

# The causes of terrorism

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## Abstract

*Terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 and after intensified concerns about a global Jihad and other forms of terrorism, and renewed calls to better understand its causes or roots. There have been divergent views on this question, and terrorism has been argued to be caused by increased poverty, rapid urbanization, declining traditional authority, globalization, and so forth. These differences, reflecting philosophical, religious, political and other differences, are not merely academic; they can affect our understanding of both the threat and of responses to terrorism. This article provides an analytic framework for understanding the limits to understanding the causes of terrorism, identifying what can be known about causation and assessing counterterrorism implications.*

## 1. Introduction

The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the subsequent terrorist bombings in Casablanca, Istanbul, Riyadh, Madrid, London, Mumbai and elsewhere have intensified concerns about the terrorist threat and renewed calls to better understand the causes of terrorism. These attacks are in some ways unprecedented, and ultimately raise the question of the roots or causes of terrorism. Historically and today, there have been divergent views on this question, which reflect philosophical, religious, political and other differences.

Terrorism is too complex and diverse a phenomenon to speak easily of causes. But we may be able to discern underlying conditions, factors contributing to the risks of terrorism and perhaps even the causes of specific acts. Our response to terrorism will be affected by our understanding of their causes, as well as by possible political requirements to address widespread perceptions of causes. Addressing causes (real and perceived) may not be possible and will not in any case end terrorism, and addressing the wrong causes can be counterproductive. Response to emerging threats will be affected by the understanding of terrorism's causes, including actions to reduce conditions that create terrorist support and aid recruitment. For this reason alone, we must do everything possible to understand the reasons terrorism may be undertaken, including the attacks of September 11 and those in its aftermath. This article provides an analytic framework for understanding the limits to understanding the causes of

## Keywords

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- 1 The views expressed are those of the author, and not of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, the National Nuclear Security Administration, the Department of Energy, the Wilson Center or any other organization.

2 Determining the causes of terrorism depends on the definition of terrorism; a common definition has proven elusive, as the phrase 'one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter' suggests. Not only is there is no agreed general definition of terrorism, the term is laden with ideological, political and moral baggage. However, there has been some convergence on this matter in recent years, especially since 9/11.

terrorism, identifying what can be known about causation and assessing counterterrorism implications.

## 2. Assessing the roots of terrorism

The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon gave impetus to a debate over terrorism in the United States that has continued and spread widely as global Jihadis continue to attack targets throughout the world. Immediately after 9/11, many foreign newspapers and other media blamed the attacks, at least in part, on the United States and its policies. The US news media questioned, somewhat naively: 'Why do they hate us?' Such reactions, after 9/11, resulted in a chorus of calls to get to the roots or causes of terrorism.

Despite this renewed interest in, and continuing debate on, causes, terrorism is a tactic or instrument that appears to a significant extent to be independent of the objectives it has been designed to advance. It can, in principle, be used to promote virtually any objectives. We have seen terrorism undertaken under the banners of nationalism, ethnicity, left- and right-wing ideologies, religion and single issues such as abortion and animal rights. Most recently, the objectives put forward by terrorists (when they choose to do so at all) appear vaguer than in earlier decades, and may involve only punishment or revenge.

Reflecting its instrumental nature and the objectives to which it may be associated, the roots of terrorism are, in principle, boundless.<sup>2</sup> According to one expert (Jenkins 1988), the potential causes of terrorism include:

rising population; increased poverty and scarcity; racial tension; inflation and unemployment; increased tension between the have and have-not nations; waves of refugees shoved about by wars and repression; immigrants moving from poorer states to wealthier ones, often bringing them the conflicts of their home country, sometimes causing resentment among native citizens; rapid urbanization; the disintegration of traditional authority structures; the emergence of single-issue groups, the rise of aggressive fundamentalist religions groups or religious cults.

If anything can potentially cause terrorism, can one identify its real causes? Is it even relevant to seek its causes? Behind these questions lies another: Should an act of violence be praised or condemned, accepted or opposed, on the basis of perceptions of its cause?

From this perspective, differences over causes are not merely academic, as they can affect our understanding of both the threat and responses to terrorism.

Considering the causes of terrorism is difficult and has often confused the issues of terrorism and counterterrorism. To speak of its causes is frequently seen as or intended to be a justification or rationale for terrorism. But no cause can justify an act of terrorism, and removing causes, if possible at all, will not eliminate terrorism although they could isolate the terrorists,

diminish support for terrorist attacks or drain the pool of potential recruits. For these and other reasons, the quest for the causes is important at multiple levels and no doubt will be pursued by political leaders, pundits and publics. In some cases, there may be a political requirement for the United States and other states confronted with terrorism to demonstrate a concern for getting at the roots of terrorism. Although some putative causes, underlying conditions or motivating factors are so ambiguous or grandiose that they cannot possibly be addressed, a demonstrated effort to deal with widely held perceptions of causes when possible could have value for the pursuit of long-term counterterrorism goals or, in the short term, to maintain counterterrorist coalitions.

Empirical studies have not been able to link terrorism to poverty or any other social, economic, political or psychological factor that may be construed as a cause. (Jenkins 1988; Crenshaw 2003) It appears terrorism is too complex and diverse to be explained on the basis of a single cause or even a set of causes. The commonly held belief that terrorists are 'madmen' is unfounded. There is no evidence of a 'terrorist mind' or 'terrorist personality', or of any psychological factors that directly give rise to terrorism (Post 2006). Indeed, individual psychology is less important than group, organizational and social psychology – which are themselves inadequate – for understanding terrorism (Post 2006). Political discontent, marginalization and alienation are often associated with terrorism, as are religious fanaticism, but they are all insufficient to explain the rise of terrorism in any specific time and locale. Poverty is not a cause of terrorism, nor is it a cause often advocated by terrorists. Structural inequalities on the national and international levels may be underlying conditions or correlates of terrorism, but they are insufficient to explain or predict terrorist attacks. The impacts of globalization, rapid modernization and socioeconomic and cultural disruptions may be associated with the rise of terrorism, and are often exploited by terrorists. However, they do not explain the phenomenon (Roy 2006).

Terrorism occurs in diverse and divergent social, political and economic conditions and needs to be viewed through historical, cultural, demographic, economic, social and political lenses. Terrorist acts and motivations differ among groups and individuals, within and across nations and regions as well as religions. We frequently do not understand the motives of terrorists and the *causes* to which terrorists appeal are often but not always known in specific cases. But these may or may not be the *cause* of their acts or even related to causation.

Even though there is no clear causal link between terrorism and poverty or any other factor or group of factors, certain indicators or correlates of, or conditions conducive to, political violence and terrorism are to some degree at least identifiable. To advance the debate along these lines, it is useful to look at the intersection of factors associated with the possibility or risk of terrorism, including poor governance (especially in failed or failing states), demographic problems (a bulging youth population),

political alienation and despair, religious fanaticism, structural inequalities, and so forth. For example, a US study noted: 'States with poor governance; ethnic, cultural, or religious tensions; weak economies; and porous borders will be prime breeding ground for terrorism' (National Intelligence Council 2002). This move away from causes per se to the conditions that may make terrorism more appealing to a broader group of people appears to have some merit. But it remains difficult in practice and does not by itself make a significant contribution to explanatory or predictive capabilities. Within these limits, how useful are such indicators? If they are evident in a society or region, terrorists may or may not appear. In areas where these conditions do not exist, again terrorism may or may not appear.

Although prospects are modest, and the search for causes will no doubt continue, looking to ameliorate the conditions in which terrorism thrives is an important goal in the counterterrorism context. But this still begs the question of what *are* the conditions that foster terrorism. If, for example, one believes that terrorism has political roots, that it emerges in certain political conditions such as ethnic or nationalistic conflict, to combat it requires changing the political conditions from which it emerged. Democracy is frequently held out as the solution in this context. There may be specific actions that can be effective in reducing the appeal of terrorism, including resolution of long-standing regional conflicts. If one believes terrorism thrives amid poverty, economic growth and development is central to a solution. Such reasoning applies to all putative causes.

As noted, the search for causes is not merely academic and influences options for counterterrorism, as will be seen in a discussion of the possible causes of global Jihad, with a focus on 9/11.

### **3. The causes of the global jihad**

The terrorism of global Jihadis is the predominant, most widespread and dangerous form of terrorism today. The discussion of causes is particularly important, although it will not shed substantive light on other forms of terrorism. Of the Jihadi attacks, the most deadly have been the brutal attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001, and the causes or underlying conditions involved are similar albeit not identical to the attacks in Madrid, Bali and other cities in their aftermath.

#### ***3.1. Understanding the attacks of 9/11 and their aftermath***

There has been a great temptation to see the attacks of September 11 in light of the theories of the post-Cold War period. So, it is said, the attacks refute the end of history thesis. Or they prove the validity of the notion of a clash of civilizations. Or they demonstrate that "McWorld" is besieged by the forces of 'Jihad'. Such views shine little light on the issues surrounding causes. More to the point are the analyses that place the causes of, or factors involved in, 9/11 and other attacks by al Qaeda and its affiliates, in the role of radical Islam, in the political grievances expressed by Usama bin Laden and al Qaeda, in poverty or in the notion of the global Jihad as

a backlash against globalization. All of these explanations have received considerable attention and cannot be dismissed. Yet there are problems with each explanation. Let us consider some views.

Richard Dawkins (2001) placed the blame for 9/11 squarely on religion. He declared that the terrorists of September 11 were driven by an 'insane courage' that arose from religion. He continued:

Religion is also, of course, the underlying source of the divisiveness in the Middle East which motivated the use of this deadly weapon in the first place. But that is another story and not my concern here. My concern here is with the weapon itself. To fill a world with religion, or religions of the Abrahamic kind, is like littering the streets with loaded guns. Do not be surprised if they are used.

Is Dawkins correct? Is Islamic radicalism the cause of, or the dominant factor involved in, the global Jihad? It must be stated at the outset that Islam, which is a religion of peace and tolerance, was not the cause. But the terrorists' rhetoric expressed a violent brand of Islamic extremism. In particular, they declared they were acting in the name of God. They decreed the desecration of Islam and its holiest sites by the influence and presence of 'Jews' and 'Crusaders'. They had a dream of a new Caliphate, a fundamentalist Islamic political entity of uncertain geographic scope.

Acting in the name of religion or God – as a rationale – is one thing. But this does not warrant a simplistic assumption of the global Jihad's religious causes. The terrorists may have believed in their variant of Islam, but their supposed religious motivation appears to be political at root in its vision of a new Caliphate extending from Spain to Southeast Asia. This is clear in terms of the religious expression of both political grievances and of political objectives.

If radical Islam is not *the* cause of the attacks, and this motivation is inextricably tied up with politics, what of the political agenda of the terrorists? Does *it* explain 9/11? Zbigniew Brzezinski (2002) argued that 'it is the emotional context of felt, observed or historically recounted political grievances that shapes the fanatic pathology of terrorists and eventually triggers their murderous actions'. On this basis, the attacks were more political than religious. For Brzezinski, 'American involvement in the Middle East is clearly the main impulse of the hatred that has been directed against America'.

From a very different perspective, Susan Sontag (2001) makes a similar point. She questioned: 'Where is the acknowledgement that this was not a "cowardly" attack on "civilization" or "liberty" or "humanity" or "the free world" but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions? How many citizens are aware of the ongoing American bombing of Iraq?' Sontag then declared: 'A lot of thinking needs to be done, and perhaps is being done in Washington and elsewhere, about the ineptitude of American intelligence and counter-intelligence, about options available

to American foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, and about what constitutes a smart program of military defense’.

These views are reflected in statements by the terrorists themselves. Usama bin Laden and al Qaeda criticized US policy in the aftermath of the Gulf War, opposing deployed forces in Saudi Arabia and sanctions on Iraq. US support for Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was also attacked (Bin Laden 1998). Moreover, the terrorists opposed US support for the regimes in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which are viewed as repressive and anti-Islamic by al Qaeda, as well as US wealth and power and perceived US arrogance and hostility to Islam.

These issues are serious. They are of concern to the United States and to the world (at one level). They are of special concern to Usama bin Laden’s targeted audience and perhaps to the terrorists themselves (although they only began speaking of the plight of the Palestinians in the late 1990s). Many in the Islamic world responded positively to this reasoning, if not also to the attacks. However, world leaders, including those from Islamic states, have rejected this rationale. Moreover, as resolving these issues through terrorism or other means seems highly unlikely, questions about their role in motivating the terrorist actions are raised.

Realistic or not, were they the cause of, or the dominant factor involved in, 9/11 – or only an element of the landscape in which the attacks occurred? If these were the true causes of 9/11, it would mean that changes in US policy would have been sufficient to shut down al Qaeda’s operations. This appears hardly credible. In this context, Usama bin Laden stated his grievances, but did not make specific demands or issue ultimatums related to these matters or to any others. Punishment or revenge for these grievances is a more credible rationale, but the hatred of the United States goes well beyond specific criticism of policies. In the end, it is not particularly useful to ascribe the brutal attacks of September 11 exclusively, or primarily, to the terrorists’ opposition to US Middle East policy.

According to Lakshman Kadirgamar (2001), Sri Lanka’s Minister of Foreign Affairs: ‘If the world has become a village surely we must take care to ensure that villagers living down one road in the village are not given cause to become resentful and angry at the opulence enjoyed by other villagers living down another road, only a stone’s throw away’. In search for causes, he noted the need to ‘revisit and readdress the old questions that have haunted the United Nations ever since it was born—the questions of poverty, hunger, disease, ignorance, injustice’. Yet, his focus is on poverty. He states: ‘neither we in the developing world nor those in the developed world can allow abject, desperate poverty, without any hope of a better future, to become a fertile field for those who wish to fan the flames of discord and hate and make it their business to wreak death and destruction and terror and mayhem’. However, poverty is not one of the grievances emphasized by Usama bin Laden or others, and the terrorists responsible for 9/11 and subsequent attacks were not poor. But, in this case and others, such explanations probably reveal elements of the truth (in some cases a profound insight) and the issues raised are real.

Are the attacks then a backlash to globalization? They may appear to be a reflection of resentment towards what Edward Said called 'bewildering interdependence'. In this light, the terrorists reject the complex, multi-dimensional social, political, economic and cultural realities of a globalized world from which they seek to retreat but cannot. As Salman Rushdie (2001) said of the terrorists:

Such people are against, to offer just a brief list, freedom of speech, a multi-party political system, universal adult suffrage, accountable government, Jews, homosexuals, women's rights, pluralism, secularism, short skirts, dancing, beardlessness, evolution theory, sex.

These views may be seen to reflect Rushdie's personal trials, but they are more widely held in the Islamic world and outside. Other commentators from the Islamic world have not suffered as Rushdie did, could also be mentioned.

Indeed, Usama bin Laden himself has in his rhetoric suggested the value of this perspective on the attacks. In a post 9/11 *al-Jazeera* interview (that was run in part by CNN), CNN reported that bin Laden called the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon 'great on all levels . . . Those awesome, symbolic towers that speak of liberty, human rights and humanity have been destroyed. They have gone up in smoke'.

So following Usama bin Laden's views, Rushdie and others – implicitly or explicitly – see the terrorists as driven by a rejection of market capitalism and democracy and the values they share, notably freedom, in the real world of the early twenty-first century. This is a rejection of modernism by minds rooted in the Middle Ages. This vision has been furthered over the last decades by the *madrastas*.

With all its complex roots and dimensions, this perception of the world is ultimately a rejection of globalization. And the global Jihadis are opposed to globalization. Globalization is seen among critics in the West (anti-globalization movement) as an enemy of social progress – the cause of poverty – and the enemy of literacy, cultural autonomy, diversity, gender, equality, environment, and so forth. In other parts of the world, globalization is hated as the *engine of social progress* with a corrosive effect in traditional politics and religion.

The arguments for considering 9/11 and other attacks as a direct attack on the forces of globalization are sound. But, as some critics of this view note, rather than an attack on globalization, 9/11 was an attack on the United States as a consequence of its policies, power and opulence. Attacks in Madrid and London, for example, could be seen as attacks on US allies supporting its policies. The critics may even admit that it was an assault on modernity by traditional forces, but that globalization and Western 'contamination' were of secondary importance in their thinking. These arguments have a point, but they are overdrawn. The United States was indeed attacked, but there were reported plans to attack other targets, some not directly related to the United States. Usama bin Laden stated on

one occasion the attack was not against the United States but against the 'global crusaders'. Of course, the United States is seen by the terrorists as the primary 'crusader' and the 'crusade' is driven by globalization. The United States is seen to be the principal force behind, and beneficiary of, globalization. Globalization is to some degree Americanization, and the World Trade Center is a symbol of globalization (as Usama bin Laden admitted and nearly all believe).

These and other attempts to explain 9/11 to a certain extent cover the causes ascribed to or factors associated with later terrorist attacks by global Jihadis, although perhaps not certain case-specific factors such as the role of diaspora communities in the West. They are clearly insufficient analytically in terms of understanding the global Jihad. If these interpretations of the causes of, or the factors involved in, 9/11 as well as the broader global Jihad are seen as competing hypotheses, their inherent limitations are then set in stone. They may be better viewed as parts of a more complex reality, in which all the so-called 'causes' are seen as underlying conditions or factors in determining the risks of terrorism. In either context, it is important to understand that not all contribute equally to revealing the roots of terrorism.

### ***3.2. Responding to the global Jihad***

Differences over such interpretations can affect our understanding of both the threat and of appropriate responses to terrorism by global Jihadis in the aftermath of September 11. Such differences can also affect international cooperation in counterterrorism. For example, the new war on terrorism – the response of the United States and a wide-ranging coalition to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon – has not been able to agree on the full range of counterterrorism measures. As a result cooperation has been broad and strong on some issues but limited and weak on others. Moreover, these differences are responsible for the war being viewed by some as a 'clash of civilizations' between the West and the Muslim world, or as the end of the post-Cold War period with its assumptions of a triumphant and secure West riding the crest of globalization. These differences have also led to comparisons between this new form of warfare and the Cold War as great global and ideological struggles that will define foreign and defence policy for decades to come.

What are we engaged in, and how does it relate to our understanding of causes? The war on terrorism is being undertaken as a response to the attacks, and the military actions in Afghanistan and elsewhere as well as other elements of the near-term response would be necessary whatever the causes of the action. As the terrorist attack of September 11 involved asymmetric warfare against the United States, it was necessary to defend the country. Without a forceful response, including military action, the United States would have increased its vulnerability. Beyond initial US actions, the understanding of causes or contributing factors matters, especially in the long term, to guide a strategy (military and non-military) that

responds in a manner that dissuades, deters and defeats this form of warfare. Indeed, considerations of causes are driven by the need to act against an elusive enemy.

If one believes terrorism is a manifestation of religious hatred or rage, the promotion of dialogue and toleration, interfaith contacts and education and other such efforts may offer a long-term solution. But, in the near term, moderate religious leaders need to denounce terrorism and terrorists believed to be driven by religious extremism must be marginalized and defeated.

If the global Jihad is the consequence of the political marginalization and alienation of Muslim youth, the long-term answer may be democracy. Short-term responses would focus on defeating the terrorists.

If 9/11 was caused by US Middle East policies, the response should involve a review of those policies as well as of public diplomacy. In any event, widespread perceptions that this is the case will need to be addressed. US policies have been examined and debated since 9/11. However, it is not possible to see fundamental changes of the kind implied by bin Laden's rhetoric. Moreover, if some modest changes do occur, they could be seen as a victory for al Qaeda, which is potentially counterproductive. This possibility must be addressed in any serious policy review. The same logic applies to other states, including Pakistan, Spain and the United Kingdom, that have been attacked by al Qaeda or terrorists inspired by the network. If their support for US policies, or their own, resulted in the attacks they suffered, a policy review is in order.

What if global Jihad is a backlash to globalization? It will be important in this case to think anew about the nature and impact of globalization. In practical terms, this will require concrete efforts to address anti-globalization sentiment and its roots. Beyond ideology, the appeal of anti-globalization was enhanced by the fact that during the 1990s – the West's decade of peace and prosperity driven by globalization – many developing states experienced declining socio-economic conditions and violence at all levels of the conflict spectrum.

Globalization itself is probably not primarily responsible for these problems, even though it did not have as strong a political diversion as an economic one in the past decade and earlier. Clearly, it is widely believed those promoting globalization did not do enough to address these issues. Globalization has not served all the peoples of the world equally well in economic terms and has certainly contributed to cultural alienation and the sense of humiliation in the Islamic world, including Diaspora communities within the West.

There is a need to address the cultural as well as the economic impact of globalization. Economically, improving the effectiveness of development banks in raising living standards, opening societies to commerce and investment, securing public health, targeted trade preferences, development aid tied to good governance and other ways to transform globalization's 'losers' is a necessary but difficult task. In the cultural realm, promoting multicultural education, cultural exchanges and intercultural tolerance is essential in the long term.

If one takes a simplistic view of causes, one is led to a simplistic and narrow set of counterterrorism options rather than complex, multifaceted responses that reflect the real nature of the terrorist threat. Considering the integration of all conditions and factors that are associated with the risk of terrorism in specific national, regional and global contexts offers a richer, more comprehensive approach to counterterrorism. Such an approach involves the need to rethink the possibility of establishing new precepts of international order in the midst of global Jihadi attacks and the responsive actions they initiated, as well as for managing multicultural and multiethnic states/societies and their interactivities. Can we build upon the mutual reciprocal interests in conducting the current war and meeting future challenges?

Today, one of the great dangers we confront comes from failed states, and the sub-national and transnational terrorism that they breed and harbour. The political requirements for addressing these dangers are immense and involve areas such as development, debt relief, cultural conflict resolution, trade and immigration policies, and so forth. All of these issues have become in some ways more intractable in the aftermath of 9/11 and the global reach of the Jihadis, and other problems and new threats will no doubt emerge. To pursue such a comprehensive agenda, we will have to think in terms that extend far beyond the requirements of the current war on terrorism. The prospects for success are not certain – but they do exist. US post-9/11 leadership will be critical, but international cooperation is essential. If such cooperation is to be forthcoming, it will require that differences over responses, driven by divergent views of causes, will have to be resolved.

The Bush Administration's national security strategy embodies elements of a broader approach to combating terrorism and other threats. Beyond its promulgation of counterterrorism, nonproliferation and counterproliferation policies, it states:

The U.S. national security strategy will be based on a distinctly American internationalism that reflects the union of our values and our national interests. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better. Our goals on the path to progress are clear: political and economic freedom, peaceful relations with other states, and respect for human dignity. The aim of this strategy is to help make the world not just safer but better. Our goals on the path to progress are clear: political and economic freedom, peaceful relations with other states, and respect for human dignity. And this path is not America's alone. It is open to all.

(US White House 2002)

#### **4. Conclusion**

Terrorism is too complex and diverse a phenomenon to speak easily of causes. But we may be able to discern underlying conditions, factors contributing to the risks of terrorism and perhaps even the causes of specific

acts. Even if one could identify causes, they do not justify terrorism. Nothing can justify the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, on Madrid trains, on the London subway or any of the other attacks by global Jihadis around the world. But our response to global Jihad and other forms of terrorism will be affected by our understanding of its causes, as well as by possible political requirements to address widespread perceptions of causes. Some elements of effective counterterrorist responses are not at all tied to causes, but others (especially long-term responses) depend on as clear as possible an assessment of terrorism. Our response to global Jihad and other acts of terrorism will be affected by our understanding of their causes, as well as by possible political requirements to address widespread perceptions of causes. Addressing causes (real and perceived) may not be possible and will not in any case end terrorism, and addressing the wrong causes can be counterproductive. If we see the global Jihad as caused by Islamic radicalism or by US or Western Middle East policies, or as a backlash against globalization, the responses we develop will reflect these perceptions. If we look more broadly at the underlying conditions of terrorism and the factors associated with the risk of terrorism in their complex, multifaceted relations, the resulting policies and actions that combat the terrorists while ameliorating the conditions that create support for terrorism and aid its recruitment will be the basis of a truly responsive and effective counterterrorism strategy.

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