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5 Myths About Terrorism

By Alan B. Krueger

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Six years after 9/11, all too many Americans still have only a vague idea of what does -- and doesn't -- motivate terrorists. It doesn't help that many politicians exploit the anxiety that terrorism evokes to promote their own agendas. Here are five key urban legends:

1. Terrorism is a random act carried out by irrational people who hate our way of life.

If only it were that simple. In fact, terrorists are typically motivated by geopolitical grievances, not blind hatred. The agendas of individual terrorist groups vary, but their tactical goal is always more or less the same: to sow fear and confusion by deliberately targeting civilians in order to intimidate a country into changing its policies and ways.

So political calculations are key here. Citizens of countries that occupy other countries, for example, are more likely to be targeted by terrorists. In addition, wealthy democracies are more likely to be the targets of terrorist strikes than are totalitarian regimes, which suggests that terrorists deliberately strike countries that are susceptible to public pressure.

Another reason not to see terrorist attacks as random: They're often timed to occur when they can have maximum impact, such as the eve of pivotal elections. In Israel, for example, attacks by Palestinian terrorist groups bent on sabotaging peace talks are more frequent before elections when left-wing governments hold power, in hopes of pushing Israeli voters in a more hawkish direction, according to research by Claude Berrebi of the Rand Corporation and Esteban F. Klor of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

There's even a cold logic to the time of day that terrorists pick for their attacks, which also suggests a rhythm that's far from random. My analysis of U.S. government data from the National Counterterrorism Center reveals that terrorists are most likely to strike in the morning -- in time to enter the day's news cycle.

2. Terrorists are no different than ordinary criminals.

Wrong. Criminals tend to be poor and uneducated. But terrorists tend to come from families with above-average means and are often well-educated. For example, Jitka Maleckova of the Russell Sage Foundation and I found that members of the military wing of the radical Shiite group Hezbollah who were killed in action in the 1980s and early 1990s were better educated and less likely to be poor than their Lebanese countrymen. Other researchers have found similar results for other terrorist groups. People who join terrorist organizations often have legitimate, well-paying jobs, unlike common criminals.

3. Terrorists are likely to cross into the United States from Mexico.

This is a favorite chestnut of some activists and politicians keen to tighten immigration and build a fence on the Mexican border. But the historical record doesn't bear it out. Of course, the past may not be a good predictor of the future, but terrorists have rarely crossed into the United States from Mexico. In a recent Nixon Center study of 373 Islamist terrorists, Robert Leiken and Steven Brooke concluded: "Despite widespread alarms raised over terrorist infiltration from Mexico, we found no terrorist presence in Mexico and no terrorists who entered the U.S. from Mexico." By contrast, the authors found "a sizeable terrorist presence in Canada and a number of Canadian-based terrorists who have entered the U.S." For example, Ahmed Ressam, the Algerian terrorist who tried to blow up Los Angeles International Airport in December 1999, was caught trying to cross the border from Canada into Washington state.

4. Terrorism is mainly perpetrated by Muslims.

Wrong. No religion has a monopoly on terrorism. Every major religious faith has had followers involved in terrorism. (Sri Lanka, for instance, has grappled for decades with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, a separatist group that pioneered suicide bombing as a terrorist tactic and hopes to create a homeland for the country's mostly Tamil minority, who are largely Hindu.) Although radical Islamic terrorists are the worry du jour because of 9/11 and Iraq, the data show pretty clearly that the predominant religion of a country is not a good predictor of whether its people will become involved in terrorism.

After all, it was not long ago that homegrown villains such as Timothy McVeigh and the so-called Unabomber were the most notorious terrorists. That makes sense; the vast majority of terrorist incidents are local, motivated by local concerns and carried out by natives. Even international terrorist events tend to be local affairs, most frequently carried out by local militants who target foreigners who happen to be in their country. (Just think of last week's foiled plot to attack U.S. targets in Germany.) This suggests that the likelihood of attack by homegrown terrorists is far greater than the threat of another 9/11-style attack by foreigners.

5. Terrorism never succeeds.

If terrorism didn't work, it would be far more rare than it now is. Sometimes terrorists do achieve their goals, which is why others continue to try the tactic.

Of course, it's not always easy to determine what the terrorists' objectives are, but sometimes their goals are pretty clear. Consider the devastating commuter-rail bombings in Madrid in March 2005, three days before Spain held congressional elections. The Islamic radicals who set off the bombs reportedly hoped to change the Spanish government. It worked. A new study by Jose Garcia Matalvo, an economist at Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona, compared absentee ballots cast before the bombings with votes cast after them on a province-by-province level. His work convincingly shows that

the shock of the bombings led the Socialist Party to defeat the incumbent conservative government. Upon assuming power, the Socialist Party immediately withdrew Spanish troops from Iraq.

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