

Book Review

Krueger, Alan B. 2007. *What Makes a Terrorist: Economics and the Roots of Terrorism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. xi + 180 pp. ISBN 978-0-691-13438-3 (hb). Price: £14.95.

Reviewed by Bjørn Møller [1 October 2007]

This is a very insightful and thought-provoking book, reporting many important research findings by the author himself as well as others – but one which would have benefitted considerably from a more systematic structure. As it stands, it basically consist of three lectures followed by a Q&A section, and this format neither works in print nor does it service the contents.

The main message of the book is that the links between poverty and terrorism are much less clear than most politicians seem to think. Neither are terrorists generally poor – in fact, most belong to the middle class – nor do they typically come from poor countries (affluent Saudi Arabia standing out as a central “breeding ground” for terrorists). Neither do there seem to exist any links between education or employment and the propensity for individuals to become terrorists or join terrorist organizations as the typical terrorist has an above-average level of education and is usually employed and well-integrated into society. The conspicuous lack of correlation among these variables are both demonstrated directly, by comparing data sets of terrorism with socioeconomic data, and indirectly by an analysis of hate crimes which the author convincingly describes as “a close cousin to terrorism.” Not only does the author use standard, and to some extent official, data sets such as the U.S. State Department’s Patterns of Global Terrorism (which he criticizes at length) and the National Counterterrorism Center, but he also draws on his own previously published research, e.g., on Palestine.

Krueger regards any causal link between poverty and terrorism as nonexistent. The author thus warns against the policy implications of such erroneous beliefs for development aid. “If we ... seek to couch support for international aid as part of the war against terrorism, support for such aid might wane as the fear of terrorism recedes ... Incorrectly linking poverty to terrorism can be counterproductive to our efforts to reduce the former even as we confront the latter” (pp. 51-52).

Beside the analysis of the causes of terrorism, Krueger also addresses the under-researched question of its economic consequences, distinguishing between the opposing “big effect” and “small effect” schools. In favor of the latter speak both the historical experiences with other forms of disasters, from which most countries have recovered quite fast and the more recent experiences with 2001 attacks in the United States and the 2005 London attacks which have had only transient and limited consequences. In favor of the former speak the fact that certain localities and businesses have been quite severely affected, e.g., the tourist industry of Indonesia by the Bali bombings, to which should be added the rather unpredictable consequences of over-reaction to terrorist threats, leading to the conclusion that “terrorism, as we have experienced it so far, only matters in a big way if we let it matter” (p. 140).