

Educated Radical And Classic Guerilla Warfare

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The popular image we have of people who take up small arms for a cause is influenced by the experience of nationalist or anti-colonial struggles. But many of those involved in the new transnational terrorism of al-Qaida and related groups, are far from the products of slums or backwoods religious schools and are instead well-off, educated people, often with roots in Africa or Asia, but who have typically lived - and become radicalised - in the west. New militant groups often follow the rules of classic guerrilla warfare and combine military assaults with political work among local civilian populations. Once they have achieved their ends they form small committees that are neither violent nor militant. These committees preach to the people telling them this is good, and this is against Islam. They praise those who go to the mosque and shame the others. They tell people they are here to bring in Shariah law and only when they are accepted, do they turn into militants. If that sounds frighteningly similar to the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s, it is because it is.

It is also increasingly apparent that the new terrorist is educated. Peter Bergen of the New America Foundation, examined the backgrounds of seventy-nine people behind five major attacks: the World Trade Centre attack in New York (1993), the east African embassy bombings (1998), 9/11, Bali (2002), and London (2005). Of the sixty-three whose education was known, two-thirds had been to university, half in the west. Four had been, or were working on, doctorates. The largest group had studied engineering; the next most popular field was medicine.

A leading scholar of Islamic history and ideas, Malise Ruthven, soon after the incident of 9/11 wrote in openDemocracy that "there are a disproportionate number of scientifically trained people in fundamentalist movements because they are less critical of simplistic religious messages, as technical specialisation tends to discourage critical thinking. However this may say more about attitudes to knowledge and class than about the factors that shape terrorist activity but there are certainly different styles of thinking in the two cultures." He noted the "schizophrenia" experienced by people who work with scientific principles while living a pre-scientific mindset. Other writers have seen fundamentalism as stemming from the severe unease experienced by people making the transition between traditional life based on received authority, communal identity and stability, and modern life based on complexly changing evidence, urban plurality and the notion of progress.

Sri Lanka has the highest literacy rate of an astounding 92 percent yet it is here that the cult of suicide bombings found its origin with more than 200 suicide attacks since 1970 that have claimed thousands of lives. The victims include several politicians including the former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, who was killed by a female suicide bomber in 1991. Clearly the educational development in this country has not had a direct correlation with conflict reduction. But Sri Lanka is not the only example of this phenomenon. Another country that is frequently associated with radicalism, Iran, has one of the highest literacy rates in the Middle East - over 70 percent. In this case, the gender argument on literacy is not applicable either, since there are now more female college graduates in Iran than men. Yet this has not translated into a culture of tolerance among the masses, who continue to overwhelmingly support radical ideologies.

Some of the most charismatic terrorists such as for example, America's elusive Unabomber, was a Harvard graduate. Abimael Guzman, leader of Peru's Sendero Luminoso, was a university professor; and the intellectual leader of the Maoist rebels in Nepal, Baburam Bhattarai, has a doctorate in urban planning. Among the Al Qaeda hierarchy, Aimen Al-Zawahry is a medical doctor, and Mohamed Atta was an engineering student fluent in three languages. Bin Laden is a construction engineer and the leader of the newly formed Tehrik-i-Taliban, Baitullah Mehsud, blamed by Pakistan and the CIA for killing Benazir Bhutto, an articulate commander is clearly educated. He is currently waging an increasingly coordinated insurgency threatening further destabilisation in Pakistan. Mehsud was killed by several diverse militant groups in December 2007.