to expectations. This radicalized social habitat is easily exploited by terrorists.

This is why focusing on the collective grievances behind radicalism is probably the most effective way of addressing the root causes of terrorism. This effort at prevention can be conceived of as a first line of defense against terrorism. The goal is to reduce the social, economic, and political appeal of terrorism by isolating terrorists and winning over potential recruits. Once the challenge is defined as such, the next and more difficult step is to identify an effective strategy to fight radicalism. The socioeconomic and political context where radicalism takes root, particularly in the context of the Arab world, presents an urgent situation for the West. This enabling environment can be altered most effectively by focusing on relative deprivation and human development. The next two sections of the article will focus on these concepts from within the context of the broader Middle East.

Relative Deprivation

Breeding grounds for radicalism and terrorist recruitment emerge not necessarily under conditions of abject poverty and deprivation, but rather when negative social, economic, and political trends converge. In fact, when ana-
lyzed in a broader framework of socio-economic and political deprivation, the societal support for terrorism and radicalism gains greater relevance. Dismissing the social and economic causes of radicalism on the grounds that some terrorists have middle-class backgrounds is simplistic and misleading. Weak, failing, and failed states; ungoverned spaces; and civil wars that create safe havens for terrorism are all in underdeveloped parts of the world, not in the industrialized West. Terrorism is not necessarily caused by socioeconomic problems. But there is certainly a correlation between deprivation and radicalism.

Absolute deprivation is not the real challenge. The more challenging question, particularly in the Arab world, is relative deprivation: the absence of opportunities relative to expectations. Such focus on relative deprivation is important because poverty is no longer an absolute concept in the context of globalization. Globalization creates an acute awareness about opportunities available elsewhere. This leads to frustration, victimization, and humiliation among growing cohorts of urbanized, undereducated, and unemployed Muslim youth who are able to make comparisons across countries. The scale of youth frustration is compounded by a demographic explosion, growing expectations, weak state capacity, and diminishing opportunities for upward mobility in most parts of the Muslim world. Globalization further exacerbates this situation because restive Muslim masses of both genders are caught in the growing tension between religious tradition and western modernity.

Socioeconomic decay in the Islamic world often creates considerably more frustration than in other parts of the developing world for historical reasons, as well. Particularly in the Arab world, a sense of nostalgia for the golden age of Islam—during which Arab civilizations far surpassed Europe—is deeply ingrained in the political culture. Unlike other developing regions of the world, Arab countries have a historic, cultural, and civilizational sense of rivalry with the Christian West. Geographic proximity further complicates this picture. Europe is often a historic point of reference in terms of social, economic, and political success. Feelings of a historic sense of superiority combined with the more recent memories of colonial subjugation and military defeat create a dangerous sense of victimization, resentment, and injustice in large parts of the Arab world. All these factors significantly compound the level of frustration of a great civilization nurturing great expectations and aspirations.

An effective strategic campaign against radicalism in the Arab and Islamic world at large should take the socio-economic dimension of this collective frustration very seriously. Little can be done in the short-term about deeply rooted cultural and psychological grievances. But quite a lot can be done in the social and economic sphere. Take the question of political Islam for example. Weak Muslim states are often unable to provide adequate social and economic services. The capacity gap within Muslim states such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Pakistan creates a vacuum that is frequently filled by grassroots Islamic organizations that provide goods and services in crucial areas such as health, education, and housing. The strength of these
Islamic networks is magnified by the weaknesses of the state system. In that sense, the absence of effective public services opens the field for the rise of Islamic networks with their own political agendas.

Finally, in addition to socioeconomic decay, the absence of constitutional liberties brings a ‘political’ dimension to relative deprivation in the Arab world. In other words, there is a growing gap between political aspirations and the realities on the ground. Improving educational standards without increasing prospects for employment, or providing jobs without creating outlets for political and social participation all create a combustible mix in the Arab world. The growing numbers of educated but unemployed youth are particularly alarming. It is, after all, the educated youth who have the highest political aspirations and expectations, and thus, it is they who are the most frustrated when their expectations are unmet. The growth of unemployment among the educated often creates a class of ‘frustrated achievers’ who may end up becoming radicalized militants looking for a political cause to hang on to. Repressive political systems exacerbate these dynamics. In most authoritarian Muslim countries, the mosque is the only institution not brutally suppressed by the regime. And when the mosque is the only outlet for mass politics, the outcome is predictable: the Islamization of dissent. As dissent turns Islamic, what naturally follows is the politicization of Islam.

Political Islam thus slowly evolves into a resistance movement against injustice, state oppression, and western support for repressive regimes. As authoritarian governments become more repressive, a vicious cycle of violence and counter-violence emerges. Once political Islam is pushed underground, it turns more radical, aggressive, and resentful. It is therefore absolutely necessary to provide legitimate political outlets other than Islam and the mosque for opposition movements in the Muslim world.

All these problems illustrate the need for alternative strategies to address radicalism in the Islamic world. The new approach should find ways to promote democratization, security, and economic development in a comprehensive and harmonious framework. Given the multifaceted nature of factors fueling radicalism, the social and economic agenda against relative deprivation and radicalism needs to be defined very broadly. The goal of ‘human development’ offers such an alternative.

**Human Development**

Human development involves a much broader public policy agenda than economic growth, mainly because it takes into consideration the social and political dimensions of the human condition as a whole. The basic idea behind human development, as conceptualized by Nobel laureate Amartya...
Sen, is that GDP growth fails to capture the complexity and breadth of development as a social and political phenomenon. Human development considers the social and political progress towards freedom and democracy as an integral part of development. Sen has dedicated his career to drawing international attention to the crucial role of democracy, freedom, and human rights in promoting economic development. This new way of looking at development is therefore motivated by the need to prioritize the quality of life as much as the quantity of growth.

An integral part of Sen’s approach to economic development is the need for institutions that promote better governance. Improving state capacity, state legitimacy, and state security are equally important dimensions of better governance and human development. In that sense, human development expands the meaning of development in a similar way that relative deprivation broadens the meaning of poverty. Both concepts are particularly relevant to the debate on the root causes of radicalism. With their emphasis on economic, social, and political aspirations rather than just income per capita, ‘relative deprivation’, and ‘human development’ offer analytical tools for a more strategic approach to radicalism and counter-terrorism.

These two concepts also shift the debate of root causes from the realm of economic growth to the realm of governance and political economy. Such focus on the state is particularly useful in the context of the Arab Middle East, where political power and economic structures are strongly intertwined. One can argue that the most important challenge facing the majority of Muslim countries is their inability to invest in human development. Arab underdevelopment needs to be addressed in its proper political, social, and economic context, not in a vacuum detached from the reality of the power structure. Only such an approach can establish linkages, correlations, and even causalities between political and economic failure.

For instance, linkages between failing educational systems and authoritarian state structures become particularly relevant when the problem is analyzed in light of the human development approach. This is also why human development sees democratization and development as a simultaneous process. In other words, it refutes the sequencing argument which argues for development first, democratization later--an approach strongly implied in modernization theory. According to Amartya Sen, democratization should not be detached from economic modernization. Prioritizing one over the other is often bound to produce neither.

The systemic connections between political, economic, and social stagnation have been identified in four excellent Arab Human Development Reports focusing on the democracy, knowledge, and gender deficits. Building on their findings, one can argue that an effective human development expansion the meaning of development in a similar way that relative deprivation broadens the meaning of poverty.
strategy can also go a long way in fighting radicalism, especially if enough attention is paid to relative deprivation. This, in turn, requires prioritizing education and employment opportunities, better governance, and incremental democratization in the Arab world.

**The Case for Fighting Radicalism with Human Development**

The economic and social context within which radicalism takes root is profoundly important. Without societal support, most terrorist and radical movements are doomed to fail. This is why prosperous and democratic countries have an easier time overcoming terrorism compared to impoverished and politically unstable countries, where terrorism tends to become a ‘systemic’ problem. The same argument can be made about civil war. What we know about the causes of civil wars can be very instructive for our analysis of human development and radicalism. In an excellent World Bank study on the root causes of civil wars, it is argued that “Countries with low, stagnant, and unequally distributed per capita income that have remained dependent on primary commodities for their exports face dangerously high risks of prolonged conflict. In the absence of economic development neither good political institutions, nor ethnic and religious homogeneity, nor high military spending provide significant defenses against large-scale violence.”

These factors should help us realize that unfavorable socioeconomic dynamics can degenerate into political violence and perpetuate a vicious cycle of radicalism, terrorism, and civil war. At the very least, such problems create an environment where radicalism and political violence find social acceptance. While radicalism and terrorism result from many interrelated causes, it has recently become popular to argue that the root causes of radicalism are unrelated to economic deprivation and a lack of education. The argument that poverty and a lack of education are unrelated to political violence and radicalism is based on a fallacy that can be summarized in the following way: Terrorists do not tend to come from the poorest elements of the population; instead, they are often relatively well educated and above average in terms of income. Thus, individual poverty is not by itself the primary factor that disposes people to terrorism, and therefore, reducing poverty or improving education will not seriously reduce terrorism. The most common objection comes in the form of the familiar argument about the September 11 terrorist attacks: 15 of the 19 hijackers came from Saudi Arabia, perceived as one of the wealthiest countries of the Middle East. If poverty and a lack of education were to produce terrorism, it is often argued, most terrorists would come from the poorest countries in the Arab world or from sub-Saharan Africa.

The argument that socioeconomic deprivation is unrelated to radicalism and terrorism is erroneous for a number of reasons. First, the argument is based on a very narrow and exclusive focus on ‘elite’ terrorist leaders. As terrorism expert Judy Barsalou points out: “Effective terrorist groups rely on a division of labor between young and uneducated ‘foot soldiers’ and ideo-
logically trained and well-funded elite operatives. In Pakistan, the former are often plucked from madaris.11 It is therefore important to acknowledge that while terrorist leaders tend to come from professional classes, the foot soldiers are often poor and uneducated. One should also not be confused by the fact that at the highest level, the implementation of terrorist activity requires proficient organizational skills and sophistication. The poorest and least educated masses can be recruited and radicalized by terrorist masterminds. Yet, they would make ineffective terrorists in a complex operation. Indeed, the more complex an operation is, the greater security risks it entails, and the more likely the participants are to be elite—the result of a careful screening process. All these factors only reinforce the importance of addressing the question of relative deprivation, frustrated achievers, and radicalism as a social milieu.

The second point with regard to the link between socioeconomic deprivation and radicalism is the fact that terrorist organizations usually seek failing or failed states—which are often poor—in which to set up shop. This is why failed states in Asia and Africa—such as Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia, and Sierra Leone—easily turn into terrorist havens and are often engulfed in a vicious cycle of civil war, political violence, and radicalism. As Susan Rice points out, “these states provide convenient operational bases and safe havens for international terrorists. Terrorist organizations take advantage of failing states’ porous borders, of their weak and non-existent law enforcement and security services, and of their ineffective judicial institutions to move men, weapons, and money around the globe.”12 Especially in the wake of September 11, the problem of failed states gained a sense of immediacy and importance that transcends its previous humanitarian dimension. In fact, since the early 1990s, wars in and among failed states have killed about eight million people, most of them civilians, and displaced another four million.13 The number of those impoverished, malnourished, and deprived of fundamental needs such as security, health care, and education has totaled in the hundreds of millions. Is the fact that failed states are feared as breeding grounds of instability and mass-murder, as well as reservoirs and exporters of terror, not evidence enough of social and economic problems leading to increasing global terrorism?

From Somalia to Afghanistan, from Mali to Yemen, from Chechnya to the Pakistani Federally Administered Tribal Areas and to the Philippine island of Mindanao, ungoverned spaces often attract terrorist networks that use these territories for two major purposes: (1) as a staging ground for international attacks, and (2) to recruit uneducated and impoverished young men with no prospects.14 Even in relatively wealthier Arab states with high-income disparities like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Morocco, Tunisia, and Lebanon, pockets of poverty are fertile grounds for terrorist recruiters. For that matter, even among those who perpetrated the 9/11 attacks, we are more likely to look at the leadership (Osama bin Laden or Muhammad Atta) rather than the foot soldiers who are detained at the Guantánamo Bay naval base. Moreover, if we look at all those who seized the planes on 9/11, rather than just Atta, neither prosperity nor education was their
hallmark. Observers have focused on the fact that the vast majority came from Saudi Arabia, a country endowed with oil riches. However, outsiders tend to mistakenly see Saudi Arabia as a ‘rich country,’ rather than the most indebted society in the Middle East, a country with an unofficial unemployment rate of 20 percent, and a place that still has villages without water and electricity. Indeed, three of the hijackers were ‘Alghamdi’—a name that indicates that they did not even have a respectable tribal origin, and thus had a low social status within their country.

Similarly, the Islamic Combatant Group (GICM), a Moroccan Jihadist organization, recruited mainly unemployed and uneducated young men from the slums of Casablanca. These recruits would later carry out simultaneous bombing attacks in their home city in May 2003, killing 45 people. Three of the masterminds of the 2004 Madrid train bombings were also Moroccan nationals who grew up in shantytowns. Even in Lebanon, a country deeply polarized along sectarian lines, the radical Shi’ite group Hezbollah, and Sunni Jihadist organizations like Fatah al Islam, draw their main support from socioeconomically deprived segments of society. In that sense, what we should really be focusing on is not the decision of this or that individual (particularly not leaders such as Bin Laden, who are highly atypical even in their own movements) to become a terrorist. Rather, we should be looking at the social conditions that make dissident movements more likely to turn to terror and—more importantly—the circumstances under which such dissident movements receive popular support. Such an approach may also provide us with invaluable keys with which to distinguish between the limited success of a terrorist like Timothy McVeigh—who was met with no popular support—and the broad backing that Osama Bin Laden and al Qaeda enjoy. When thinking about terrorism, we have to remind ourselves that it is primarily within a troubled and desperate social, economic, and cultural environment that the engineers of terrorism can freely recruit and operate, thus causing greater dangers to global society.

Finally, the assumption that radicalism is unrelated to education and development is based on the failure to distinguish between education and indoctrination. This requires a critical examination of a recent study that gained academic respectability by arguing that Palestinian radicalism and terrorism is unrelated to economic deprivation and a lack of education. The Krueger-Maleckova study, which suggests that having a secondary school or higher education is positively associated with participation in the Hezbollah or Hamas, mistakenly imposes a generalized image of edu-

Outsiders tend to see Saudi Arabia as a ‘rich country,’ rather than the most indebted society in the Middle East with an unofficial unemployment rate of 20 percent and villages without water and electricity.
icated radicals. Before reaching sweeping generalizations about economic deprivation, a lack of education, and radicalism, as this study attempts, it is important to remember that the context within which radicalism occurs has crucial implications. Instead of looking at the connection between radicalism and education in a broader global context—for instance, by including case studies of Jihad-oriented Madrassahs in Pakistan—this study is solely confined to Palestinian radicalism. 18

Even though the study points out that many of the suicide bombers were educated, it fails to account for the kind of educational system these terrorists were subject to. The study reveals its own problematic nature by pointing out that “one fifth of the sample was schooled in the Hezbollah education system.” 19 These individuals have not been part of a positivist education system. As in the case of Pakistan’s extremist Madrassahs, what is considered education is instead ideological indoctrination.

**Human Development Assistance and Conditionality**

Change in the Arab and Islamic world towards better governance and human development will essentially come from within. Yet, outside actors such as the United States, the European Union, and Japan can also help by increasing and coordinating their financial assistance for human development in the Islamic world. The coordination of U.S foreign assistance to the greater Middle East with the European Union's Barcelona Process and Japan’s assistance programs will assure the pooling of funds into one budget. If managed effectively, such budget coordination can significantly improve the effectiveness of assistance by avoiding duplication and putting more resources in critical areas such as rural literacy, labor productivity, and microcredit programs linked to technical training.

Such increased assistance, however, should be granted with stricter conditionality for institutional reforms. In other words, increased foreign economic assistance to Muslim states like Egypt, Yemen, Pakistan, and Morocco should be presented as an incentive for domestic political reforms. The ownership of reform should be located in these countries. No attempt should be made to impose reforms. But foreign assistance should be conditional on institutional reforms. A common mistake of the past has been to accept cosmetic changes as signs of modernization or democratization. This time the effort needs to go beyond the creation of NGOs and civil society organizations that can easily be co-opted by repressive national governments. The criteria should be institutional changes promoting better governance, political participation, and human development.

The reason civil society promotion or income per capita growth has not led to genuine political change in the Arab world is because state institutions never had to change. The organizations, arrangements, laws, decrees, and regulations that constitute the political rules remain stagnant in most parts of the Arab world. Rather than opening the system by providing transparency, accountability, and political rights—giving citizens a voice and a stake in the system—Arab political institutions tended to limit
political participation and individual freedom. As previously mentioned, these repressive measures drove political opposition to the mosques and fueled political Islam and radicalism. This is why conditionality in foreign assistance should focus on institutions that will promote not only socioeconomic growth but also political rights and liberties. This, in short, is the essence of a new strategy that will fight radicalism with human development. Such conditionality, in practice, will have to consider progress in areas such as constitutional reform, freedom of the press, the formation of political parties, and a domestically determined calendar for free and fair elections in the medium to long run.

There is obviously no simple blueprint for good political liberalization and democratization. Yet, good governance seldom takes root in the absence of social and economic development. Across a wide range of studies and a great variety of samples, time periods, and statistical methods, the level of socioeconomic development continues to be the single most powerful predictor of the likelihood of democratization. Particularly when it comes to the crucial question of the ‘sustainability’ of democracy, the level of socioeconomic development is an even stronger determinant.

American foreign policy urgently needs alternative strategies to address radicalism in the Islamic world. The new approach should seek to promote democratization, security, and economic development in a comprehensive and harmonious framework. Ultimately, America’s success against radicalism and terrorism will not depend on winning wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but in promoting non-military policies that will strengthen the institutional underpinning of human development in the Islamic world.

Notes


