It's the secular state that is responsible for the woes we are seeing today. People should understand that we are not saying we have to rule Nigeria, but we have been motivated by the stark injustice in the land.

- Abu Qaqa, Islamist group Boko Haram spokesman

Policy Question

Is inequality a major driver of terrorism? In an op-ed for newspaper *Le Monde*, renowned economist Thomas Piketty argued that inequality, bolstered by Western powers, was one of the root causes of terrorism and the rise of the Islamic State. Paul Davis, a senior researcher of the RAND Corporation, rebutted that inequality had not empirically proven to be by itself a major causal factor, and that it was a poor factor to highlight as “the cause.” Piketty’s statement was also widely refuted by other scholars based on two arguments: firstly, that many terrorists were actually found to be well-educated and financially stable individuals, and secondly, that several survey studies suggested that sympathy for terrorist groups was actually not highest in the poor, but rather in middle classes. However, neither of these arguments fully addresses the issue of whether or not the existence of inequality in a given context is a root cause of violent radicalization that culminates in terrorism. This may be due to the difficulty in gauging the extent to which inequality plays a role in movements and conflicts that have extended even beyond national borders, so the study of terrorism tends to focus on immediate causes and predictors. However, to set forth an analogy, if a match is lit in a dry forest, we would identify a resulting wildfire’s root cause to be the dryness of the environment, not the match. While the match may be the immediate cause or trigger, it would not have the same devastating and far-reaching impact under a cool and humid environment, and thus, it is not actually the root cause and most certainly not the driver of the wildfire. We cannot prevent a wildfire if we do not account the environment.

While it may be difficult to establish that inequality on its own is the sole root cause and principal driver of terrorism, in conjunction with a particular combination of contextual factors it may prove to be one of the crucial ingredients in creating the grounds for violent radicalization and promoting widespread terrorism. This is significant because most counterterrorism strategies are based on costly enforcement and aggressive surveillance; they tend to focus on who could light the match and where. Meanwhile, root causes that could and should be addressed for a more effective preventive strategy have been largely ignored (partly because there is no consensus on what they are).

---

5. In one study, the measure used to determine likelihood of radicalization was participants’ justification or condemnation of 16 different cases that could be classified as terrorism. The problem with this approach is that given the sensitivity of the issue, more vulnerable participants may be unlikely to display honest opinions in fear of judgement or reprisals (especially given that the surveyed were of Muslim, Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage living in London and Bradford). Secondly, it is unclear whether or not claiming a terrorist act is justified would indicate someone is more prone to radicalize and actually have the intent to perpetrate terrorism him/herself, or conversely, whether expressing condemnation signals that the individual does not have a propensity to radicalize. In any case, the signal’s effectiveness may be moderate.
6. One such study, conducted by Pew Research concluded that, “in some countries, including Pakistan, Morocco and Lebanon, middle-income citizens were slightly more likely than low-income citizens to say that attacks against civilians and suicide bombings in Iraq were justified.” Noack, Rick. "3 Charts Explain Why Piketty’s Idea That Inequality Fueled Islamic State’s Rise Is Flawed." Washington Post. Washington Post, 3 Dec. 2015. Web. 23 May 2016.
Several indicators and common themes in radical discourse seem to point to inequality and the resulting social injustice as one of these root causes. Consequently, it may be a vital aspect to assess in order to diminish, determine and diffuse threats. Unfortunately, we do not have a reliable counterfactual of the extent to which radical factions such as Al-Qaeda would have taken hold in a less unequal setting. However, we can compare different settings where radical ideologies have flourished and assess whether and how inequality has had a significant effect in bolstering them. This study aims to compare radicalization patterns and causes in the Middle East and in Latin America to determine how inequality and social injustice play a role in driving terrorism.

Research Aims and Questions

Since 9/11, we have tended to classify terrorism under two broad categories based on underlying motives behind the acts perpetrated: secular (political) and religious. This distinction, however, is tenuous. The precursor of terrorism is radicalization, but more specifically violent radicalization, or a willingness to resort to violence in the adoption or pursuit of an ideology or policy that challenges the status quo. An individual can espouse radical beliefs or support a seemingly radical agenda, but only until he/she is willing to use force to push his/her goals can their radical state truly be considered an immediate precursor to terrorism. In other words, all terrorists are radicals, but not all radicals are terrorists. In a sense, this categorization muddles the debate of what leads to violent radicalization and terrorism, because while leaders of violent radical movements tend to be motivated by power, they effectively use ideology to promote and bolster their following and increase their influence.

Whether religious or not, what seems clear is that under the adequate social and economic conditions, the figureheads’ radical agendas acquire greater traction because of these underlying conditions and not necessarily thanks to the sway of their ideology (in contrast to how violent radicals are often portrayed in Western media). While it is true that not all ideologies are created equal and some have more appeal than others, the decision to be willing to sacrifice one’s life to a cause often requires other core motivations which the ideology taps into. This implies that the spark would only light up given a set of preexisting conditions or grievances which followers are led to believe may be amened through the strength of the radical movement, often legitimizing violent means. One of the common themes in countries where violent radical groups’ influence has spread like wildfire is pervasive inequality. While there seems to be a broader consensus on the role of economic factors driving violent radicalization in the drug war in Latin America, radicalization in the Middle East is examined under a different lens even though goals and development of “classical” terrorist and “narcoterrorist” groups are not all that different, especially in organizing their response to government crackdowns.

Systemic inequality could play a role in driving terrorism both directly and indirectly. Directly refers to when individuals become violent radicals because, given the highly unequal distribution of wealth and lack of opportunity and social advancement in their country, they are more easily recruited by groups that promise them what their official government has shirked on: a decent livelihood, social advancement or a way out of economic uncertainty. In these cases, radicalization is based on material utility at its core, but is further strengthened by ideology and experience once they join a group. The indirect effect refers to radicalization of individuals who, despite being economically stable, are frustrated by the perception of rampant corruption (which is associated with greater inequality), unfairness, or social stagnation of their environment, and is often inflamed by what they may perceive as unjust intrusion of an outside force that permits the local authority to maintain these conditions and monopolize resources and power. In summary, the frustration wrought by inequality may come about through both perceived (i.e. indirect) and experienced (i.e. direct) injustice.

---

8 One could argue about the interconnectedness of “inequality” and “injustice”, but a great deal of academic literature links social injustice and economic inequality as part of the same phenomenon.
One of the starkest examples of how perceived inequality and injustice played a crucial role in inciting terrorism is the case of Mohammed Atta. The leader of the 9/11 perpetrators, Atta was “a 33-year old Egyptian town planner; the son of an Egyptian lawyer, he had studied architecture at Cairo University and had subsequently studied at university in Hamburg.” And while studies into his past suggest he was, “caught in an ambiguous situation between a traditionalist Islamic past and a secular Westernism,” several accounts reveal that he was fueled by, “anger at a ruling elite seen as corrupt and undemocratic. Anger, too, at America for supporting Egypt’s rulers and being Israel’s strongest ally […] [His] rage and frustration were fueled by the government crackdown on Islamic extremists.”

Thus, the indirect effect of inequality which is not often addressed may be extremely consequential.

To address the policy issue described above, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1) How commonly are inequality and social injustice in the home country cited as justifications for violent radicalization and terrorism?
2) What contextual factors, along with economic and social inequality, are present where violent radical groups thrive and propagate?
3) What are the differences in needs addressed by “secular” and “religious” violent radical groups?
4) What are the patterns of growth of radical groups in response to government crackdowns in unequal societies? Is it possible to observe a “network effect” of a terrorist group in an unequal environment? (i.e. validating the “outlet” or “social movement” theory)

The broader dynamics of terrorism (proposed conceptual framework):

Richard English states, “In general, terrorism has two broad purposes: to gain supporters and to coerce opponents […] Terrorism is coercive intimidation.” It is ostensibly through its powers of coercion, that a group gains access to a wider support base and further expands these powers. When a group’s ideology successfully attracts and manages to expand their support base, their influence increases and their threat is regarded more seriously. When ideology is not sufficient to sway the collective will, they will resort to violence and coercion. Of course, this second form is more ineffective and costly, and may also lead to fewer adherents in the long run.

At what point, however, does a terrorist cell become a movement? In the several significant terrorist movements we can identify three recurring geopolitical factors that shape a group’s long-term influence: 1) they have tapped into a valuable financial resource that allows the group to fund its operations (i.e. oil, drugs, black market operations, etc.), 2) the perception of the local government or authority, often seen as oppressive, corrupt and unjust, and facing widespread public opposition and 3) the involvement of an outside actor who favors the status quo and is perceived as an enabler of the local government. When all three are present, inequality and social discontent reach inordinately high levels largely because local governments opt to use crackdowns on social movements instead of conceding to public demands. It can manage to maintain stability through force and quell social pressure only temporarily with the aid and support of a larger, more powerful outside actor. The pressure of social discontent, however, continues to mount beneath the surface, and when it has no outlet, it tends to find a natural escape through ideological movements which offer an alternative to problems the government has been unwilling or unable to solve. Thus begins a self-reinforcing cycle in which government crackdowns may have the effect of exacerbating radicalization by exposing the state’s weaknesses, portraying it as a bully, and legitimizing radical movements. Broadly speaking, the Arab Spring was a manifestation of this pressure boiling to the surface; some regimes relented the pressure by conceding to certain demands (i.e. Bahrain, Jordan) and others used the crackdown method (i.e. Egypt, Syria).

To paint a more relatable picture of the proposed dynamic, we can use a schoolyard example. In the schoolyard, if nobody can counter the main bully, “bully #1”, when a weaker challenger rises up, “bully #2”, she may be seen as a redeemer or at least an option by those who feel oppressed by bully #1 and his circle and wish some level of

---

protection or outlet for their grievances. In any case, their position is enhanced by the very existence of bully #2. In every affront, bully #2’s reputation as a force to be reckoned with is legitimized. Bully #1 must now be wary and not make too many enemies, lest he be overturned completely. Now suppose bully #1 is granted special protection and privileges by the schoolteacher, a higher authority. Frustration boils under the surface by all those who fall victims to bully #1 and his entourage’s abuse, because now, even when his abuse is egregious, confronting him would mean confronting a higher authority. Bully #2 in her struggle to overturn this order would attempt to rally support in an effort to undermine bully #1’s position. Under this scenario, where most have relatively little to lose and others feel alienated or indignant, it is easier to convince others to rise up. Bully #2’s opposition seems more reasonable and her momentum may create a bandwagon effect. Further, she may even strive to rally enough support to undermine the schoolteacher’s authority, forcing her to either lay off support to bully #1 so he may tone down his antics, or strike back harshly and legitimize bully #2 as a force to be reckoned with while furthering the perception of injustice.

By this logic, if the conditions in a given setting exist for radicalization and pressure is exerted through a crackdown, the fragmenting of terrorist groups may simply result in a consolidation of a stronger group that poses a greater threat to the state. Similar to the balloon effect with cartels in Latin America, exerting pressure in one area will only displace this volatility elsewhere, and naturally to a more unstable and lawless region (i.e. Syria in Middle East case, Honduras and Guatemala in Latin America) where these groups can recruit and operate more freely. As long as this pressure is not relieved, either through concrete local government action granting certain concessions and diminishing existing disparities, the conflict may continue indefinitely. However, local authorities of these countries continue headstrong in their crackdown strategies because they are aided financially and politically by a more powerful actor, or because they monopolize the states’ resources, or both.

The aforementioned dynamic, relatable to both a drug trafficking organization or a terrorist network, is illustrated below:
Secular vs. Religious Terrorism – How does narcoterrorism relate to other forms of terrorism?:

Even if we manage to trace the origin of a terrorist or violent radical group and their motives appear clear on the outset, the line between the two tends to become blurred as these groups or cells evolve, as violence mounts and as their struggles intensify. Narcoterrorists, for example, deemed secular by most scholars because their motives boiled down to profits or continuing their business, have developed offshoots which have adopted religious beliefs and ideologies promoting narcoculture. Ioan Grillo in his book El Narco narrates:

The most virulent expression of narco religion is by La Familia Cartel in Michoacan. La Familia indoctrinates its followers in its own version of evangelical Christianity mixed with some peasant rebel politics. The gang’s spiritual leader, Nazario Moreno, “El Mas Loco”, or the Maddest One, actually wrote his own bible, which is compulsory reading for the troops […] Many who follow these faiths are not drug traffickers or gun-toting assassins. The beliefs all have an appeal to poor Mexicans who feel the staid Catholic Church is not speaking to them and their problems. But gangsters definitely feel at home in these new sects and exert a powerful influence on them, giving a spiritual and semi-ideological backbone to narco clans. Such a backbone strengthens El Narco as an insurgent movement that is challenging the old order. Kingpins now fight for souls as well as turf.12

It seems like no coincidence that clans praising “La Santa Muerte” (Goddess of Death) and Jesus Malverde (a Robin-Hood-style bandit from Sinaloa executed a century ago under dictator Porfirio Diaz) in Mexico and other parts of Latin America rose to prominence during the decade of the 2000s, especially towards the end of this period when violence in Mexico reached its peak. Some trace “La Santa Muerte” back to an old Aztec deity and offer this link as proof of resistance to colonial culture by the working class.13

---

11 Grillo says, “In these cases, narco violence is a reaction to concrete strikes on criminal organizations. They are pressuring the state to back off and signaling they want a soft government who will not mess with their business.” p. 207
13 Ibid, p. 195
This example highlights how it becomes difficult to draw the division among terrorist motives, even when the initial cause behind a movement seems clear-cut. There are many accounts of how kingpins, with their elite statuses, also ascribe to these beliefs, but whether they do so genuinely or for credibility purposes is not well established. What seems evident is that there is a network effect of radical ideologies, i.e. ideologies that fit well with or in some form legitimize terrorism, and this effect is intensified when conflict and violence rises, often as a response to government or outside forces’ oppression. However, it is unclear whether these ideologies spur in response to conflict, or whether their pre-existence incites conflict, or in the more likely scenario, a combination of both that leads to a vicious cycle of increased radicalization and violence.

The Mexican case sheds some light on terrorism because, not only were typical terrorist tactics amply used by drug trafficking organizations’ (DTOs) at the height of the government’s crackdown in the late 2000s, but in less than 10 years, it was visible how DTOs molded their ideologies and strategies into forms that could gain them wider support and favor their recruitment as they continued their struggle against the government. How does this compare with terrorism in other places? Looking into radicalization in the Middle East, such as with the rise of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, there is no clear consensus on what drives terrorism from fundamentalists, i.e. non-secular terrorists. Because of this, governments tend to take on highly reactive stances to terrorism. Often, the blame is almost entirely assigned to irrational and violent ideologies which permeate entire societies, where personal factors such as socioeconomic status or educational level are not indicators of participation, and therefore, are practically impossible to combat outside the battlefield or without using harsh enforcement methods. Indeed, a study by the RAND Corporation offered the following factor tree to depict all aspects that influenced the likelihood of terrorism:

---

14 A network effect is the effect that one user of a good or service has on the value of that product to other people […] Thus, the value of the product or service is dependent on the number of others using it.
While this type of framework is useful in pointing out the many overarching effects and pathways that lead up to a potential increase in terrorism, the problem is that it seems to offer only retrospective explanations for violent radicalization in individuals or groups. And while it may be true that we cannot encompass all violent behaviors to one all-encompassing theory, there are more concrete answers that do explain why certain groups grow and become an outlet for disgruntled individuals, and why some simply remain isolated. The build-up of discontentment and frustration is often very evident as individuals make their way through the pipeline of violent radical groups. This research proposal attempts to reach conclusions based on the study of patterns that make an outlet more or less attractive, and thus design a more prospective approach to deal with the build-up of dissatisfaction so as to relieve the pressure further up the pipeline, thus chocking the support for radical groups that enjoy exponential growth as they become the channeling force for public discontent.

**Interview Protocol/Data Management and Analysis:**

A common worry in actuality is the threat of violent radicals and terrorists cells extending their influence through the use of social media platforms. Indeed there have been several notable cases of “homegrown terrorists” that have been recruited or indoctrinated online by cell leaders. More importantly, the Arab Spring brought about a volatile situation in which rebel and radical groups alike could organize more easily through these platforms and destabilize or challenge the entire existing order. But the fact that the discontent and frustration could be channeled into larger and more powerful movements should not detract attention from the underlying reality that there were, in fact, large swathes of the population enormously dissatisfied with state of their respective societies. This widespread dissatisfaction created a golden opportunity for groups that could offer enough incentives, sense of purpose, and credibility of threatening the order to the masses. Social platforms may have catalyzed the process by allowing these movements to reach critical mass quicker and erupt, but tension had been brewing beneath the surface for a long time. This implies that seeking to minimize the growth and influence of these groups is an endless endeavor when discontent is widespread and basic grievances are not addressed. Aggressive tactics to hunt down and eliminate the head of the organizations also seem to have very limited short-term effects, apart from being extremely costly. This holds great similarity with the hawkish enforcement approach against DTOs in Latin America. In the Middle East, radical groups have tapped into the broadcasting powers of new technology to spread their message to whomever it might resonate with. In a recent *Washington Post* article that covered the killing of Mohammed Emwazi AKA “Jihadi John”, Faysal Itani, a Middle East expert at the Atlantic Council stated, “Killing a high-profile propagandist is in itself a significant propaganda win. But this organization is extremely adaptable and, so long as it has access to an aggrieved Sunni population, will always reemerge in one way or another.”

**Interview Protocol/Data Management and Analysis:**

Alan Krueger’s study *Education, Poverty, Political Violence and Terrorism: Is there a causal connection* is often cited as the main argument against a possible correlation between socioeconomic conditions and radicalization in the Middle East. Krueger, pulling from Hezbollah’s weekly newspaper, *Al-Ahd*, analyzed the profiles of 129 members of Hezbollah’s military wing who died in action. The external validity of the study, however, may be questioned based on the biasedness of a sample that only includes militants of this particular group and listed in this particular journal. Additionally, a positive relationship with a factor like inequality may often not be borne out empirically in studies because it is particularly difficult to measure in less developed and more authoritarian countries, leaving us with a possible attenuation bias. This study aims to address these biases and dig deeper into root causes (though also addressing proximal causes) on violent radical groups across the board by collecting a wider sample and analyzing interview transcripts of elements from both secular and fundamentalist radicals.

---

The goal of the study is analyze interviews on at least 10 individuals who have been involved or connected to Muslim radicalism in the Middle East and violent pseudo-ideological cartels in Mexico and Guatemala. Using the proposed interview protocol (shown below), the researcher intends to construct a conceptual map of motivations and causes so as to piece together the commonalities on the individuals’ decisions to radicalize and resort to violence within a group. Once the information has been collected and interviews transcribed, we may construct visual word maps that highlight the most common themes of each group. Comparing these word maps can give us a reference of both individual and group dynamics and shed light on what, in fact, drives terrorism. This is a useful approach in the sense that it does not address only proximal causes that have spurred individuals into violence, but it engages these same individuals to look into the root of their frustration and disentangle the reasons for their actions, driving at not only direct effect of socioeconomic conditions but also indirect. Key words to look for that may suggest that inequality and social injustice are at play may be “unfair”, “deprived” or “disillusioned”.

Conclusion

The goal of this study is not to delegitimize the current preventive approach towards narcoterrorism or terrorism. These efforts must and should continue in order to safeguard the larger population. However, if these measures are not complemented with truly effective counterterrorism efforts that address the root of the issues in order to cripple the source of strength and legitimacy of violent radical factions, then we will continue to fight an uphill battle. Our perceived gains in this respect will quickly be reversed, especially if we consider that it is simply unfeasible to safeguard everything at all times. Moreover, as tensions boil to the surface, the world will be a more dangerous place.

Taking on a practical perspective, even our costly counterterrorism efforts by way of enforcement and surveillance have resulted in limited effectiveness. As of yet, factors that are weighed into assessing potential terrorists are incredibly broad and contested. A New York Times article points out the following: “As a practical matter, scientists note, checklists are mathematically certain to fail. Even a test with 99 percent accuracy would be wrong far more often than right. It is a counterintuitive thought, but in a country with a huge population and a tiny number of terrorists, even a nearly perfect test would flag many more innocent people than actual terrorists.”17 In cases where we have identified the underlying motivations, particularly based on ideologies, these have often already become engrained, reinforced and distorted over time, throughout a radicalized individual’s struggle and through personal interactions. Once an individual joins the fight, whether in Mexico or in Syria, they have almost always reached a point of no return. Thus, the crucial intervention point should be before they are convinced or coerced into joining. Their decision will often be driven by the options offered to them by their environment. How this environment plays a role and what combination of factors set the scene for it are vital, albeit complicated, points of analysis.

---