

Five years after the reverberations of 9/11
PULL UP TERRORISM BY THE ROOTS
Considering the causes of terror is neither
softheaded idealism nor the appeasement of evil
by Thomas Homer-Dixon
Toronto Globe and Mail
Monday, September 11, 2006

Since 9/11, millions of words have poured from our popular media into our brains about the nature of al-Qaeda, about divisions and discord within the Islamic world, and even about the ingredients for liquid explosives. This torrent of information has enlightened us about terrorism in some ways, but in others it has left us as befuddled as ever. And nothing has confused us more than the question of whether it's worthwhile, or even morally justified, to talk about terrorism's "root" causes.

Are there deep economic, social, political, or psychological causes of terrorism -- things such as economic inequality, militant religious fundamentalism, or feelings of alienation and humiliation -- and, if so, should we discuss them, analyze them, and then try to address them through our domestic and foreign policies?

To many people -- including this paper's editorial board and several of its columnists -- any discussion of root causes is simply an exercise in making excuses for terrorism. It shifts blame from where it should reside -- squarely on the heads of the terrorist perpetrators themselves -- to other people or impersonal external forces. In particular, the claim that the West's foreign policy is the root cause of Islamic terrorism amounts to little more than blaming the victim. At its best, consideration of root causes is softheaded idealism. At its worst, it's appeasement of evil.

In the passion that marks the aftermath of a terrorist attack, such arguments are understandable. But that doesn't make them sensible. In fact, they're downright dangerous. They could deprive us of knowledge and insights that might be decisive in our long-term struggle with terrorism. None other than Hans Morgenthau, one of the architects of the conservative realist school of international relations scholarship, recognized the vital importance of a "respectful understanding" of one's adversaries. "The

political actor," he wrote more than 50 years ago, "must put himself into the other man's shoes, look at the world and judge it as he does."

To argue against analysis and discussion of root causes is to argue for blind ignorance, and in our new world -- where small groups of people may soon be able to destroy entire cities with nuclear or biological devices -- blind ignorance could be costly indeed.

That being said, the issue of terrorism's causes is truly a minefield. I've followed scholarship and popular commentary on the topic for 20 years, collecting shelves of books and many thick files of clippings and articles. Taken as a whole, this literature covers just about every imaginable cause. Some of it is thoughtful and well-researched, but too much of it, alas, is little more than ideological posturing by commentators on the political right or left. And a surprising amount of it is handicapped by some very basic analytical mistakes.

Take, for instance, the common tendency to conflate moral and causal assessments of terrorism. Conservative commentators, especially, often say that terrorism's fundamental cause is nothing more than human wickedness or evilness. To argue anything else, they say, is to justify and legitimize atrocity. Yet, while it's satisfying and morally appropriate to condemn terrorist attacks as evil, such condemnation doesn't really tell us much about why they happen. To say that evil happens because people are evil is circular. And the effort to diagnose terrorism's underlying causes -- the roots of the evil, if you will -- doesn't imply moral approval of the terrorism.

When it comes to terrorism, we need to have two kinds of discussion within our democracies. One should be about the moral character of terrorism and its perpetrators -- and here it's entirely appropriate to use words such as "evil." The other should be about the social and psychological factors that contribute to terrorism. The two discussions, both vitally important and inevitably connected, are nevertheless distinct. We can condemn terrorism as a moral abomination at the same time we try to figure out why it happens, just as we do with criminal behaviour in our societies, such as murder and child abuse.

Another common mistake is to say that terrorism is caused by one thing -- such as poverty, Islamic radicalism, capitalism, rapid modernization, or

cultural insecurity. We all have our favourite cause, and it's usually something that makes sense within our ideological worldview. Conservatives, for instance, will often emphasize deep-seated cultural factors as the cause -- such as a tendency, supposedly intrinsic to Islamic culture, towards radicalism and violence. Those on the left of the political spectrum, on the other hand, will often stress economic factors such as poverty and inequality.

Once we've identified our favourite single cause, we frequently set up opposing arguments as straw men. A popular strategy is to find a few cases where the opposing argument doesn't work and to assert that, therefore, it's always wrong. For instance, if we believe that the cause of terrorism is Islamic radicalism, while our opponent argues that it's poverty, we'll try to discredit our opponent's argument by pointing to cases -- such as 9/11 -- where the terrorists were relatively well off. Or we'll note that the vast majority of poor people aren't terrorists. Of course, our opponent can do the same kind of thing by pointing to cases where Islamic radicalism isn't a factor in terrorism, including Tamil suicide attacks in Sri Lanka.

Such mudslinging over the relative merits of single-cause explanations of terrorism is utterly pointless. It gets us nowhere, because complex social events are never caused by one thing. Any particular event -- whether a war, economic recession, treaty negotiation, or instance of terrorism -- is always the product of the combined influence of an incalculable number of factors. The influence of any one factor will depend on the specific constellation of other factors operating in that case. So sometimes poverty might be an important cause of terrorism, and sometimes not, depending on what else is going on.

Does this mean that every terrorist attack is different? Yes it does. Does it mean that we can't say anything in general about terrorism's root causes? No it doesn't. Careful research can identify common patterns of factors across cases -- factors that occur frequently enough that we can say with confidence that they're significant causes of the general phenomenon we call terrorism.

Since 9/11, scholars have carried out and published an enormous number of studies. They've run statistical analyses of reams of data on the characteristics of terrorists and their backgrounds, and they've interviewed thousands of terrorists and their friends, acquaintances, and family members.

From this research, a clearer picture of terrorism's underlying causes is beginning to emerge. This picture suggests that participants in terrorism tend to be men in their twenties or thirties who are ferociously angry because of powerful feelings of humiliation. The humiliation can have many sources, but it's likely to arise when relatively well-educated young men are deeply frustrated by a lack of political and economic opportunity and when, at the same time, they strongly identify with a group, society, or culture they perceive as oppressed or exploited. Extremist leaders then inflame and manipulate these feelings of humiliation, partly by defining the "enemy" -- the group or society that's responsible for all problems and that should be the target of attack.

So far this research hasn't had much influence on our public conversation about terrorism in Western societies. Instead, too many commentators seem mainly interested in scoring cheap ideological points. But if we don't prepare ourselves better to deal with terrorism, especially by understanding and doing what we can about its deep causes, we'll eventually pay a heavy price. It's very unlikely we'll defeat this menace through military force alone.