

PERSON OF INTEREST: ALAN KRUEGER

Terrorist an uncommon criminal

By John Crewdson

a Chicago Tribune senior correspondent

Published July 15, 2007

Alan Krueger, the Bendheim professor of economics and public affairs at Princeton University, corresponded with the Tribune last week about the recent terrorist plots in Britain. Krueger's new book, "What Makes a Terrorist: Economics and the Roots of Terrorism," will be published in August.

Q Are you surprised that all the suspects arrested in connection with the attempted bombings in London and the attack on the Glasgow airport are highly educated and accomplished -- several physicians, a PhD engineer and a hospital laboratory technician?

A No. Although terrorists come from varied backgrounds, much research finds that they are disproportionately well-educated and from middle-class or higher-income families. Engineers and doctors, in fact, are probably the two most common professions among terrorists.

Q How do you account for the fact that so many intelligent, well-educated people have turned toward terrorism?

A With the possible exception of Northern Ireland, terrorists have come from more privileged backgrounds than the general population over the world. ... I suspect that this is the case because people join terrorist causes because they are committed to the goals of the organizations.

Q Where did the notion originate that most terrorists were poor and ill-educated and that poverty and lack of education has driven them to embrace terrorism? Why does it persist?

A I suggest in my book that the misconception that terrorists are people who attack us because they are desperately poor and uneducated is popular because it provides an easy answer. In addition, many world leaders have endorsed this mistaken notion because it furthers their ends and enables them to avoid confronting the true sources of terrorists' discontents.

Q We have been told repeatedly that poverty and lack of education are the root causes of crime in this country. Isn't terrorism just another crime, and why do the demographics of terrorism seem to show the reverse?

A Terrorism is not like property crime, where people with few alternatives are more likely to commit such crimes. Instead, a better analogy is to voting or political protest. Terrorists are typically using violent means to make a political statement or pursue a political agenda. Who votes? People who are well-educated and employed. It is easier for well-educated people to learn about various issues, and sometimes this leads them to adopt extreme views.

Q The Bush administration's position is that terrorists "hate" the U.S., and in particular hate "our democratic values and freedoms." Is that what motivates terrorists?

A I think this is an overly simple explanation that is not supported by the evidence. I think it is more likely that terrorists hate U.S. policies or military dominance, not our constitutional freedoms and lifestyle.

Q Are most terrorist acts "imported" from one country to another, and is this a legitimate focus for official concern?

A Most terrorism is local, arising from purely domestic concerns and involving local perpetrators and victims. Even international terrorist events are typically local. It is rare for people from one country to travel to another country to attack its people. This is one reason why Sept. 11 was an extremely unusual event. A more common type of terrorist event is Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichol's bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City -- domestic perpetrators and domestic victims.

Q There seems to be a considerable amount of terrorism-related data available from sources like the U.S. State Department. Is the Bush administration employing that same data in crafting its defenses against another 9/11-type attack?

A Not as far as I can tell. I often feel that we are waging a "data-free war on terrorism." The State Department lacks expertise -- and, quite frankly, interest -- in performing impartial analysis of terrorism. Now that the National Counterterrorism Center is responsible for collecting the data I think that the situation is beginning to improve, but there is still a tremendous lack of interest and expertise in the U.S. government when it comes to impartially evaluating data on terrorism.

Q Has any group ever won significant political gains from a terrorist campaign?

A Terrorist groups that lack popular support to advance their cause by legitimate means often face long odds to achieve their goals. But there have been cases when terrorism led groups to advance their agenda. The difficult thing for many terrorist organizations is to know when to abandon terrorism and turn to other tactics and become a legitimate political organization. This is a problem that Yassir Arafat never fully overcame, to the great suffering of the Palestinian people.

jcrewatson@tribune.com