

CAPITAL

By DAVID WESSEL

Princeton Economist Says Lack of Civil Liberties, Not Poverty, Breeds Terrorism July 5, 2007; Page A2

When Princeton economist Alan Krueger saw reports that seven of eight people arrested in the unsuccessful car bombings in Britain were doctors, he wasn't shocked. He wasn't even surprised.

"Each time we have one of these attacks and the backgrounds of the attackers are revealed, this should put to rest the myth that terrorists are attacking us because they are desperately poor," he says. "But this misconception doesn't die."

Less than a year after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, President Bush said, "We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror." A couple of months later, his wife, Laura, said, "Educated children are much more likely to embrace the values that defeat terror." Former World Bank President James Wolfensohn has argued, "The war on terrorism will not be won until we have come to grips with the problem of poverty, and thus the sources of discontent."

The analysis is plausible. It's appealing because it bolsters the case for the worthy goals of fighting poverty and ignorance. But systematic study -- to the extent possible -- suggests it's wrong.

"As a group, terrorists are better educated and from wealthier families than the typical person in the same age group in the societies from which they originate," Mr. Krueger said at the London School of Economics last year in a lecture soon to be published as a book, "What Makes a Terrorist?"

"There is no evidence of a general tendency for impoverished or uneducated people to be more likely to support terrorism or join terrorist organizations than their higher-income, better-educated countrymen," he said. The Sept. 11 attackers were relatively well-off men from a rich country, Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Krueger, 46 years old, is one of those academics whose research extends from the standard fare -- How much more do workers with education earn? What happens to employment when the minimum wage rises? -- to, well, cool stuff. Did Firestone factories produce shoddy tires during a period of labor unrest? (Yes) Are rich people really enjoying life more than the rest of us? (No) Are concert-ticket prices higher for female musicians than males? (Yes)

He began poking around this sordid subject a decade ago when he and a colleague found little connection between economic circumstances and the incidence of violent hate crimes in Germany. Among the statistical pieces of the puzzle a small band of academics have assembled since are these:

- Backgrounds of 148 Palestinian suicide bombers show they were less likely to come from families living in poverty and were more likely to have finished high school than the general population. Biographies of 129 Hezbollah shahids (martyrs) reveal they, too, are less likely to be from poor families than the Lebanese population from which they come. The same goes for available data about an Israeli terrorist organization, Gush Emunim, active in the 1980s.
- Terrorism doesn't increase in the Middle East when economic conditions worsen; indeed, there seems no link. One study finds the number of terrorist incidents is actually higher in countries that spend more on

social-welfare programs. Slicing and dicing data finds no discernible pattern that countries that are poorer or more illiterate produce more terrorists. Examining 781 terrorist events classified by the U.S. State Department as "significant" reveals terrorists tend to come from countries distinguished by political oppression, not poverty or inequality.

- Public-opinion polls from Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan and Turkey find people with more education are more likely to say suicide attacks against Westerners in Iraq are justified. Polls of Palestinians find no clear difference in support for terrorism as a means to achieve political ends between the most and least educated.

Data on which all this relies are hardly perfect: Terrorists don't fill out elaborate questionnaires. Better-off, better-educated individuals could be motivated if not by their own circumstances, then by the conditions of their impoverished countrymen. Interviews of terrorists in Pakistan by Harvard terrorism scholar Jessica Stern reveal recruiters there found the poorest neighborhoods to be the most fertile ground, particularly among those who feel Muslims are humiliated by the West. She says Mr. Krueger and like-minded scholars don't yet have enough evidence to prove anything. "We are only just beginning to do really serious large studies in terrorism," she says.

But the conventional wisdom that poverty breeds terrorism is backed by surprisingly little hard evidence. "The evidence is nearly unanimous in rejecting either material deprivation or inadequate education as an important cause of support for terrorism or of participation in terrorist activities," Mr. Krueger asserts. The 9/11 Commission stated flatly: Terrorism is not caused by poverty.

So what is the cause? Suppression of civil liberties and political rights, Mr. Krueger hypothesizes. "When nonviolent means of protest are curtailed," he says, "malcontents appear to be more likely to turn to terrorist tactics."

Which -- ironically, given that Mr. Krueger is no fan of the president's actual policies at home or abroad -- is close to Mr. Bush's rhetoric: "Liberty has got the capacity to change enemies into allies."

Write to David Wessel at capital@wsj.com, or chat with him about this column in his [online forum](#).

```
var x = document.getElementsByName("pagename")[0]; var st1 = (x == null) ? "" : x.content; var index = (st1 == null) ? "" : st1.indexOf('_'); var articleId = st1.substring(index + 1);
```