Who Attacks America? Islamist Attacks on the American Homeland

by Nilay Saiya

Abstract

The twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist strikes presents a good occasion for scholars and policymakers to take stock of what has been learned about Islamist, anti-American terrorists. In this article, the author evaluates a number of proposed causes of terrorism against the empirical record of 60 individuals who, claiming to have been motivated by their understanding of Islam, have plotted or carried out attacks against the American homeland. The analysis finds that while many theories of terrorism fail to explain the phenomenon of Islamist, anti-American terrorism, these terrorists do share a few traits, namely that they tend to be well-educated, young men reared in countries characterized by government repression, many of which happen to be security partners of the United States. The insights of this analysis suggest a number of policy prescriptions.

Keywords: 9/11, causes of terrorism, Islamism, repression, terrorist profiles, United States

Introduction

Twenty years ago, the United States was the target of the most devastating terrorist attack in modern history, when 19 Islamist extremists hijacked four airliners and skillfully guided three of them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Since that time, dozens more individuals have attacked or plotted attacks against the American homeland, claiming to be motivated by Islamic political principles or by a Muslim religious and communal identity.[1] What have we learned about Islamist, anti-American terrorists in the 20 years since 9/11? In this article, the author evaluates a number of proposed causes of terrorism against the empirical record of all 60 Islamist terrorists who have plotted or carried out attacks against the American homeland. Over the past 20 years, a number of explanations for anti-American terrorism have been proffered by policymakers and academics. Some accounts of terrorism point to *individual* characteristics such as personal impoverishment and mental illness. Others identify *country-level* variables like poverty or misguided foreign policies instead. How well do these contending theories of terrorism—both at the individual and country level—hold up when examining the history of Islamist, anti-American terrorism? Do these terrorists share common traits? These are important questions. Beliefs about the root causes of terrorism have driven central foreign and domestic policies of the United States. The ability to build a profile of potential terrorists could help policymakers develop more effective policies to combat terrorism and allocate resources effectively. The analysis reveals two important findings: (1) most explanations for anti-American terrorism developed over the years cannot adequately explain Islamist, anti-American terrorism and (2) the traits most commonly shared by this set of terrorists include their gender, age, and their being raised in repressive countries, often backed by the United States through security partnerships and support. This analysis suggests that, in some cases, policies intended to combat terrorism may, in fact, be encouraging it.

The present study builds on previous work in three ways. First, the article draws on the most comprehensive data set of Islamist, anti-American terrorism to date, one which contains information on every terrorist or potential terrorist who carried out or attempted to carry out an attack on American soil and who claimed to be motivated by the teachings of Islam. This study builds upon previous work by considering both homegrown *and* international anti-American, Islamist terrorists who attempted to commit terrorist attacks on American soil, whereas many previous studies have focused mainly on domestic terrorists.[2] Second, it attempts to consider individual and country-level explanations for Islamist, anti-American terrorism *simultaneously*, whereas previous work examines one or the other. This study differs from previous ones in that it does not take a country-level quantitative approach using cross-sectional, time-series analysis, nor does it focus on a

specific terrorist organization as is common in qualitative studies of terrorism. In taking a "middle approach" that considers the entire history of cases of Islamist, anti-American terrorism from 1990 through 2017, the present study provides a more holistic understanding of the roots of this form of terrorism than previous accounts by examining 11 theorized causal explanations for Islamist, anti-American terrorism. Third, and relatedly, the analysis takes an interdisciplinary approach to the study of anti-American terrorism. Because it does not seek to advance any particular theoretical viewpoint or work from within any particular discipline, it is able to incorporate into the analysis psychological, sociological, economic, and political explanations for terrorism.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify the scope of this study. First, the author does not put forward a novel theory of terrorism. Instead, an attempt is made to evaluate existing theoretical explanations against the universe of cases of Islamist terrorism against the United States homeland. Second, the author's survey is concerned with a specific subset of terrorists: those motivated by extremist interpretations of Islam. To be sure, anti-American terrorism can take many forms—including a virulent and spreading form of white supremacist terrorism—but the focus of this article is on those individuals who acted on their extremist interpretations of Islam in plotting or committing attacks on the American homeland. There are practical reasons for examining only cases of attacks or plotted attacks against the American homeland by Islamist extremists as opposed to anti-American terrorism in general. There have been many hundreds of terrorist attacks committed against Americans in the Middle East, especially in the war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan. In many of these cases, the perpetrators have not been identified. Furthermore, in the cases where attackers have been positively identified, it is nearly impossible to obtain reliable information on their backgrounds. It is also the case that the attacks that are most worrisome to American policymakers and the American public are attacks on the territory of the United States itself. Moreover, past scholarship has shown terrorism to be a heterogeneous category, with different forms of terrorism being driven by different factors.[3] Focusing on attacks on the American homeland is thus a reasonable way to scope the project, while still obtaining useful information, even if it applies only to a certain subset of terrorism. Third, terrorism is examined here at the individual rather than the group level. The reason for this is that this author finds little evidence that the terrorists surveyed in this study were more likely to have substantive ties to established terrorist organizations than they were to be acting of their own accord. The major exception here, of course, are the 9/11 hijackers. In the two decades since 9/11, there is only one case of a jihadist foreign terrorist organization directing or coordinating a deadly attack inside the United States, or of a deadly jihadist attacker receiving training or support from groups abroad—namely in the case of the attack at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola on December 6, 2019. While some terrorists might claim to be acting on behalf of extremist groups—and the groups themselves might take credit for the attacks—most terrorists in the data set did not appear to be taking direct orders from established organizations. This is indicative of the changing nature of terrorism, which at one time was hierarchical and driven by established organizations, but today is more decentralized and often committed by lone wolves. Fourth, the goal of this study is not to establish causality between independent and dependent variables but rather to identify traits common to anti-American, Islamist terrorists.

This article proceeds in three parts. The next section details various proposed causes of terrorism. It groups these explanations into individual- and country-level determinants. The second part evaluates these explanations against the universe of cases of Islamist, anti-American terrorism, dating back from the end of the Cold War through 2017. The concluding section situates the findings in the context of policy.

Explanations for Terrorism

What makes terrorists tick? Answering that question has long been at the heart of terrorism studies well before the attacks of September 11, 2001. After those attacks, though, the question took on a whole new urgency. Since 9/11, both policymakers and scholars have attempted to elucidate the "root causes of terrorism".[4] These theories of terrorism have had a direct bearing on the foreign and domestic policies of the United States and its allies.

Some explanations for terrorism have focused on the personal factors that drive people to partake in political violence. Other work has looked instead at how country-level factors can drive terrorism by creating pools of potential terrorist recruits. Now, 20 years after the deadliest terrorist attack in world history, how well do these different explanations clarify the roots of Islamist, anti-American terrorism? Are we any closer to unearthing the root causes of terrorism? In the following, six proposed individual-level causes of terrorism are examined.

Individual-Level Explanations

At the individual level of analysis, scholars have pointed to a number of potential determinants of terrorism. These explanations include personal impoverishment, a lack of education, a history of mental illness, immigrant and refugee status, age, and gender. This section explains the rationale behind each of these explanations in turn.

Personal Impoverishment

Perhaps the oldest and most widely-held assumption about terrorism is that it is rooted in poverty.[5] The poverty-terrorism link is particularly popular among policymakers. After the 9/11 attacks, Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton were quick to link terrorism to economic conditions in the Middle East. "We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror," Bush proclaimed to a United Nations conference in Mexico.[6] American Secretary of State Colin Powell similarly declared: "I fully believe that the root cause of terrorism does come from situations where there is poverty…where people see no hope in their lives". [7] The poverty of resources and of life prospects may drive people who would ordinarily have no interest in terrorism to the point of desperation and to take greater risks, including attacking those believed to be responsible for their impoverished situations.[8] It is important to note, however, that much academic work has questioned the link between personal poverty and terrorism.[9]

Education

Along the same lines as the personal poverty thesis, many have conjectured that education can serve as an important deterrent to terrorism.[10] Popular in some counterterrorism circles is the refrain "With guns you can kill terrorists, with education you can kill terrorism"—a declaration popularized by Malala Yousafzai, the youngest Nobel Prize laureate and herself a victim of a brutal terrorist attack in her native Pakistan in 2012. Education can help combat terrorism by contesting stereotypes, confronting bigotry, and providing hope for a better future. In the words of Moza Bint Nasser, "Education is the world's vaccine against terrorism."[11] Acting on this belief, policymakers, especially those in global liberal institutions, often peddle expanded access to education as the most important antidote for terrorism.[12] Like the personal impoverishment thesis, however, the education thesis also has its share of critics.[13]

Mental Illness

Another popular view, especially prevalent in the media and in policy circles, links terrorism to mental illness.[14] As noted by an article in a popular magazine, "There is no doubt that the study of mental health and its implications has an important role to play in both the prevention of, and the response to, terrorist attacks."[15] This logic provides a seemingly straightforward explanation for the phenomenon of suicide terrorism in particular; only individuals with cognitive deficits would willingly kill innocent civilians and *themselves*. Terrorists are often compared to other mass murderers who engage in indiscriminate violence such as school shooters whom we later learned were, in fact, diagnosed with various mental illnesses. The scholarly consensus, however, has concluded, in the words of Jerrold Post, that "it is not going too far to assert that terrorists are psychologically normal—that is, not clinically psychotic."[16] In fact, Post argued that terrorist groups seek to *weed out* mentally unstable individuals who could compromise the mission of

the organization. Nevertheless, the idea that terrorists tend to be mentally ill remains a popular thesis among the general public, policymakers, and those in the media.

Immigrant and Refugee Status

One of the most provocative explanations for Islamist, anti-American terrorism points to the threat posed by immigrant and refugee populations. During his first week in office, American president Donald Trump signed an executive order temporarily banning citizens of seven Muslim countries—Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen—from entering the United States for a period of 90 days and, in the case of refugees from Syria, indefinitely. The executive order came on the heels of a presidential campaign in which Trump vowed to ban Muslims from entering the country. The president justified this unprecedented measure on national security grounds, believing that such a ban would deprive terrorists of the freedom of movement necessary to attack Americans. As noted in the executive order, the purpose of the ban was "to protect the American people from terrorist attacks by foreign nationals admitted to the United States… after receiving visitor, student, or employment visas, or who entered through the United States refugee resettlement program".[17] Critics of the administration's immigration policy, however, noted that citizens of the countries on the ban list had killed no American citizens in terrorist attacks. Empirical studies on the topic similarly find little relationship between immigrants or refugees and terrorism.[18]

Age

Young people may be especially susceptible to the appeal of terrorism, and, increasingly, are serving as a key source of support for terrorist organizations.[19] Terrorist organizations can help youth make sense of the world. The appeal of a group-based identity, the promise of combating cultural threats, the prospects of glory and dignity, and personal ties to terrorist networks can serve as powerful incentives for young people. Increasingly, teenagers and, in some cases, even younger individuals serve in combat roles. With time, knowledge, and experience, however, individuals tend to be less prone to terrorist appeals and propaganda.

Gender

Finally, at the individual level of analysis, some have suggested a gender difference in the making of terrorists. [20] The fact that the vast majority of the world's terrorists consists of men suggests that women might have more innate peaceful tendencies, owing to their natural propensity for dialogue, cooperation, egalitarianism, reconciliation, and anti-militarism.[21] As noted by psychologist Steven Pinker, "over the long sweep of history, women have been and will be a pacifying force. Traditional war is a man's game: tribal women never band together to raid neighboring villages to abduct grooms".[22] Young men, in particular, remain especially vulnerable to the appeal of terrorist recruiters for the reasons mentioned above.

Country-Level Explanations

Much of the "root causes of terrorism" literature focuses at the level of the country rather than the individual. While the individual-level causes of terrorism focus on the *direct motivation* for individual terrorists turning to the bomb or the gun, country-level explanations focus on the *general climate* that breeds terrorism. The next section highlights five of the most important proposed determinants of terrorism arising from research on, and popular beliefs about, the macro-level correlates of terrorism: political repression, mass poverty, country size, political stability, and states' foreign policies. These factors can have the effect of creating large pools of potential terrorists. The following section also explains the rationale behind each of these explanations in turn.

Repression

Among the country-level correlates of terrorism, perhaps none has proven to be more important than the belief that terrorism arises from environments of authoritarianism.[23] One month after the 9/11 attacks, the administration of George W. Bush embarked on a "global war on terror." This war was driven by the belief that countries which block access to political representation and thwart free expression alienate citizens, generate grievances among the population at large, and inspire terrorism because their governments do not provide legitimate, nonviolent channels for dissent, making the turn to political violence more likely. In the same vein, a commitment to civil liberties prevents liberal states from cracking down on peaceful dissent and overreacting to terrorism with excessive force, while engendering support from the population at large. Thus, democracies enjoy a robust advantage in combating terrorism.[24] For this reason, the Bush administration made democracy promotion the lodestar of its foreign policies in Iraq and Afghanistan. "[T]he best antidote to radicalism and terror is the tolerance kindled in free societies," Bush remarked during a speech at the National Defense University.[25] A number of scholarly studies have found support for the idea that freedom combats terrorism.[26] Other studies demur, finding that democracies tend to experience higher levels of terrorism.[27] Still others find a nonlinear relationship between regime type and terrorism, revealing instead that regime type has an "inverted U-shaped" impact on terrorism.[28]

Mass Poverty

Whereas personal impoverishment considers the financial conditions in which individuals find themselves, country-level poverty accounts for macroeconomic indicators of poverty, from GDP per capita to government expenditure. The argument linking widespread poverty to terrorism is as follows: because economic prosperity relieves competition over scarce resources, higher levels of wealth result in greater satisfaction among the general populace and thus reduce the likelihood of individuals turning to violence in order to redress their impoverished situations. Here again, the literature is inconclusive. Some work determines that economic development and equality indeed serve as a bulwark against terrorism.[29] Other work finds the opposite: wealthier countries are more prone to terrorism.[30] Still other cross-national studies find no relationship or a nonlinear one between poverty and terrorism.[31]

Country Population Size

Whereas poverty and repression concern the *motivation* for terrorism, country size and political unrest (discussed below) relate to the *opportunity* for terrorism. The size of a country—usually measured as total population—is another popular perceived correlate of terrorism. The logic linking the size of a country's population to terrorism is straightforward: the larger the population, the lesser the likelihood of terrorist detection by the government.[32] It has also been argued that high population growth rates generate socioeconomic problems such as income inequality and subsistence stress, which can lead to overall deprivation. This further creates a cause for political violence to be utilized by terrorists as a way to signal discontentment.[33]

Political Unrest

A country's level of political unrest has long been thought of as a significant cause of terrorism.[34] In this perspective, terrorism tends to be concentrated in states characterized by hybrid regimes that are neither highly repressive (where the costs of terrorism are prohibitive) nor highly free (where peaceful means exist to change the status quo). Countries in the middle thus experience the worst of both worlds. They do not yet have the institutions and political channels for citizens to peacefully express their dissatisfaction with the political status quo; at the same time, they do not have, or choose not to use, the tools of repression to undercut terrorist group formation and violence *a priori*.[35] Domestic political instability provides would-be terrorists with the opportunity to both organize and hone military and tactical skills required for terrorist

acts to be committed. Conversely, regime stability acts as a deterrent to terrorism. For this reason, new, transitional, or failing states are more likely to produce terrorists who attack both domestic and foreign targets.[36]

Foreign Policy

A final country-level explanation for anti-American terrorism points to the impact of American foreign policy. As noted by Burcu, Savun, and Phillips, "states that exhibit a certain type of foreign policy behavior are more likely to attract transnational terrorism".[37] For example, one study finds that support for anti-American terrorism is disproportionately more likely among those who hold negative views about American foreign policy.[38] Another revealed that "negative international relations" on the part of Western countries—most prominently the United States—is correlated with more support for terrorism.[39] In this view, the aggressive foreign policies adopted by the United States as part of its counterterrorism strategy have served to embitter local populations against the United States and make it more vulnerable to terrorism committed by these aggrieved individuals. One popular theory links anti-American terrorism to its military occupation of other countries.[40] Similarly, states which back controversial foreign policies of the United States may also give rise to both domestic and transnational terrorism.

Evaluation of Explanations

How well do these proposed causes of terrorism hold up against the empirical record of attacks on the American homeland by Islamist extremists? In order to evaluate the legitimacy of these explanations, they were compared against the universe of cases of Islamist, anti-American terrorism from the end of the Cold War through the end of 2017. In all the cases, individuals who committed or plotted attacks made it clear that they were motivated by an extremist interpretation of Islamic texts or traditions. These terrorists were identified by sifting information from various sources like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database, widely considered the "gold standard" in terrorism data collection, to create a comprehensive data set of Islamist, anti-American terrorists. Detailed "biographies" were then created of every Islamist terrorist who either attempted or committed a terrorist attack on American soil, focusing on the different theories of terrorism identified above. From the biographies, a data set was constructed that was analyzed for commonalities between these terrorists. The data set uses the individual terrorist as the unit of analysis and codes information for the eleven proposed causes of terrorism described above. Individual-level characteristics were coded according to the information found in these biographies. For the country-level attributes, information on terrorists' native countries was coded, based on each terrorist's year of birth, thus allowing us to see the effects, if any, of social context on the production of Islamist, anti-American terrorism. The variable for repression is taken from Freedom House's measure of "civil liberties." The variables for poverty and population size come from the World Bank's *World Development Indicators*. The "political stability" variable is sourced from the Polity IV data set measure of "regime durability"—that is, the number of years a particular regime has been in place without a change in government (defined by a three-point change in the Polity democracy score over a period of three years or less). Table 1 shows how all the variables were coded.

Table 1: Variables and Coding

Variable	Coding
Personal Poverty	1. Lower class 2. Middle class 3. Upper class
Education	1. Primary schooling 2. Secondary schooling 3. Higher education
Mental Illness	1. No history of mental illness 2. History of mental illness
Immigrant/Refugee Status	1. Naturalized immigrant or refugee 2. American citizen by birth
Gender	1. Male 2. Female
Repression in Country of Birth	1. Low (1-2 on Freedom House scale) 2. Moderate (3-5 on Freedom House scale) 3. High (6-7 on Freedom House scale)
Population Size of Country of Birth	1. Low (top third of terrorists' home countries) 2. Moderate (second third of terrorists' home countries) 3. High (bottom third of terrorists' home countries)
Poverty Level in Country of Birth	1. High (GDP less than $10,000) 2. Moderate (GDP $10,000-$50,000) 3. Low (GDP more than $50,000)
Political Stability in Country of Birth	1. Regime in place 0-8 years 2. Regime in place 8-54 years 3. Regime in place more than 54 years
Foreign Policy of Country of Birth	1. Security partner of the United States 2. Not a security partner of the United States

Data summary tables appear at the end of this article. Analysis of the data set shows that theorized individual-level causes of terrorism appear to contribute little to our understanding of Islamist, anti-American terrorism. One common view of terrorism dismisses terrorists as mentally ill, but the results reveal that only 10 percent of terrorists had a history of mental illness. Of course, it could be the case that some instances of mental illness went undiagnosed or unreported, but it remains unlikely that mental illness was a main driver of the individuals surveyed here. Another view, especially popular in certain policy circles today, sees terrorism as arising primarily from immigrant or refugee populations. This logic served as the basis behind the various incarnations of the Trump administration's travel bans. It is, in fact, the case that most of the terrorists hailed from outside the United States; 75 percent of Islamist, anti-American terrorists were born abroad (some of whom eventually became naturalized American citizens)—but there is little reason to believe that immigrants and refugees pose a greater risk to American national security than American citizens by birth. Only 11 terrorists were naturalized citizens. Regarding the claim that a lack of education creates a fertile breeding ground for prejudice, radicalization, and recruitment, this analysis finds the opposite: in the 42

cases where a terrorist's level of education could be determined, 33 terrorists (79 percent) had attended an institution of higher education. This finding suggests that higher levels of education are *positively* correlated with terrorism—a verdict in line with the findings of other studies.[41] Research has also shown that many members of terrorist groups enjoy a higher standard of living and better education than the general populace.[42] A surprisingly high proportion of terrorists has professional occupations.[43] One possible counterargument is that terrorists may have studied at Islamic institutions of higher education where they were steeped in radical traditions, but the present analysis shows that in most cases terrorists attended or completed their studies at Western colleges and universities, such as the University of Hamburg, University of Arizona, University of Pennsylvania, Washington State University, and University College London, thus casting doubt on this account. Finally, it appears that personal impoverishment does not lead to anti-American attacks. In about half of cases, terrorists came from middle- or upper-class backgrounds.

The two individual-level traits that most Islamist, anti-American terrorists share are their gender and age. All but one of the terrorists were male, the lone exception being Tashfeen Malik, one of the two perpetrators of a terrorist attack at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California, on December 2, 2015. Regarding age, in a vast majority of cases (77 percent) the attackers were 30 years old or younger. These findings echo the verdicts of some previous studies.[44]

While the analysis of the individual-level attributes relates to both domestic and international anti-American terrorists, the analysis of country-level correlates of terrorism pertains only to international terrorists—those born outside the United States. Many of the country-level attributes likewise fail to sufficiently explain the phenomenon of anti-American, Islamist terrorism. For example, the size of the country appears not to be a strong correlate of this form of terrorism. In a slight majority of cases, terrorists hailed from less populous countries, suggesting that population size has little bearing on the production of anti-American, Islamist terrorists. Country-level poverty, like personal impoverishment, also does not appear to correlate to attacks on the American homeland. Only five terrorists came from countries with a per capita GDP of under $1000; conversely, eight terrorists came from countries with per capita GDPs of over $100,000. The average country GDP for all terrorists is slightly less than $43,000. In fact, correlational analysis shows that anti-American terrorists are more likely to come from *richer* countries. With respect to political unrest in terrorists' countries of birth, about half of non-American terrorists were born in countries with relatively new or transitioning governments, while the other half were born in countries marked by stable governments. Here again we find no correlation.

However, the analysis does reveal two important findings with respect to country-level attributes of terrorism. The first concerns the foreign policies of countries from where terrorists originate. In 66 percent of non-American cases, terrorists hailed from countries that are security partners of the United States: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Pakistan, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, and, more recently, Iraq and Afghanistan (until August 2021). In total, in 46 out of 60 cases, terrorists were either Americans or from American-allied countries. The second important country-level finding pertains to the level of repression in these countries. When excluding the cases of homegrown terrorism, in 87 percent of the international cases, terrorists were born and raised in conditions of serious political, social, or religious repression. The countries that produced anti-American terrorists and were formal security partners of the United States averaged 5.7 on Freedom House's seven-point scale of civil liberties, meaning that these individuals were born and raised in conditions of high repression.

Might it be the case that the inclusion of the 9/11 attackers is skewing the results? To account for this possibility, the analysis was performed again, this time removing the 19 September 11 hijackers. The results remain very similar, with no notable changes in the overall results (though it should be noted that the sample size is reduced considerably).

In summary, analysis of Islamist, anti-American terrorism has found scant support for many of the proposed causes of terrorism. At the individual level, these include personal impoverishment, level of education, a history of mental illness, and immigrant/refugee status. It does, however, appear that men—and in

particular well-educated, young men—are especially prone to terrorist recruitment. Likewise, few country-level attributes appear to explain attacks on the American homeland by Islamist extremists, including mass poverty, country population size, and political unrest. Two of these characteristics, however, do stand out as being particularly important: repressive countries that are also security partners of the United States. These findings have important implications for the counterterrorism strategy of the United States.

Conclusion

Addressing the root causes of Islamist, anti-American terrorism requires attention at the level of both the individual and the country. An examination of the universe of cases of Islamist terrorists who have plotted or carried out attacks against the American homeland reveals that a number of widely-held theories of terrorism find little or no support in the empirical record. At the individual level of analysis, anti-American Islamist terrorism is not a function of personal impoverishment, a lack of education, mental illness, or immigration status. At the level of the country, mass poverty, countries' sizes of population, and political stability also do not explain terrorism. Rather, the examination of terrorism here has shown terrorism to be carried out by well-educated, young men who were born and raised in countries experiencing political repression. Disturbingly, the repression in these countries has often been abetted by Washington itself through security partnerships, which likely sets into motion a vicious cycle of state repression and non-state terrorism.

The findings presented here also suggest some counterterrorism strategies and policies the US could use in the fight against terrorism. These might include programs targeted at deterring young men from subscribing to extremist worldviews, a reexamination of security partnerships with repressive regimes, and the promotion of liberty abroad. To be sure, these measures will not prevent every plot or attack against the American homeland by Islamist extremists, as the pathways to terrorism are multiple. Nevertheless, given the commonalities shared by terrorists who have attempted or committed attacks against the United States, there is good reason to believe that these steps could reduce America's vulnerability to terrorism by removing key sources of grievance in the Islamic world.

Finally, it has to be stressed that the nature of this study is not without its limitations. First, despite including the universe of cases of Islamist, anti-American terrorism, the so-called ecological fallacy may be at work by linking macro-level attributes like repression and American foreign policies to individual acts of terrorism. It might be the case, for example, that even though terrorism is incubated in conditions of repression, individual terrorists themselves might or might not have experienced such repression. Here detailed case studies of individual terrorists can help to ascertain if, in fact, country-level characteristics figured prominently in their decisions to turn to the gun. Second, the lack of a control group means that comparing terrorists to non-terrorists remains beyond the scope of this study. Future work might address this by generating a comparable control group or by employing comparative case studies of individual terrorists using the method of difference in order to isolate proposed explanations for terrorism. Third, although all of the perpetrators identified in this study have been charged with terrorist activities, it is within the realm of possibility that at least a few of them were entrapped by overly zealous law enforcement officials. We thus leave it to future work to disentangle cases of entrapment from the overall record of Islamist, anti-American terrorism. These limitations present important avenues for future research.

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Notes

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Appendix

Individual Attributes

Perpetrator	Attack Date	Male	30 or Under	Criminal Record	No University Education	Mental Illness	Lower Class	Naturalized Citizen or Refugee
El Sayyid Nosair	11/5/1990	X						X
Mehrdad Safari	4/5/1992	X	X					
Asad Daryani	4/5/1992	X	X					
Ali Fattahi	4/5/1992	X						
Amir Farokhy	4/5/1992	X						
Kambis Parvaresh	4/5/1992	X						
Muhammad Atta	9/11/2001	X						
Abd alAziz alUmari	9/11/2001	X	X				X	
Wail alShehri	9/11/2001	X	X					
Walid alShehri	9/11/2001	X	X					
Satam alSuqami	9/11/2001	X	X	X			X	
Marwan alShehhi	9/11/2001	X	X					
Fayiz Ahmad	9/11/2001	X	X					
Mohand alShehri	9/11/2001	X	X					
Hamza alGhamdi	9/11/2001	X	X		X		X	
Ahmed alGhamdi	9/11/2001	X	X		X		X	
Hani Hanjour	9/11/2001	X	X					
Khalid alMihdhar	9/11/2001	X	X		X			
Majed Moqed	9/11/2001	X	X					
Nawaf alHazmi	9/11/2001	X	X					
Salim alHazmi	9/11/2001	X	X					
Ziad Jarrah	9/11/2001	X	X					
Ahmad alHaznawi	9/11/2001	X	X				X	
Ahmad alNami	9/11/2001	X	X				X	
Saeed alGhamdi	9/11/2001	X	X				X	
Charles Bishop	1/5/2002	X	X		X			
Hesham Mohamed Hadayet	7/4/2002	X					X	X
Preston Lit	5/13/2002	X		X				
Eid Elwirelwir	3/31/2003	X	X	X				
Mohammed Reza Taheriazar	3/3/2006	X	X	X				X
Naveed Afzal Haq	7/28/2006	X	X	X				
Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammed	5/31/2009	X	X					
Nidal Malik Hasan	11/5/2009	X						
Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab	12/25/2009	X	X					
Falsal Shahzad	5/1/2010	X						X
Yonathan Melaku	10/16/2010	X	X		X			X
Luis Ibarra Hernandez	1/8/2012	X	X					
Abdullatif Ali Aldosary	11/30/2012	X						
Tamerlan Tsarnaev	4/15/2013	X	X	X			X	X
Dzhokhar Tsarnaev	5/15/2013	X	X	X			X	X
Ali Muhammad Brown	4/27/2014	X	X	X				

Perpetrator	Attack Date							
Zail Thompson	10/23/2014	X		X				
Justin Nojan Sullivan	12/18/2014	X	X	X	X			
Elton Simpson	5/3/2015	X	X	X	X			
Nadir Soofi	5/3/2015	X		X			X	
Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez	7/16/2015	X	X	X		X	X	X
Rasheed Abdul Aziz	9/15/2015	X		X				
Faisal Mohammed	11/4/2015	X	X	X				
Syed Rizwan Farood	12/2/2015	X	X			X		
Tashfeen Malik	12/2/2015		X			X		
Edward Archer	1/7/2016	X	X	X			X	
Omar Mateen	6/12/2016	X	X	X		X	X	
Ahmad Khan Rahami	9/17/2016	X	X	X	X		X	X
Dahir Ahmed Adan	9/17/2016	X	X	X				X
Abdul Razak Ali Artan	11/28/2016	X	X					
Esteban Santiago	1/6/2017	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Joshua Cummings	1/31/2017	X					X	
Devon Arthurs	1/19/2017	X	X					
Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov	10/31/2017	X	X					
Akayed Ullah	12/11/2017	X	X			X		

Country Attributes

Perpetrator	Attack Date	US Strategic Partner	High Repression	Mass Poverty	Political Unrest	Large Population
El Sayyid Nosair	11/5/1990	X	X	X	X	
Mehrdad Safari	4/5/1992		X	X		
Asad Daryani	4/5/1992		X	X	X	
Ali Fattahi	4/5/1992		X	X	X	
Amir Farokhy	4/5/1992		X	X	X	
Kambis Parvaresh	4/5/1992		X	X	X	
Muhammad Atta	9/11/2001	X	X			
Abd alAziz alUmari	9/11/2001	X	X			
Wail alShehri	9/11/2001	X	X			
Walid alShehri	9/11/2001	X	X			
Satam alSuqami	9/11/2001	X	X			
Marwan alShehhi	9/11/2001	X	X			
Fayiz Ahmad	9/11/2001	X	X			
Mohand alShehri	9/11/2001	X	X			
Hamza alGhamdi	9/11/2001	X	X			
Ahmed alGhamdi	9/11/2001	X	X			
Hani Hanjour	9/11/2001	X	X			
Khalid alMihdhar	9/11/2001	X	X			
Majed Moqed	9/11/2001	X	X			
Nawaf alHazmi	9/11/2001	X	X			
Salim alHazmi	9/11/2001	X	X			

Name	Date					
Ziad Jarrah	9/11/2001	X				
Ahmad alHaznawi	9/11/2001	X	X			
Ahmad alNami	9/11/2001	X	X			
Saeed alGhamdi	9/11/2001	X	X			
Charles Bishop	1/5/2002					X
Hesham Mohamed Hadayet	7/4/2002	X	X	X		
Preston Lit	5/13/2002					X
Eid Elwirelwir	3/31/2003					
Mohammed Reza Taheriazar	3/3/2006		X		X	
Naveed Afzal Haq	7/28/2006	X	X	X	X	X
Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammed	5/31/2009					X
Nidal Malik Hasan	11/5/2009					
Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab	12/25/2009	X		X	X	X
Falsal Shahzad	5/1/2010	X		X	X	X
Yonathan Melaku	10/16/2010	X	X	X		
Luis Ibarra Hernandez	1/8/2012					
Abdullatif Ali Aldosary	11/30/2012	X				
Tamerlan Tsarnaev	15/4/2013			X	X	
Dzhokhar Tsarnaev	15/4/2013			X	X	
Ali Muhammad Brown	4/27/2014					X
Zail Thompson	10/23/2014					X
Justin Nojan Sullivan	12/18/2014					X
Elton Simpson	5/3/2015					X
Nadir Soofi	5/3/2015					X
Mohammad Youssuf Abdulazeez	7/16/2015	X			X	
Rasheed Abdul Aziz	9/15/2015					
Faisal Mohammed	11/4/2015					X
Syed Rizwan Farood	12/2/2015				X	X
Tashfeen Malik	12/2/2015	X				X
Edward Archer	1/7/2016					X
Omar Mateen	6/12/2016					X
Ahmad Khan Rahami	9/17/2016	X	X			
Dahir Ahmed Adan	9/17/2016		X		X	
Abdul Razak Ali Artan	11/28/2016		X		X	
Esteban Santiago	1/6/2017					X
Joshua Cummings	1/31/2017					X
Devon Arthurs	1/19/2017					X
Sayfullo Habibullaevic Saipov	10/31/2017				X	
Akayed Ullah	12/11/2017	X			X	X