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URBAN POVERTY AND SUPPORT FOR ISLAMIST TERROR:  
SURVEY RESULTS OF MUSLIMS IN FOURTEEN COUNTRIES

Michael Mousseau

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# Urban Poverty and Support for Islamist Terror: Survey

## Results of Muslims in Fourteen Countries\*

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# Urban Poverty and Support for Islamist Terror: Survey

## Results of Muslims in Fourteen Countries

### ABSTRACT

Survey respondents in fourteen countries representing 62% of the world's Muslim population indicate that approval of Islamist terror is not associated with religiosity, lack of education, poverty, or income dissatisfaction. Instead, it is associated with urban poverty. These results are consistent with the thesis that Islamist terrorists obtain support and recruits from the urban poor, who pursue their economic interests off the market in politics in collective groups. These groups compete over state rents, so a gain for one group is a loss for another, making terrorism of members of out-groups rational. The rise of militant Islam can be attributed to high rates of urbanization in many Muslim countries in recent decades, which fosters violence as rising groups seek to dislodge prior groups entrenched in power. Rising group leaders also compete over new urban followers, so they promote fears of out-groups and package in-group identities in ways that ring true for the urban poor. Because many of the urban poor are migrants from the countryside, popular packages are those which identify with traditional rural values and distinguish enemies as those associated with urban modernity and the secular groups already in power. Imams have an incentive to preach what audiences want to hear, so a mutated in-group version of Islam—Islamism—struck a chord in several large cities around the globe at the same time. With globalization of the media, in many developing countries the West is widely (albeit wrongly) perceived as an inimical out-group associated with urban modernity. The best political strategy to limit support and recruits for Islamist terrorist groups is to enhance the economic opportunities available for the urban poor, and to provide them the needed services, such as access to health care and education, that many currently obtain from Islamist groups.

The people “may be likened to water”, offered Mao, and the guerrillas “to the fish who inhabit it” (Tse-Tung, 2000: 92-93). Like guerrillas, militants who employ terrorist tactics too can survive in the “water” of people. Terrorists and their leaders may be caught or killed, but as long as people provide funds, recruits, and succor, a terrorist group can exist indefinitely. Indeed, Islamist militant groups that use terror appear to have no trouble recruiting volunteers and obtaining financial support from certain communities (Sageman, 2004). This means that the threat of terror is a political phenomena as well as a military and criminal one, and understanding the political sources of terror is essential for defeating it.

This study seeks to advance our grasp of the root sources of Islamist terror by examining the conditions that contribute to its approval among ordinary people. It draws on cross-national survey data provided by the Pew Global Attitudes Project, which specifically asked close to 8,000 Muslims in fourteen countries their attitudes on terror in defense of Islam.<sup>1</sup> The sample represents 62% of the world’s Muslims. Several factors suggested to promote approval of Islamist terror are examined: religiosity, education, poverty, and income dissatisfaction. The analyses indicate support for only one factor: urban—but not rural—poverty.

The role of urban poverty is consistent with the thesis that Islamist terror is rooted in the highly insecure conditions of the larger cities of the developing world (Mousseau, 2002-03). As migrants escaping rural poverty arrive in the cities in hopes of making a living, many cannot find jobs on the market and are forced to pledge loyalty to group leaders who pursue their interests off the market in politics with threats and acts of violence. Because a gain for one group means a loss for another, there are not common but inimical interests among

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<sup>1</sup> The Pew Global Attitudes Project bears no responsibility for the interpretations presented or conclusions reached herein based on analysis of the data. The Pew data can be obtained at

<http://pewglobal.org>.

groups competing over state rents. In this inter-group zero-sum-like environment, terrorizing members of out-groups is a cost-effective strategy. Group leaders compete for followers, so they promote fears of out-groups and package in-group identities in ways that ring true with the everyday circumstances of the urban poor. Unaccustomed to the impersonal cities, popular packages are those which identify with a traditional rural set of norms and values, and set apart as enemies those associated with cold urban life. With globalization of media, the West, led by the United States, has emerged as a popular enemy out-group associated with modernity and thus widely perceived as having opposing interests.

The policy implication is profound: to clear Islamist terrorists from the “water” of people from which they obtain succor and recruits, states and international organizations must expand economic opportunities in the large cities of the Islamic world, and provide the needed services, such as access to health care and education, which many currently obtain by pledging loyalty to militant Islamist groups. This conclusion closely matches studies of terrorist incidents, which have shown that state welfare spending reduces the likelihood that a nation produces transnational terrorism perpetrated by its citizens (Burgoon, 2006).

This article is organized as follows. I begin below with an assessment of the several individual-level explanations for Islamist terror found in the literature. Next, I review how urban poverty can cause support for terror. I then present the Pew data and survey results, and conclude with the implications: the threat of Islamist terror makes urban poverty a global security issue.

## **ASSESSING EXPLANATIONS FOR ISLAMIST TERROR**

The study of the popular roots of Islamist terror combines at least two broad literatures, neither of which can be fully covered here: The study of terror as a tactical form of violence,

on the one hand, and the specific conflict that pits Islamist militants, who advocate Salifism and Jihad, against the comparatively secular governments of many countries. ‘Salifism’ is an altered form of Islam conceived as purified from Western or modern influences; ‘Jihad’ as used by Islamists usually means war against non-believers, who can be Muslims who do not accept Salifi beliefs.<sup>2</sup> Global Salifis perceive the US and the West as their far enemy. The quarrel is thus a series of low intensity armed conflicts within some nations with Muslim populations. It became internationalized when some Islamists began attacking the US and its Western allies using terrorist tactics. ‘Militant Islam’ or ‘Islamism’ should never be confused with traditional or conventional Islam.

Since the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, several explanations for Islamist terror have grown popular in the Western media. I suggest that to properly assess these explanations it is useful to compare them on how well they can account for four salient features of Islamist terror: 1) that individuals feel morally justified in waging terrorist violence, which by definition means acts of violence against civilian targets; 2) that individuals are volunteering to abet and engage in terrorist violence, putting themselves at grave risk; 3) that Islamism and Islamist terror are relatively recent phenomena; and 4) that Islamists identify the West, led by the US, as an enemy.

First, a good explanation for terror should explicate the processes that can cause a person to approve acts of terror. Most readers of this article know that they, and probably everyone they know, would never approve the murder of a child even if the expected utility of doing so outweighed its cost. It is not enough to attribute approval of mass murder to psychological deviation or vague assertions of desperation: Research has established that known terrorists are not more likely than others to suffer from mental disorders (Sageman, 2004: 81;

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<sup>2</sup> I thank Ibrahim al-Marashi for making these points clear to me.

Victoroff, 2005). It would thus seem unlikely that those who merely approve of terror, rather than engage in it, tend to suffer from mental disorders.

Second, a good explanation for Islamist terror should account for how an individual can move from approving terror to actively supporting it or engaging in it. Decisions to help a terrorist group with funds, to hide terrorists, or to engage in terror impose great costs, as they put an individual at grave risk of capture by authorities and subsequent torture and possible death. This poses a quandary for rational choice theories of social science: One may agree with a terror group's goals, but a rational and self-interested individual should seek to free ride and let others carry the burden (Olson, 1971[1965]).<sup>3</sup>

Third, a convincing account of Islamist terror must explain its variance across time. The Islamist movement that is associated with approval of Islamist terror is mostly a contemporary phenomenon. It is true that Muslim-related terror can be traced back to the twelfth century, when assassins were employed by a local caliph to spread terror in the form of murder and destruction among religious enemies, including women and children (Combs, 2003: 20). But by this standard many religions have terror in their history, such as the Christian terror of the Spanish Inquisition. In comparative terms, most Muslim history, like most Christian history, is characterized with peace and a degree of tolerance of non-believers.

In fact, just two generations ago politically-active Muslims in the Middle-East were far more likely to identify with secular and nationalist movements than religious ones. Examples include the explicitly modernist and secular leadership of Abdul Nasser of Egypt, and the Baath Parties of Iraq and Syria. Terror as a tactic by non-state groups was limited in scope and confined mostly to acts of the explicitly secular Palestinian Liberation Organization in its

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, we could solve this quandary with the simple assumption that the primary goal of the terrorist is to die and reach heaven. This solution would be trivial, however, because it does not inform us why some individuals develop the primary goal of heaven and some do not.

peculiar state-issue conflict with Israel. Suicide terror in the name of jihad was rare, if it occurred at all. The Muslim Brotherhood, a religious movement, has long been a presence in some countries, but Islamism as it is known today is largely a product of the 1980s and 1990s. A complete theory of Islamist terror must account not only for its presence today, but its absence a generation ago.

Finally, a good explanation for Islamist terror should account for why the United States and other countries of the West are enemies. Explanations that put the blame on US foreign policy are not satisfying, for two reasons. First, as evident from the Islamist terror attacks on Australians (in Indonesia) and indiscriminant attacks in France, Spain and the United Kingdom, Islamists consider the entire West the enemy, not only the US. Second, we know that at least some of the wrath against the West is not rooted in reality: Popular discourse in the Muslim Middle East regarding the West is usually based on rumors that, true or not, coexist with countless other rumors and conspiracy theories. Anti-American rumors are simply more believed and likely to spread than neutral or pro-American kinds of rumors (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2004). Countless examples are available in the regional media, a classic case being the belief, seemingly widely shared even among many educated people in the Arab Middle-East, that 4,000 Jews were warned not to go to work at the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 (Friedman, 2002). The tendency to believe anti-American rumors (and reject pro-American ones) is the consequence of something other than actual US foreign policy, and is thus one of the features of Islamist terror that must be explained.

Below I offer an assessment of how well several explanations for Islamist terror often mentioned in the popular and academic literature can account for its four salient features: the moral-justification question, the free-rider paradox, variance over time and space, and the identification of the US and the West as enemies. Survey analyses can test only individual-level explanations, so state-level explanations—such as weak state institutions or political

oppression—are beyond the scope of this study. In addition, most of the individual-level explanations for terror discussed herein—religiosity, education, poverty, and income dissatisfaction—have long traditions in the conflict literature and there is no need to dwell on them at length here. The exception is the newer theory of market civilization, which identifies the roots of terror in urban poverty in nations with weak markets. This theory is discussed in greater depth in the subsequent section.

**Islam.** Salafi jihadism is a religious revival movement, and Islamist terrorists justify their acts in the name of Islam. This suggests for some that Islamic doctrine and culture may be a root cause of the terror (e.g., Horan, 2002). Intensity of belief—such as the reward of paradise with martyrdom—can easily account for the moral justification question and the free-rider paradox. I believe the thesis has a major weakness, however: across time Muslim religion is essentially a constant while Islamist terror is a variable. A constant cannot explain a variable. While prevailing Islamic doctrines and interpretations can and have changed over time, these changes are relatively rare and are largely constrained by the Koran, which in Islam is understood as the literal work of God. To my knowledge, no one has identified any specific and recent doctrinal changes by non-Salafi leaders of Islam that can be linked with approval of Islamist terror or rage with the West.

**Education.** Lack of education as a source of terror is common in the popular literature, but few have actually explained how education might reduce support for it (Krueger & Maleckova, 2003: B10). Perhaps this is because people can be educated in many ways, and individuals can be educated to support terror (Perlez, 2003). There are two additional problems with the education hypothesis. First, education levels in most countries today are higher than they were a generation ago. Since Islamist terror is a recent phenomena, lack of

education would seem to offer an unlikely explanation for it. Second, those known to have become terrorists tend to have high levels of education (Krueger & Maleckova, 2002; Sageman, 2004: 75; Krueger, 2007). While some terrorists and their leaders are not well educated, many are engineers and medical doctors, such as al-Qaeda leaders Osama Bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Of course, it is possible that these patterns may be explained by terrorist leaders screening for high quality recruits (Bueno de Mesquita, 2005). The tests below, which examine approval of Islamist terror among ordinary citizens, offer a test of this possibility.

**Poverty.** While popular intuition suggests that poverty can cause terror, to my knowledge no thought-through argument exists for how this can happen. Usually the linkage is indirect, with poverty causing other factors that may cause support for terror, such as economic inequality or low levels of education (Crenshaw, 1990; Burgoon, 2006: 180). Many such claims are usually about the decision to become a terrorist, and even here they offer little more than vague references to resentment and desperation (eg., Newman, 2006: 751). For instance, Klaus Topfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, has argued that poverty (and environmental degradation) can “fan the flames of hate and ignite a belief that terrorism is the only solution to a community’s or nation’s ills . . . desperate people can resort to desperate solutions” (quoted in Newman, 2006: 752).

While desperation would seem to account for the moral justification question and free-rider paradox, this thesis suffers from several internal validity problems. First, to my knowledge, no one has shown how poverty can cause desperation, which is non-rational behavior. Second, there is a marginal utility problem: the less money one has, the more each unit of it is worth. So an individual with few possessions should value them no less than a wealthy individual with more possessions. Vague assumptions that poorer individuals do not

value their own lives or their meager possessions, and loved ones, do not seem completely thought through.

The thesis also suffers from two serious external validity problems. First, poverty is all over the world, particularly as we go back in time, yet international terror is a relatively rare and recent phenomenon. Second, poverty is not correlated with terrorist incidences (Piazza, 2006) or the decision to become a terrorist (Krueger & Maleckova, 2002). While poverty may be linked with terror in some way, it seems unlikely that poverty is a direct cause of it.

**Income Dissatisfaction.** One way poverty may be linked with terror is through income dissatisfaction. According to relative deprivation theory, the risk of political violence increases when there is discrepancy between what a person feels ought to be and what is. As applied to international terror, poverty relative to foreigners might fuel feelings of inferiority and rage (Gurr, 2006: 86-87). Still, many scholars have examined the relationship between inequality and violence and the evidence is consistently mixed (Piazza, 2006; Lichbach, 1989: 431–470). Moreover, if international inequality is a source of terror, then it would be the poorest countries, such as those in Africa, that produce most of it; not the relatively wealthy societies of the Middle East (Tanrioven, 2009: 57-58). In other respects, however, income dissatisfaction seems to offer a plausible explanation for approval of Islamist terror: it may account for its variance over time and space; for why global Salafi jihadists consider the West an enemy; and a rage of inequality could conceivably cause one to feel justified in approving mass murder. More seems needed, however, to account for the free-rider paradox in the decision to aid, abet, or engage in terror.

## **MARKET CIVILIZATION AND ITS CLASH WITH TERROR**

While most of the above explanations have long traditions in the literature, my own more recent research suggests that Islamist terror may be rooted in a clash of economic civilizations (Mousseau, 2002-03). In the advanced economies most citizens normally obtain their incomes, goods, and services dealing with strangers in the marketplace; in nations with weak markets citizens are far more likely to depend on the goodwill of others in their families and various kinds of groups (Polanyi, [1944] 1957). Individuals dependent on a market have a direct economic interest in the welfare and freedom of others because there are more opportunities from strangers who are wealthy and free to contract compared with strangers who are less wealthy and less free. There is also interest in the equal protection of strangers, since only citizens who can rely on their states in enforcing contracts impartially can rigorously engage the market. Since there is no apparent reason to limit these interests in the welfare, freedom, and equal rights of strangers to one's own nation, religion, or ethnicity, I have suggested that there is a global "market civilization" (Mousseau, 2002-03).

Within market civilization civil and interstate wars do not happen because war requires the harming of others, and most citizens in market-intensive economies are always better off when others in the market are richer, not poorer. Instead, citizens have direct interests in their states promoting economic growth, at home and abroad, and thus cooperating with other states for the greater good. In addition, to preserve and enhance opportunities in the global marketplace, citizens have an interest in preserving the primacy of states as enforcers of domestic and international law and in opposing all threats to the Westphalian interstate system. In fact, there has never been a single fatality in any conflict between nations with market-intensive economies (Mousseau, 2009), and these nations tend to agree on global issues (Mousseau, 2003) and ally together in conflicts with others (Mousseau, 2002).

Outside of market civilization, in contrast, the dearth of opportunities in the marketplace causes many citizens to form into groups which pursue state rents off the market in politics. These groups are organized on the principle of reciprocity (Mauss, 2000 [1924]): group leaders obtain state rents for followers with implicit or explicit threats of violence against the state and other groups, and followers respond with loyalty to group leaders rather than their states (Roniger, 1994). Because a state privilege for one group is a loss for another, political parties and ethnic groups are in a constant state of conflict over distributive gains. This means whichever coalition is in power must privilege its supporters and repress others, and the state has little incentive to provide public goods—including law and order. It also means that civil war over control of the state and terror of others over the distribution of state rents is rational (Mousseau, 2002-03).

How can a clash of economic civilizations account for the four salient features of Islamist terror? Shedding light on the moral justification question is the concept of bounded rationality: that humans economize on the costs of decision making by forming decision making habits, or heuristics, for situations that arise routinely (Simon, 1955). While in market civilization the habit is to value the freedom and rights of strangers (because doing so brings economic benefits in the longer term), for individuals dependent on groups that compete over state rents the habit is to abide by orders of superiors and discriminate strangers according to group membership (because doing so brings economic benefits in the longer term). While many individuals in all societies can sometimes overcome their everyday heuristics, with bounded rationality we can see how the norm of group loyalty and fear of members of out-groups can lower the threshold for approving acts of terror against members of out-groups, especially when ordered by group leaders, compared with individuals in market civilization, who routinely value loyalty to the state and equal rights, and thus customarily perceive acts of terror as highly egregious violations of victims' rights.

Nor is there a collective action problem in the resort to civil violence in nations with weak markets. Individuals are loyal to their groups rather than their states, and there is no collective action problem for group leaders since they can directly benefit from a fight while bearing few of its burdens (Olson, 1971[1965]). Just as citizens in market civilization are routinely loyal to their states and fear the sanctions of resisting state authorities, in nations with weak markets citizens are routinely loyal to their groups and fear the sanctions of resisting group authorities. Just as many in market civilization habitually abide by state orders to fight, kill, and be killed for their states, many in nations with weak markets habitually abide by group orders to fight, kill, and be killed for their groups. Indeed, we know that suicide terror is at least partly motivated by in-group affinity (Sageman, 2004: 135), just as dying in battle for the state in market civilization is partly motivated by in-group affinity (Stouffer, 1949). This willingness to fight for their groups in nations with weak markets includes those aligned with the state (and thus engaging in repression of out-groups) as well as those challenging it (and thus engaging in anti-state violence). In fact, we know that nations with weak markets tend to have high levels of state repression (Mousseau & Mousseau, 2008).

In these ways, the economic condition of weak markets, by forcing individuals into groups, may be a necessary condition for civil war, sectarian violence, and the indigenous production of sustained and organized terrorism. But weak markets are not a sufficient condition for inter-group and anti-state violence because ruling group coalitions based on patron-clientelist ties can sometimes manage stability with various combinations of severe repression and economic re-distribution. Instead, violence in nations with weak markets is associated with change: when older groups entrenched in power become weaker and newer groups become stronger. When this happens, newer groups must often demonstrate their rising power with violence.

Political changes can include foreign invasions, such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, both of which precipitated extreme levels of inter-group violence and terror. Demographic changes can include high rates of urbanization, as countless rural families in many countries have migrated to the cities in recent years (United Nations, 2006). This has been a particular challenge for the Muslim world (Kepel, 2002: 1-2): since 1970 the average annual increase in urban population in the predominantly-Muslim countries was 5.4% compared with only 3.4% for all other countries. This difference is statistically significant ( $p < 0.0001$ ).<sup>4</sup>

In nations with weak markets, anyone not in a group and not surviving in the market is in a highly insecure condition. Since migrants from the countryside to the cities effectively exit their rural groups, and there are limited employment opportunities in the urban job markets, many are usually forced to seek security in new groups, often starting with family ties (Hossain, 2005: 6-7). In exchange for loyalty, new urban group leaders often provide help in housing, paying children's school fees, access to health care, employment, and so on, and for poorer neighborhoods they are sometimes crucial for securing access to city sewage lines and electric power grids. Usually these groups manage to provide these services through various militant, criminal, and political activities. Larger groups with more followers are more capable than smaller ones, so smaller groups pledge loyalty to larger groups, and larger group leaders often compete for followers. In this way, larger group leaders must be understood as political entrepreneurs: they have an incentive to "market" their groups by setting group boundaries and identifying out-group enemies in ways that ring true for potential clients.

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<sup>4</sup> Predominantly-Muslim countries are those with greater than 50% Muslim population. The difference of Muslim and other nations is also significant when nations in market civilization are excluded from the sample: 5.5% and 4.1%. A list of nations with market-intensive economies can be viewed at [http://home.ku.edu.tr/~mmousseau/economic\\_norms\\_data](http://home.ku.edu.tr/~mmousseau/economic_norms_data).

In the cities of the developing world, political entrepreneurs seeking clients from the urban poor often find success in advocating anti-modern values, for at least two reasons. First, migrants from the countryside are usually accustomed to depending on friends and families and are unused to the urban environment where they regularly encounter strangers who look and dress differently and seem to act selfishly. So successful groups have learned to package their group identities as representative of traditional and rural norms and values, and identify out-groups as those associated with modern urban life. Second, the primary opposition to the urban poor and their quest for state rents often comes from ruling groups already entrenched in power. In many countries these groups are the traditional urban elite who have long adopted Western or “modern” costumes and life styles. For rising political entrepreneurs intent on challenging the entrenched power of the privileged “modern” groups, taking an anti-modern stance makes strategic sense.

In many countries with Muslim populations and high rates of urbanization, the Islamist identity emerged for at least two reasons. First, in many countries the traditional urban elite who are the main opposition to the rural poor had previously adopted various nationalist, socialist and secular ideologies and images. Since these symbols and images were already embraced by their opponents, political entrepreneurs representing the urban poor needed something new. Second, the democratic nature of Sunni Islam means that imams, like group leaders, compete for followers. The increasing numbers of migrants arriving from the countryside created an incentive for many urban imams to preach what many of the urban poor wanted to hear, which often means some religious justification for their fears of “modern” out-groups. Imams naturally promote not a tribal, nationalist or some sort of secular identity but a religious one. In these ways, a mutated in-group version of Islam—Islamism—could strike a chord in several large cities around the globe at the same time, and some urban imams emerged as leaders of new groups offering protection for the urban poor.

Migrants from the countryside go not only to Cairo and Islamabad, but to Paris and London, so Islamism took root among Muslim immigrants in the large cities of the West as well as the East.

Evidence for this chain of causation from area studies is overwhelming. Most analysts agree that in-group loyalty and patron-client corruption have long infected every country of the Muslim Middle East (Hamzeh, 2001), and that citizens outside of ruling groups have traditionally faced discrimination: “If you were not the nephew of a general or a member of the royal family it was very difficult for you even to have access to credit, to import anything or become an entrepreneur” (Kepel, 2002: 2). We also know that in recent decades in many Muslim countries a wide network of charities has gained an ample following among the urban poor (ibid.). The most popular have been Islamist ones, which often serve as “employment agencies, food banks and charities, schools and nurseries, savings clubs and financial institutions, student and professional associations, and even sports clubs and cultural gatherings” (Sadowski, 2006: 226). They attract support from people “who may not be particularly pious . . . but who simply need the services that the movements provide” (ibid.: 227). They also demand blind obedience from their followers (Gunaratna, 2002: 87; Kepel, 2002: 6; Sadowski, 2006: 232-33). In fact, most known terrorists became religious *after* joining their new groups (Sageman, 2004: 97, 117). We also know that at the heart of the Islamist movement is a rejection of modern values (Majid, 2000) and associated “greed and crass materialism” (Sadowski, 2006: 233), and that urbanization and internal migrations have long been correlated with terrorist activity (Ross, 1993: 321; Massey, 1996; Brennan-Galvin, 2002; Stern, 2003: 63–106; Sageman, 2004: 147).

It is globalization that caused the West, led by the US, to emerge as the far enemy of the Islamist movement. In many countries ruling groups in opposition to the urban poor long ago adopted Western costumes and life styles, and with globalization of media millions of urban

poor regularly witness the Western way of life on their television screens (Adelkhah, 2000; Verkaaik, 2004). For an impoverished Muslim in Cairo, Islamabad, or Jakarta, when an imam preaches that the crass materialism of urban life is a Westernization of their societies, or the result of a Western conspiracy to destroy Islam (meaning them), for many the message rings true. These claims are buttressed by the US alliance with Israel and US and Western military interventions in the Gulf Wars, Somalia and Kosovo. While some of these interventions were clearly motivated at saving (Muslim) lives, from the in-group perspective of zero-sum competition over state rents there is no such thing as universal gains: these interventions could only be for US or Western interests which must be inimical to their own.<sup>5</sup>

In these ways, al-Qaeda's attack on New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 made strategic sense: It created a highly visible image that bolstered the claims of Islamists that there is indeed a conflict between the West and Islam.<sup>6</sup> The al-Qaeda group knew that for many Muslims the Western responses against Islamist terror would look like Western attacks on Islam, thereby increasing the popularity and thus influence of Islamist groups. Nor can their more-secular opponents in power help tame anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism: like all political entrepreneurs in nations with weak markets, governing elites have an incentive to promote themselves as effective protectors of the "national" in-group by propping up fears of foreigners, and often the US and the West are their most convenient scapegoats.

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, angst at the US for its alliance with Israel by non-Arab Muslims is most likely a consequence, rather than a cause, of rising pan-Islamic identity.

<sup>6</sup> Anecdote: When asked for evidence for the claim, popular in the Muslim world, that people in the West are anti-Muslim, my predominantly-Muslim Turkish students invariably cite the *Islamist attack on the West* of 11 September 2001.

The market-civilization thesis is primarily sociological: it predicts values, preferences, and interests from society-level, not individual-level, economic conditions. But there are still individual level implications that might be observable: among Muslim populations in nations with weak markets and high levels of urbanization, approval of Islamist terror should be highest among those in rising groups challenging the status quo—the urban poor. Urban dwellers who are not poor, in contrast, are likely to be either in the market or dependent on groups allied in power. They are thus likely to be threatened by Islamist terror and oppose it. Rural dwellers who are poor, on the other hand, are likely to be ensconced in more traditional groups that have long been allied with the ruling coalition groups in power—even if this alliance accrues little in state rents—and thus not likely to identify with Islamist groups. The test hypothesis is thus:

**Hypothesis:** Neither poverty or urban status is associated with approval of Islamist terror, but individuals who are both poor and urban are more likely than others to approve it.

## **SURVEYING THE MUSLIM WORLD**

One of the most important quests for political analysts today is in identifying the individual level conditions associated with approval of Islamist terror. Unfortunately, surveys in developing countries can be very difficult and expensive: Poor record keeping complicates the construction of representative samples; poor road and communications infrastructure makes locating respondents difficult and costly. In addition, response rates for sensitive questions can be very low, and politically-sensitive questions may be unwise or even prohibited. One of the most complete cross-national surveys that have examined attitudes in

the developing world is offered by the Pew Global Attitudes surveys. To my knowledge these surveys are the only large cross-national ones that ask about approval of Islamist terror in multiple countries with Muslim populations. For these reasons the merits of the Pew Surveys—its extensive coverage and its query on approval of terror in defense of Islam—far outweighs any weaknesses associated with the difficulties of surveying populations in low income countries.

I draw on Pew data for 2002, so attitudes are less affected by the Gulf War that began in 2003. There are fourteen nations in the survey where respondents identifying themselves as Muslim were asked whether they approved of terror in defense of Islam. These respondents represent roughly 62% of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims.<sup>7</sup> Question 55 asked:

Some people think that suicide bombing and other forms of violence against civilian targets are justified in order to defend Islam from its enemies. Other people believe that, no matter what the reason, this kind of violence is never justified. Do you personally feel that this kind of violence is often justified to defend Islam, sometimes justified, rarely justified, or never justified?

Almost half of all Muslims surveyed—49%—believe that terror in defense of Islam can “never” be justified. A smaller number of respondents say such terror is “rarely” (15%), “sometimes” (21%), or “often” justified (15%). Since respondents who believe that Islamist terror is “often” justified are not twice as pro-terror as respondents who believe that it is “rarely” justified, the variable does not meet the interval level of measurement necessary for

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<sup>7</sup> The fourteen countries where Muslim respondents were asked the question on Islamist terror are: Bangladesh, Ghana, Indonesia, Ivory Coast, Jordan, Lebanon, Mali, Nigeria, Pakistan, Senegal, Tanzania, Turkey, Uganda, and Uzbekistan.

linear regression. I thus estimate the measure with an ordered logistic function using maximum likelihood. I considered ‘don’t know’ and ‘refused’ answers in the surveys as missing values, yielding a response rate of 61%, which is high enough to draw reasonably confident generalizations (Babbie, 1992: 267). I call the variable *Approval of Islamist Terror*, since the question is framed in the context of the suicide bombing and other forms of terror that have been predominantly, if not entirely, carried out by Islamist groups in recent years.

Additional questions in the Pew Survey allow us to examine the several individual-level factors posited as influencing approval of Islamist terror. From the discussion above, we should seek to gauge respondents’ religious practices, level of education, feeling of income dissatisfaction, level of poverty, and urban poverty. Because most of the questions ask about clear behavioral conditions (such as whether or not they have electricity in their homes), I anticipate minimal risk of systematic bias from language and cultural differences among the fourteen countries in the sample. All of the variables correlate safely, most at less than 0.20 (Pearson’s  $r$ ); the exceptions are, not surprisingly, Poverty with Education (-0.34) and Income Dissatisfaction (0.32). The response rate was 99% for those who answered the question on terror. While details of variable constructions are discussed below, their summary statistics and correlations can be viewed in the Appendix.

The aim of the analyses is to test for individual-level patterns in approval of Islamist terror in the Muslim world after consideration of country differences. Accordingly, the data are pooled and all the estimates control for country differences with the inclusion of country dummy variables (Ghana is included in the intercept). As a further precaution against clustering by country, I report only estimates with robust, panel-corrected standard errors. All the analyses include as well adjustments for the weight variable provided in the Pew dataset,

and are weighted as well by country sample sizes so nations with larger samples cannot bias the results.<sup>8</sup>

**Islamic Practices.** We can never know what anyone is thinking, but it seems reasonable that individuals who practice traditional religious customs are more likely than others to be influenced by its doctrines. Question 80 asked respondents identifying themselves as Muslims: “How often, if at all, do you pray: hardly ever, only during religious holidays, only on Fridays, only on Fridays and religious holidays, more than once a week, every day at least once, or every day five times?”

As can be seen in Model 1, the coefficient for Islamic Practice (0.00) is zero and about as insignificant as a variable can get ( $p = 0.944$ ). To be sure that these results are not an artifact of the linear assumption of the measure, I retested for non-linear functional forms—estimates using the natural log or square of the measure (unreported). These too failed to yield significant results. It seems that Muslims who abide by traditional Islamic practices are not more likely to approve of Islamist terror than other Muslims. While it is impossible to get into the heads of anyone, the state of evidence is that Islam itself is not a likely cause of approval of Islamist terror.

[Table I about here]

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<sup>8</sup> Specifically, each regression was weighted by a sample-specific weight variable using Stata’s (version 10) “pweight” command. For each regression, this weight was calculated as the product of the Pew weight variable and the inverse of the probability that the observation is included due to sample size. Additional regressions (unreported) with only the Pew weight variable produce identical results.

**Education.** The Pew Surveys make a distinction of technical from university-preparation type of secondary education (Question 84: “What is the highest level of education that you have completed?”). As a result, the nine possible levels of education for most countries are not necessarily in a progressive order suitable for regression analysis. For instance, we cannot be sure that the category ‘Complete secondary school: technical/vocational type’ is less education than ‘Incomplete secondary: university-preparatory type.’ To have confidence that higher levels of this category always mean higher levels of education, I collapsed the categories that make the distinction of technical from university-preparatory education, realizing a seven-point scale.<sup>9</sup>

As can be seen in Model 2, the coefficient for Education (0.02) is not significant ( $p = 0.652$ ). Further tests for non-linear functional forms (unreported) failed to produce significant results. It seems that approval of terror is not a likely function of low levels of education. This is consistent with what we know about known terrorists (Krueger & Maleckova, 2002; Sageman, 2004: 75; Krueger, 2007). Since those who approve of Islamist terror do not have lower levels of education than those who do not approve of it, it seems that if terrorist leaders are screening for high quality recruits as some suggest (Bueno de Mesquita, 2005), they are not screening from a below average pool.

**Poverty.** Two questions in the Pew survey ask respondents concrete behavioral conditions that indicate their level of poverty. Question 87 asks if there had been times during the prior year when the respondent’s family did not have enough money to: a) buy needed food (40% of respondents); b) pay for needed medical and health care (44%); or c) buy needed clothing (40%). Question 89 asks if respondent’s household has a) electricity (90%); b) a working TV

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<sup>9</sup> In three of the fourteen countries—Ghana, Nigeria, and Pakistan—I had to reset the categories to realize the seven-point scale.

(81%); c) running water in the house (67%); d) a flush toilet (49%); and e) a car (19%). Of these, possession of a TV (89b) and car (89e) seem qualitatively distinct in that neither is necessary for a healthy life, and some individuals go without these possessions by choice. I thus summed all the positive responses of Question 87 and negative responses of Question 89 with the exception of categories b (TV) and e (car).

As can be seen in Model 3, the coefficient for Poverty (-0.03) is insignificant ( $p = 0.526$ ). Tests for the natural log or square of the measure (unreported) failed to improve the results in any way. It appears that individuals in poverty are not more likely than others to approve of terror.

**Income Dissatisfaction.** Question 6a asks: “Please tell me whether you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with your household income.”

As can be seen in Model 4, the coefficient for Income Dissatisfaction (-0.12) is significant but negative, indicating the counter-intuitive result that the more dissatisfied a person is with their income, the less likely they are to approve of terror. Tests for functional form (unreported) show the log of this measure to be the most robust, indicating that approval of terror is most closely associated with the first category of being very satisfied with one’s income. Since those who are very satisfied with their income are more likely than others to approve of Islamist terror, it seems highly unlikely that the global Salafi jihad is rooted in any kind of dispute over global inequality.

**Urban Poverty.** The final hypothesis is that urban poverty, but not urbanity or poverty per se, is associated with approval of terror. To gauge rural poverty I interacted Poverty with the dummy measure Urban (Question 97), which has the value of 1 for respondents living in places with populations greater than 500,000 (a definition that includes 25% of the sample).

Since Urban is a binary variable, the interaction term Urban\*Poverty indicates the impact of poverty for urban dwellers; the constituent term Poverty indicates the impact of poverty for rural dwellers; and the constituent term Urban indicates the impact of urban status for respondents at 0 levels of poverty—that is, those who in the prior year never went without needed food, money for needed medical care, or clothing, and have in their home electricity, running water, and a flush toilet—or 34% of urban dwellers (Friedrich, 1982).

As can be seen in Model 5, the interaction term Urban\*Poverty (0.15) is positive and significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that poverty promotes approval of terror for urban dwellers. This is consistent with the expectation that approval of terror is rooted in the dislocations of urban poverty, where many lack economic security and form loyalties to group leaders who pursue state rents with threats and uses of force, shored up with ideological and identity claims. The constituent term for Poverty (-0.05) is negative and actually significant at the lower 0.10 threshold ( $p = 0.064$ ). This indicates that poverty in rural areas *decreases* the probability a person approves of terror. This is not a surprise: rural dwellers are likely to be ensconced in traditional in-groups that are challenged by the new Islamist groups.

An alternative explanation for these results could be that terrorist outreach efforts may occur mainly in cities, and the proportion of poor people may be higher in cities. But this alternative cannot be correct because poverty is higher in rural areas (2.7) than urban ones (1.8)—this is why rural folks migrate to the cities. In addition, the coefficient for Urban (-0.17) is in the negative direction (and insignificant), indicating that urbanity among the non-poor, if it has any effect, reduces approval of terror. Still, to be sure that Urban is insignificant across the full range of Poverty, I re-tested Model 5 with the interaction term removed. Both constituent terms are insignificant in this additive model (unreported), confirming that the impact of each is conditional on the presence of the other.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The coefficients with standard errors in parentheses are: Poverty 0.01 (0.03) and Urban 0.16 (0.19).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Terrorists and their leaders may be caught or killed, but as long as community yields funds, political support, and recruits, a terrorist group can exist indefinitely. This means terror is a political problem as well as a criminal one, and to construct an effective political strategy for combating it we must understand its root causes. Analyses of roughly 8,000 survey respondents representing 62% of the world's 1.5 billion Muslims indicates that approval of terror in defense of Islam is not a likely function of Muslim faith, poor education, poverty, or income dissatisfaction. Instead, approval of Islamist terror is linked with urban—but not rural—poverty.

The role of urban poverty is consistent with the 'market civilization' thesis that Islamist terror is rooted in the highly insecure conditions of the larger cities of the developing world (Mousseau, 2002-03). In these cities many cannot find jobs on the market and are forced to pledge loyalty to group leaders who pursue their interests off the market in politics with threats and acts of violence. Groups compete over state rents, so a gain for one group means a loss for another, making terrorism of members of out-groups a cost-effective strategy. Group leaders also compete for followers, so they promote fears of out-groups and package in-group identities in ways that ring true with the everyday circumstances of the urban poor. Appealing packages are those which identify with traditional rural values and distinguish enemies as those associated with urban elites. With globalization of media, the West, led by the United States, is widely (albeit wrongly) perceived as associated with urban "modernity".

We have also seen that the market civilization thesis, unlike prior arguments about religiosity, poor education, poverty, or income dissatisfaction—offers an account for all four salient characteristics of the global Salafi jihad. Loyal service to groups rather than states is a rational and functional response to high structural unemployment, and processes of bounded

rationality can cause a de-individualization of members of out-groups, lowering the threshold at which an individual can approve of terror. The collection action problem is solved because decisions for violence are made by group leaders, not followers, and leaders can directly benefit from a fight. Variance in approval of Islamist terror over time and space is solved with urbanization: countries with weak markets that experience high rates of urbanization are more susceptible than others to inter-group and anti-state violence as new and rising urban groups seek to establish new balances of power. We have seen that in recent decades predominantly-Muslim countries have experienced higher rates of urbanization than other countries. Finally, with globalization of the media the West is widely perceived by insecure urban dwellers as another out-group with inimical interests, and in this way terrorism against the West is a mere continuation of local politics across borders.

Once we comprehend the in-group mindset we can understand the ambitions of leaders of the global Salafi jihad. The whole idea of a state having the monopoly on the use of force over a geographic space makes sense only for those who regularly engage the market, because only then is a state needed that enforces contracts equally, protects freedom to contract, and seeks to enhance the general welfare. For those dependent on groups, competition among groups is constant: winners repress losers, within and across nations. Like the Marxist and fascist mass movements in Europe a century ago—when terrorism also took root among the urban poor (Gurr, 2006: 87)—the global Salafi jihad movement today does not recognize the legitimacy of the states they happen to be in or accept the idea that states should possess the monopoly on violence. Nor do they approve of the Westphalian system of sovereign states: Similar to the Marxists and fascists, Islamists “insist that the entire Muslim world forms one community that should be united” (Sadowski, 2006: 227). It is this challenge to Westphalia that unites the nations of market civilization against them, as it is the monopoly on the use of force by states who agree on the basic norms of international law that serves as

the vital backbone of the global marketplace. While it is obvious that Islamist terrorists cannot possibly achieve their objective in overthrowing Westphalia, they fight anyway because in the clientelist mindset of collective loyalty, dying for the group is a matter of honor, just as it once was in Europe before the mindset changed towards individualism and defending the state (Bowman, 2006).

The policy implications for combating the sources of Islamist terror are direct and profound. To clear Islamist terrorists from Mao's "water" of people in which they obtain succor and recruits, states and international organizations must increase the economic opportunities available for the poor dwelling in the large cities of the Islamic world, and provide them the needed services, such as access to health care and education, that many currently obtain by pledging loyalty to militant Islamist groups. Globalization has made urban poverty a global security issue.

Table I. Sources of Approval of Islamist Terror

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>	<i>Model 5</i>
Islamic practice	0.00	-	-	-	-
	0.00	-	-	-	-
Education	-	0.02	-	-	-
	-	0.05	-	-	-
Poverty	-	-	-0.03	-	-0.05
	-	-	0.04	-	0.03
Income dissatisfaction	-	-	-	-0.12 <sup>†</sup>	-
	-	-	-	0.05	-
Urban*Poverty	-	-	-	-	0.15 <sup>**</sup>
	-	-	-	-	0.04
Urban	-	-	-	-	-0.17
	-	-	-	-	0.27
Bangladesh	0.86 <sup>**</sup>	0.83 <sup>**</sup>	0.76 <sup>**</sup>	0.87 <sup>**</sup>	0.20 <sup>**</sup>
Indonesia	-0.24 <sup>**</sup>	-0.31 <sup>**</sup>	-0.36 <sup>**</sup>	-0.23 <sup>**</sup>	-0.61 <sup>**</sup>
Ivory Coast	0.97 <sup>**</sup>	0.93 <sup>**</sup>	0.86 <sup>**</sup>	0.98 <sup>**</sup>	0.51 <sup>**</sup>
Jordan	-	0.63 <sup>**</sup>	0.54 <sup>**</sup>	0.72 <sup>**</sup>	-
Lebanon	-	1.97 <sup>**</sup>	1.87 <sup>**</sup>	2.02 <sup>**</sup>	-
Mali	0.27 <sup>**</sup>	0.23 <sup>**</sup>	0.16 <sup>*</sup>	0.29 <sup>**</sup>	-0.25
Nigeria	0.82 <sup>**</sup>	0.78 <sup>**</sup>	0.75 <sup>**</sup>	0.87 <sup>**</sup>	0.43 <sup>**</sup>
Pakistan	0.40 <sup>**</sup>	0.37 <sup>**</sup>	0.29 <sup>**</sup>	0.39 <sup>**</sup>	-0.05
Senegal	-0.02	-0.06 <sup>**</sup>	-0.15	-0.02	-0.41 <sup>**</sup>
Tanzania	-	-0.59 <sup>**</sup>	-0.64 <sup>**</sup>	-0.51 <sup>**</sup>	-0.92 <sup>**</sup>
Turkey	-1.05 <sup>**</sup>	-1.14 <sup>**</sup>	-1.23 <sup>**</sup>	-1.07 <sup>**</sup>	-1.53 <sup>**</sup>
Uganda	-0.22 <sup>**</sup>	-0.22 <sup>**</sup>	-0.23 <sup>**</sup>	-0.15 <sup>**</sup>	-
Uzbekistan	-1.76 <sup>**</sup>	-1.84 <sup>**</sup>	-1.86 <sup>**</sup>	-1.75 <sup>**</sup>	-2.12 <sup>**</sup>
Intercept 1	0.07	0.07	-0.14	-0.25	-0.46
Intercept 2	0.72	0.77	0.57	0.45	0.23
Intercept 3	1.97	2.06	1.85	1.73	1.46
Pseudo log-likelihood	-7032	-9181	-9100	-9129	-626
Pseudo R-squared	0.06	0.08	0.08	0.08	0.06
N	6,257	7,937	7,867	7,904	5,624

Standard errors, corrected for clustering by country, in second row of each cell but not reported for country dummy variables and intercepts to save space. Empty coefficients for nations indicate question was not asked in that country. Ordered logistic analyses performed using Stata 10.0.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , <sup>†</sup>  $p < 0.05$  but in wrong direction; two-tailed tests.

Appendix: Correlations and Summary Statistics of the Independent Variables

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Correlations</i>					<i>Summary Statistics</i>				
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. dev.</i>	<i>Min.</i>	<i>Max.</i>
Islamic practice	(1) 1.00					6257	2.5	2.2	1	7
Education	(2) 0.16	1.00				7937	3.9	1.8	1	7
Income dissatisfaction	(3) 0.06	-0.14	1.00			7904	2.6	0.9	1	4
Poverty	(4) -0.02	-0.34	0.32	1.00		7867	2.2	1.9	0	6
Urban	(5) -0.09	0.06	-0.19	-0.05	1.00	5692	0.3	0.4	0	1

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