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

Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog
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Perhaps it's hard to imagine an engineer who is also a poet. After all, there seems to be a stark difference between the skills required by each profession. The dichotomy is undergirded by the notion that—whether engineering conditions engineers to act in particular ways, or engineers are born with a certain mindset—engineers possess certain traits, which lead them to do some things rather than others. The present title, *Engineers of Jihad*, examines the connection between education and another trait: the capacity for violence. The authors are particularly interested in why there is a disproportionate number (indeed, a significant overrepresentation) of engineers among the ranks of Muslim extremists. Based on this observation, they conclude that engineers are more prone to radicalization than other university graduates (11-16). Although the data could be explained by another hypothesis (there is a higher demand for engineers in extremist groups), the authors maintain that engineers possess certain character traits that predispose them to radicalization (164).

According to the authors' "relative deprivation" hypothesis, engineers in the Middle East were among the smartest, most ambitious, and most respected people in their communities. They believed that education was their path to a better life. When this did not come to pass (due to faltering economies in most Muslim-majority countries) these engineers felt cheated, and this feeling of deprivation made them vulnerable to radicalization (42-52). Much of this argument pivots on a contrast between Muslim-majority countries and Western countries. Thus the authors study a sample of "Western-based jihadis" to see whether it is compatible with expectations from the relative deprivation hypothesis. According to the hypothesis, "if social and economic conditions were to explain the overrepresentation of both graduates and engineers among Islamist radicals, we should find fewer university graduates among the jihadis who radicalized in Western countries" (60). Indeed they find there is an underrepresentation of people with university exposure among Islamic extremists in the Western sample, in contrast to those from the Muslim world samples (63), which the authors explain according to the relative deprivation hypothesis: "graduates

have better prospects and more to lose in the West than they do in poorer Islamic countries" (66).

At the same time, on average, Muslims in the West are less educated than non-Muslims in those societies. This minority condition puts the relative deprivation hypothesis in question—for if Muslims in the West do not represent the average education of Western countries, why is it significant that university graduates are underrepresented among Muslim extremists in the West? Moreover, the authors note that the "education levels in [their] Western sample broadly reflect the Muslim sub-populations they stem from" (64). This means that if we only consider the Muslim subpopulations, there is neither an underrepresentation nor an overrepresentation of the number of university graduates in the Western sample. Therefore, there is nothing relevant either to validate or reject the relative deprivation hypothesis. How the authors analyze their data, choosing not to compare Muslims in the Western sample with the Muslim population in the West, arbitrarily leans towards validating their hypothesis.

In subsequent chapters, the authors examine violent left-wing and right-wing groups in the West. After defining and examining specific personality traits among Islamic extremists and in the left-wing and right-wing groups, the authors conclude that Islamic and violent right-wing extremists are more similar to each other than they are to violent left-wing groups. The data indicates that most left-wing extremists with a university education have a background in the humanities or social sciences. By contrast, there is an overrepresentation of engineers among Muslim extremists and violent right-wing extremists. By accepting that degrees are proxies of character traits, *Engineers of Jihad* validates "the core claim of political psychology that different ideologies attract different types" (165).

Is "engineering" a universal category? Do particular traits cause individuals to choose certain fields of study? Rather than rehearsing an abstract nature vs. nurture debate, a closer look at the socio-historical conditions of education might be instructive. It seems to me that being an engineer in the Middle East is actually not comparable to being an engineer in the West. People living in the Middle East typically do not choose their course of study on the basis of their passions or personality traits. Factors ranging from socioeconomic class, gender, and family expectations all affect what subject one "chooses" to study (as indeed they do in the West). Such pressures rarely put one on the path to becoming a poet or a historian. Returning to the case I opened with, there is nothing peculiar about a Middle Eastern engineer who is dedicated to the art of poetry. Given my first-hand

knowledge of many such poet-engineers, I was skeptical of how the authors of *Engineers of Jihad* interpreted their data about the Middle East. The overrepresentation of engineers in their samples does not necessarily indicate a correlation between personality traits and ideologies. For instance, how many engineers in their samples would have become engineers if they were allowed to choose their course of education based on their passions or character traits? How many of these engineers are "actually", according to their temperament, poets and historians? By corollary, the number of non-engineers qua non-engineers is probably constant in the samples, yet the number of engineers qua non-engineers might change dramatically. This might lead to a smaller number of engineers qua engineers, and thus affect the validity of the authors' claim about an overrepresentation of engineers in the samples from the Middle East.

Despite such concerns, one cannot deny the insights of this work relevant to sociologists, religious studies scholars, political scientists, and economists. The book offers a novel way to consider the relationship between education and violence, mindset and ideology, as based in principles of political psychology.

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