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Engineers of Jihad: The Curious Connection between Violent Extremism and Education

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This book takes its point of departure from what the authors call “a surprising fact: engineers are overrepresented among violent Islamist extremists.” (viii) It undertakes a systematic investigation of this fact and its possible significance, using a wide range of available statistical and other information and appropriate statistical methods.

The first chapter undertakes to show that engineers are indeed overrepresented in violent Islamist groups in relation to their proportion in the male population of their countries of origin and to their proportion of university graduates, who are also overrepresented in violent Islamist groups. They also give reasons to discount the possibility that this is because recruiters from these groups prefer engineers.

The next chapter addresses the issue of “relative deprivation”. In many Muslim countries university graduates have suffered economically and engineers, additionally, have lost considerable prestige. This is a partial but not a full explanation since engineers are overrepresented also in countries that don’t have these problems and prominent individuals do not fit this profile. The third chapter further challenges the relative deprivation theory by showing that among Western based Muslim engineers are also overrepresented among university graduates who join violent Islamist groups. It further argues that for all Muslims engineers are more likely than other graduates to join violent as opposed to non-violent groups and religious rather than secular groups. They are also less likely to defect from their groups.

The fourth chapter presents historical connections and affinities between right-wing Westerners and Islamists and identifies fifteen characteristics of Islamist ideology, most of which are shared with Western right-wing extremists and few with left-wing extremists. The fifth chapter presents evidence that engineers are overrepresented among Western right-wing extremists, and somewhat more so among those with a religious orientation. In the sixth chapter the authors claim that European right-wingers are high on four specific psychological traits and use data from a major European study, among other sources, to show that engineers are also high on these. They also present evidence to show that in the West engineers generally have more conservative political views than others.

In relation to the original issue addressed by the book, the conclusion is that the key factor is not engineering as such but the underlying character traits that predispose both toward engineering and toward extreme (Western) right-wing views or, given the similarities, Islamism. Beyond this, it tends to “validate the core claim of political psychology that different ideologies attract different types because ideologies meet different [psychological] needs.” (155-6)

This summary hardly does justice the scope of material presented or to the detail and nuance of the arguments. In general the authors seem successful in making their case to the extent this is possible with the evidence available, the adequacy of which varies. For example, their initial list of 497 members of violent Islamist groups, of which they have educational information on 335, is drawn from a wide range of countries over about 40 years but is not a random sample and underrepresents some geographical areas, as the authors admit (7). The list can be questioned but it is hard to imagine how one would get a better list under present circumstances. The European Social Survey, used for university graduates in Europe, is evidently much more robust, while other studies seem to vary. Anecdotal material can contribute much but may not be sufficiently representative. The authors discuss quite frankly the deficiencies of their material, seek ways to compensate for them and discuss alternative hypotheses that might fit the data.



We should mention that the study excludes groups such Boko Haram, Shabab, ISIS and Taliban, in which many readers will be interested, since these operate differently from other groups in significant ways. The reader is advised of this in the introduction. (ix)

A weak link in the argument is that evidence for the four psychological traits discussed in chapter six is little beyond anecdotal for violent Islamists. They have to be inferred based other similarities with Western right-wing ideologies. It is a reasonable inference but hardly a water-tight one. The authors deal briefly with question of whether the traits in question are innate or acquired in the course of academic training and opt for the former on the basis of their evidence but they do not consider the possibility that these traits, even if innate, may be intensified by engineering training.

The authors discuss religiosity but only briefly. They discount it as an independent factor in the basis of several studies though admitting that the evidence is “mixed” (157). My faith in their judgement is not helped by their off hand statement that “Religiosity is typically a personal rather than a political value.” (158) Such a statement reflects Western secular assumptions but is problematic for the Muslim world. The subject needs more attention. Also, this is a very male oriented study, since the groups studied are heavily male. There is a short section on women, mainly to show that their political and psychological profiles are generally opposite to the groups studied, but there are some exceptions that could be further investigated.

An interesting point is made during the discussion of psychological traits that, unlike scientists, who are taught to ask questions, engineers tend to treat scientific results as given facts, much a like followers of “text-based religions” (148), and similar attitudes are found among Islamists. This point could be broadened to include all “fundamentalists”, Muslim and Christian, violent and non-violent, and discussed at greater length.

In fairness it must be said that the criticisms here point not so much to “weaknesses” in the book as to points worthy of further investigation. This relatively small book breaks significant new ground and should generate many more significant studies in this area. It should prove to be an important waystation on the path to better understanding not only of violent Islamism but of other political and politico-religious phenomena. It deserves a wide readership among those seriously interested in these subjects.

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