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Targeting the Poor: How Al-Qaida Would Recruit from Latin America

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Targeting the Poor: How Al-Qaida Would Recruit from Latin America*

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Abstract

The U.S. Department of State and experts on terrorism have suggested that the poor are a potential source of recruits for political and Islamic fundamentalist terrorist organizations. This observation is particularly applicable to the poor in Latin American nations (that is, the Caribbean and Central and South American regions). Focusing on al-Qaida, this paper uses Bayat's (2000) classification of the passive, surviving, political and resisting poor to argue that al-Qaida's recruitment efforts would target the surviving poor residing in Latin American nations because, relative to the other categories of the poor, the surviving poor demonstrate more activities in common with al-Qaida: for example, theft, kidnapping for ransom, narco-trafficking, and illegal immigrant smuggling. Such activities relate both to efforts by the surviving poor to escape poverty and to the planning and execution of terrorist acts by al-Qaida.

KEYWORDS: messianic terrorism, political terrorism, political poor, passive poor, resisting poor, surviving poor

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INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Department of State and scholars with expertise on terrorism have suggested that poverty provides a key source for the development of terrorism, and particularly for the recruitment of future terrorists (Marsella, 2004; U.S. Department of State, 2006; Wagner & Long, 2004). For example, Wagner and Long (2004) pointed out that poverty in Latin American nations “may well have led to the development and support for various terrorist guerrilla groups, such as the *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) in Peru and *FARC* [the Revolutionary Armed Forces] in Colombia” (p. 211). The poor experiencing economic distress in these and other Latin American nations may indeed try to eliminate the current political and social system with acts of terrorism. Examples of this sort would illustrate the possible connection between poverty and political terrorism.

This connection further merits attention with particular regard to the recruitment efforts of al-Qaida, even though some scholars (Heston, 2003; Paniagua, 2005a; Pipes, 2004) have observed that the poverty-terrorism relationship does not appear to be strongly evident in messianic terrorism or Islamic fundamentalist terrorism, as exemplified by al-Qaida. The U.S. Department of State (2006) raises a new possibility in its annual *Country Reports on Terrorism*. The report, which takes in militant Islamic groups such as al-Qaida, al-Jihad, Islamic Jihad Group and other fundamentalist Islamic terrorist organizations, suggests that al-Qaida’s recruitment interests could now extend to the poor residing in Latin American nations of the Caribbean as well as Central and South America.

Let’s assume, therefore, that al-Qaida does indeed want to recruit from among the Latin American poor. The question is: What type of poor would al-Qaida recruit in such a scenario? The aim here is to answer this question using Bayat’s (2000) classification of the *passive, political, resisting* and *surviving poor*.¹

BAYAT’S CLASSIFICATION OF THE POOR

According to Bayat (2000), the *passive poor* would typically adapt to their situation and struggle “to make ends meet” (p. 538). In a sense, these poor would be resigned to a “culture of poverty,” in which fatalism would prevail. Among Hispanics, “fatalism” is “the belief that a divine providence governs the world and that an individual cannot control or prevent adversity” (Paniagua, 2005b, p. 58).

¹ This argument is based on a conference entitled, “La Escalera Hacia el Terrorismo” [The Staircase to Terrorism] at the *National Dominican Police*, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, March 29, 2006.

Therefore, the passive poor would tend to believe that they are impoverished due to the workings of the “divine providence” that governs the world.

The *political poor*, on the other hand, would seek to get out of poverty by participating in the political process, through active membership in a given party and voting in democratic elections that could result in the victory of that party. The assumption is that people who are elected by the poor would keep their promises to eliminate poverty. These promises are almost never fulfilled, but the political poor would continue voting for the same party, hoping that one day it would respond to the needs of the poor. This category of poverty generally includes individuals who reside in the *barrios* and members of different church denominations—particularly the Catholic Church, the majority of whose members are poor. This is in contrast with Islam, which tends “to mobilize not the poor but largely the educated middle-classes” (Bayat, 2000, p. 540).

The *resisting poor* would try various avenues of escape from poverty, but two are particularly relevant here. First, the resisting poor could oppose the political and social system in power “without any revolutionary consequences” (Bayat, 2000, p. 543). For example, they might support a strike to demand that the government reduce the cost of certain products considered vital for the general public (for example, electricity, food, gasoline, and water). Alternatively, the goal might be the radical removal of the current political and social system, controlled by the dominant classes, and its replacement with a system run by the working classes with a long history of poverty. This would imply *revolutionary actions* leading to the establishment of a socialist state. This second alternative of the resisting poor is generally coordinated by a party or organization that is self-classified as socialist or communist. The *Sendero Luminoso* is an example of such a group that represents the resisting poor in Peru (Wagner & Long, 2004).

Although not considered in Bayat’s (2000) classification of the poor, an important point is that the resisting poor in a given Latin American nation would share their revolutionary ideas with resisting poor in other Latin American nations. But their final goal would be to eliminate poverty in their own nation with either non-revolutionary or revolutionary actions against the dominant classes. The actions of the resisting poor are thus localized to a given nation rather than global and extending to several nations.

The final category, the *surviving poor*, would neither resort to revolution nor wait for a “miracle” to relieve their poverty. The surviving poor would instead engage in illicit and usually criminal activities, in order “to counter unemployment or price increases” (Bayat, 2000, p. 539). Among such activities might be prostitution, theft, kidnapping for ransom, narco-trafficking, and illegal immigrant smuggling. Begging could also be included and could be either legal or illegal, depending on the laws of the particular nation or the context in which it

occurs. (For instance, begging might be accepted on the streets but not in the lobby of a hotel.)

WHICH TYPE OF LATIN AMERICAN POOR WOULD AL-QAIDA RECRUIT?

If, as the U.S. Department of State (2006) suggests, al-Qaida is interested in the recruitment of the poor from Latin American nations, one might expect to see the resisting poor targeted. The ideological roots of al-Qaida (Paniagua, 2005a), however, suggest two arguments to the contrary. First, the resisting poor in Latin American nations are not interested in establishing an Islamic state in their own nation (which is the central aim of al-Qaida in nations such as Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Saudi Arabia), but to eliminate the conditions that lead to poverty in that particular nation (for instance, the radical removal of the dominant classes). Second, as noted above, the actions of the resisting poor are local and not global, meaning that they are not interested in extending their non-revolutionary or revolutionary actions to other nations—in particular to nations, such as Iraq, that al-Qaida wants to be transformed into Islamic states.

Among the three remaining recruitment options, two would also be excluded by al-Qaida, namely the passive and the political poor. For the passive poor, getting out of poverty is not the main goal, because of their adaptation to the “culture of poverty” and their belief in fatalism (as defined above by Paniagua, 2005b). In the case of the political poor, the individual wants to get out of poverty but through a democratic path that would be inconsistent with acts of terrorism executed by al-Qaida, especially the killing of innocent people (women, children and the elderly) who have nothing to do with the war on terrorism.

If al-Qaida is to recruit the poor from Latin American nations, its best choice would be the surviving poor. With the exception of begging, al-Qaida and the surviving poor share many activities of a criminal nature. For example, narco-trafficking is one of the main financial sources for al-Qaida. In addition, illegal immigrant smuggling activities are special tactics used by al-Qaida to place terrorist cells across the world, to wait for the best opportunity to execute acts of violence. Al-Qaida may also be interested in recruiting prostitutes who would serve as “mediators” for certain operations including, for example, transport of money, collection of intelligence, and surveillance activities involving people and the infrastructure of the particular nation.

Another point to consider is that the surviving poor would not be aware that they are working for al-Qaida. If this knowledge were available, the surviving poor would probably move away from the terrorist organization as soon as possible, since terrorism is not the main goal of this category of poor. They are also, of course, not Muslims and are thus uninterested in defending the radical

fundamentalist ideology of al-Qaida, which is based on a false interpretation of the Glorious Qur'an (Asani, 2003; Paniagua, 2005a). In addition, the surviving poor are aware of the fact that al-Qaida is a very dangerous organization that should be avoided at any cost, including continuing in poverty, if this is the only way to sidestep the association with terrorism.

But having a sense of the dangers of al-Qaida would not ultimately be a defense or deterrent for the surviving poor, because only militant Muslims have knowledge of their membership in al-Qaida. And once they have been integrated into the al-Qaida cells, which is a group of four to six individuals (White, 2003), members of the particular cell only know about each other and have no knowledge of militant Muslims in other cells. Al-Qaida would thus not be disposed to share sensitive information or to reveal identities of key people to the non-Muslim surviving poor.

Keeping any association with itself secret would enhance al-Qaida's ability to recruit the surviving poor because, as noted above, given any sense of the truth, this category would likely move away from al-Qaida. In addition, lack of knowledge among potential recruits would make it harder for local intelligence services to prevent al-Qaida from attracting promising individuals. The surviving poor want to get out of poverty at any cost—just so long as they are unaware that the real price is their association with al-Qaida.

CONCLUSION

In its annual *Country Reports on Terrorism*, the U.S. Department of State (2006) pointed out that “there are no known operational cells of Islamic terrorists” in Latin American nations ((p.155); see also Wagner & Long, 2004). The same report, however, identifies poverty in such nations as a potential source of recruits to political and fundamentalist Islamic terrorist organizations such as the *Sendero Luminoso* and al-Qaida, respectively. If in fact al-Qaida does entertain the idea of recruiting the poor from Latin American nations, the conclusion to be drawn is that it would most likely target the “surviving poor.” This group would not, however, be members of al-Qaida, because membership would require a root in Muslim regions of the world and above all a clear intention to convert into militant Muslims in support of al-Qaida's radical ideology. Secretiveness would not only enhance al-Qaida's efforts to recruit the surviving poor in Latin American nations, but it would also hamper the efforts of local intelligence services to prevent such recruitment. Latin America's surviving poor could thus unknowingly serve as “mediators” in the terrorist operations of the al-Qaida.

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