Understanding Jihadi Networks

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Introduction

The terrorist threat to the United States of America comes from a violent Islamist revivalist social movement, united by a utopian vision of justice and fairness. Our efforts to deal with this threat are hampered by the wide variety of commonly held beliefs about terrorism. Conventional wisdom offers up several explanations: terrorists are a product of poverty and broken families; ignorance; the lack of skills and opportunities; thelack of occupational or family responsibilities; weak-mindedness and vulnerability to brainwashing; mental illness, psychopathy or sociopathy; plain criminality; religious fanaticism; or simply evil. My current study attempts to empirically test this conventional wisdom through the accumulation and analysis of biographical data on real terrorists who have sought to harm the United States.[1]

Traditionally, the study of terrorism has been hampered by attempts to define terrorism. Indeed, a common quip is that one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. So, my first task was to identify whom to include in this sample. My study was interested only in those terrorists connected to the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks. Therefore, it has excluded other terrorists such as the Palestinians or the Tamil Tigers—who are often lumped together, but who are not specifically linked to the anti-American perpetrators of 9/11. In order to delineate who belongs in my sample, it was necessary to define the threat to the United States.

The terrorists who flew into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and crashed into the fields of Pennsylvania on 9/11 were part of al Qaeda. The term al Qaeda is confusing, because it refers both to a specific organization and to a more diffuse and global social movement at war with the United States. The formal al Qaeda organization is the vanguard of this violent Islamist revivalist social movement. But I chose to include in my sample people who belong to this terrorist social movement, which I called the global Salafi jihad, because many of the terrorists are not formally in al Qaeda—in the sense of swearing an oath of loyalty to Osama bin Laden, its leader—but they are nevertheless fellow travelers with them. In order to define who belongs to this social movement, it is important to understand its nature.

The Evolution of the Global Salafi Jihad Ideology

The terrorist social movement is held together by a common vision. This arose in the context of gradual Muslim decadence over the past five hundred years, during which Islam fell from its dominant position in the world. Because Islam claims to be the last and perfect revelation from God, this decline presents a problem. Many explanations, secular and religious, have tried to deal with this obvious mismatch between claim and reality. One of the more popular religious explanations is simply that Muslims have strayed from the righteous path. The source of strength of the original and righteous Muslim community was its faith and its practices, which pleased God. Recapturing the glory and grandeur of the Golden Age requires a return to the authentic faith of the ancient ones—namely the Prophet Mohammed and his companions, the Salaf, from the Arabic word for predecessor or ancient one. The revivalist versions of Islam advocating such a return are called Salafi. Their strategy is the creation of a pure Islamist state, which would create the conditions for the reestablishment of such a community.

Most Salafists advocate a peaceful takeover of the state, either through face-to-face proselytism or the creation of legitimate political parties. Their peaceful strategy was undermined by President Nasser's brutal crackdown in the name of a pan-Arabist socialist project. Some Islamists like Sayyid Qutb concluded that Nasser would never give up power peacefully, and preached his violent overthrow.[2] He argued that Muslim countries had reached a state of decadence, injustice and unfairness, which was similar to the state of barbarism, *jahiliyya*, prevailing in the Arabian Peninsula just before the revelations of the Quran. This was due to a "crisis of values," namely greed, corruption and promiscuity, which could only be redressed from above, by capturing the state. Because their rulers were accused of having abandoned true Islam, they were branded apostates, and the Quranic punishment for apostasy was death. Mohammad Abdal Salam Faraj[3] further claimed that the violent overthrow of these rulers, the "near enemy," was the forgotten duty of each Muslim, a sixth pillar of Islam.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan internationalized the militant Islamist movement. Sheikh Abdallah Azzam preached a traditional jihad against the Soviet invaders. Many militants from all over the Muslim world answered his call. As the Soviets withdrew, Azzam extended the defensive jihad into a more global one. He preached that all former Muslim lands dating back to the fifteenth century, from the Philippines to Spain, had to be liberated from the infidels. After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, these militants focused on the other lands under infidel occupation. They gathered in the Sudan where they held intense discussions about their failure to capture a core Arab state and transform it into an Islamist state. Some militants, led by Osama bin Laden, argued that this failure was due to the United States propping up the local regimes.

The strategy that the most militant advocated was to switch priorities and fight the "far enemy"—the United States and Jews—in order to expel them from the Middle East, so that they could overthrow the "near enemy", their own regimes. This argument split the Islamist militant community, for many did not want to take on and provoke a powerful enemy like the United States. But Osama bin Laden and his followers returned to Afghanistan and declared war on the United States.[4] In February 1998, bin Laden extended his "Jihad against Jews and Crusaders" to civilians outside the Middle East, ruling that "to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it."[5]

With the evolution of this ideology and social movement in mind, it becomes possible to select the terrorists that belong in this sample: They are those who use violence against any foreign or non-Muslim government or population (the "far enemy") to establish an Islamist state in a core Arab region.

The History of the Global Salafi Jihad

The immediate historical roots of the present terrorist Islamist revivalist social movement go back to Egypt in the 1970s—when President Anwar al-Sadat encouraged the formation of Islamic Societies at the universities to counter the leftist supporters of Nasser. Some of these militants adopted the radical views of Qutb and Faraj and turned against Sadat himself when he made peace with Israel. They were responsible for his assassination in 1981. Most of these militants were arrested and tortured in a crackdown after Sadat's assassination. Those not directly involved were released three years later, and found their way to Afghanistan in support of Sheikh Azzam's jihad against the Soviets.

The presence in Afghanistan and Peshawar of so many Islamist militants from all over the world transformed the jihad—from a collection of local attempts to overthrow their governments to a more international movement reclaiming former Muslim lands lost to the infidels over the past five centuries. After their victory in Afghanistan, most of the foreigners returned to their home countries. But those who could not, mostly because of prior terrorist activities at home, stayed behind and became the nucleus of al Qaeda, the organization.

After many Middle Eastern countries complained to Pakistan that it was harboring terrorists, Pakistan expelled them. The most militant went to the Sudan, invited by the new militant regime of Hassan al-Turabi, who tried to unify the disparate local Islamist terrorist movements under one umbrella. His greatest supporter in this enterprise was Osama bin Laden, who set up camps in the Sudan and Afghanistan for the training of terrorists coming from the whole world. During this Sudanese episode, the most militant terrorists switched priorities to target a common enemy, the United States.

The imposition of international sanctions on the Sudan after it supported a serious assassination attempt on Egyptian President Mubarak during a state visit in Addis Ababa forced the Sudan to expel the terrorists. The few who agreed with bin Laden's strategy of going after the "far enemy" returned to Afghanistan, and within two months of their arrival, declared war on the United States. So the threat to the United States came from a process of self selection—in which the most militant of the most militant of the most militant switched their targets from their own governments to the United States.

Their return to Afghanistan heralded the start of a close collaboration with the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, who provided sanctuary to the now-global Salafi jihad. This allowed Osama bin Laden to gain control over this social movement through his monopoly on training and funding support for the various local Islamist terrorist groups scattered around the world. This gave the appearance of a hierarchical organization, with al Qaeda (Osama bin Laden's organization) at the top with strong command and control over the whole movement. During the five years leading to 9/11, this was mostly true—as bin Laden and his lieutenants provided training for local Islamist terrorists, housed them and their families in protected areas in Afghanistan, supported them with logistics and funds, and gave advice on their operations. In a real sense, for about five years, Osama bin Laden achieved in Afghanistan what Turabi had tried to do in the Sudan.

The U.S. reaction to the 9/11 terrorist operation changed the movement. The elimination of sanctuaries in Afghanistan, the destruction of the training camps and the disruption of the financial "golden chain" for the jihad undermined bin Laden's and al Qaeda's control over the social movement, which degraded back into smaller local networks of operatives, now linked through the Internet. To the extent that these smaller clusters of terrorists respond to the Salafi vision and general guidance from al Qaeda, they are still part of this global Salafi jihad. But there is no more need for a strong command and control structure. Now, this social movement is self generated from below, very similar in structure and behavior to the World Wide Web itself, which shows that there is no need for top down control for the network to grow and prosper.

Methodology

My present study is based on the collection of biographical details of people who belong to this global Salafi jihad. There is a paralyzing assumption in terrorism research that there is no good data for research, based on three presumptions:

1. That terrorists would not grant interviews to serious researchers for security reasons;
2. That states would not grant access to captured terrorists for national security reasons; and
3. The one can never besure whether the terrorists would be honest with the interviewer.

This has prevented the emergence of evidence-based terrorism research. However, with the development of the Internet, open source data has become more available—even in one's home. Indeed, all the data collected for this study came from the public domain. I did not have direct access to the terrorists or to any government's secret reports. But despite the problems listed above, I found there is enough information in open sources to support an empirical analysis of the global Salafi jihad.

My sources included the documents and transcripts of legal proceedings involving global Salafi terrorists and their organizations; government documents; press and scholarly articles; and Internet articles. The information was often inconsistent, so I considered the source of the information when assessing facts. In decreasing degrees of reliability, I favored transcripts of court proceedings subject to cross examination; government documents such as the 9/11 Commission Report; reports of court proceedings; corroborated information from people with direct access to the information provided; uncorroborated statements from people with direct access to the information provided; and, finally, statements from people who had heard information secondhand. "Experts" fall into the last category—for their reliability as sources of information depends on their diligence as historians.

The collected information suffers from several limitations:

1. First, the terrorists selected are hardly representative of the global Salafi jihad as a whole. Journalists and scholars tend to focus on the unusual: leaders, people they can investigate and unusual cases. This bias toward leaders and unusual cases tends to ignore those who cannot be investigated and downplays the rank and file.
2. Second, reliance on journalistic accounts is fraught with danger. In the rush to publish, the initial information may not be reliable. Lack of direct access to information feeds the wildest rumors, and journalists are born storytellers, who fill in the gaps in knowledge. These initial inaccuracies can be corrected by following the developing stories over time, rather than simply relying on initial reporting.
3. Third, reliance on retrospective accounts from principals and witnesses are subject to the biases of self-reporting and flawed memory. These accounts were often the only available information, and were only very occasionally able to be corroborated with existing contemporaneous documents.
4. Finally, there is a lack of a relevant control group that would allow the generation of statements specific to the terrorists. It is difficult to make specific statements about these terrorists without comparison to a group of Muslims with similar backgrounds and activities who did not participate in terrorism despite having had an opportunity to do so.

Nevertheless, the hope is that even though each piece of information may be of questionable validity, the emerging pattern would be accurate given the large numbers involved. A description of the potential sample might be able to support or refute the conventional wisdom about al Qaeda terrorism. Using the definition of a terrorist elaborated in the previous section, I was able to identify 394 terrorists—on whom there existed enough background information to include them in empirical generalizations as to age, origin, religious commitment, and education. I was able to codify them into a matrix with 34 variables, most of which dealt with their relationships to each other and are not relevant to this *Strategic Insight* .

Profiles of the al Qaeda Terrorists

As mentioned above, the common stereotype is that terrorism is a product of poor, desperate, naïve, single young men from Third World counties, vulnerable to brainwashing and recruitment into terror. Unpacking this formula, the geographical origins of the mujahedin should be not only the Third World, but some of the poorest countries of the Third World. It also implies that they come from the lowest socio-economic strata. Their naïve vulnerability implies that they either are brainwashed early into hatred of the West, or are relatively uneducated and susceptible to such brainwashing as young adults. In this sense, they are relatively unsophisticated and local in their outlook. A broad experience of the world might be protective against the alleged brainwashing that presumably led to their conversion to terrorism. The desperation implies that their occupational opportunities are extremely limited. They are single, for any strong family responsibilities might prevent their total dedication to a cause that demands their ultimate sacrifice.

But in fact, most of the global Salafi terrorists come from core Arab countries, immigrant communities in the West, Indonesia or Malaysia. They do not come from the poorest countries in the world, including Afghanistan. Surprisingly, there are no Afghans in my sample. In terms of socio-economic background, three-fourths come from upper and middle class families. Far from coming from broken families, they grew up in caring, intact families, and were mildly religious and concerned about their communities. In terms of education, over 60% have some college education. Most are in the technical fields, such as engineering, architecture, computers, medicine, and business. This is all the more remarkable because college education is still relatively uncommon in the countries or immigrant communities they come from. Far from being immature teenagers, the men in my sample joined the terrorist organization at an average age of 26.

Most of the terrorists have some occupational skills. Three-fourths are either professional (physicians, lawyers, architects, engineers, or teachers) or semi-professionals (businessmen, craftsmen, or computer specialists). They are solidly anchored in family responsibilities. Three-fourths are married and the majority have children. There was no indication of weak minds brainwashed by their family or education. About half of the sample grew up as religious children, but only 13% of the sample, almost all of them in Southeast Asia, were madrassa educated. The entire sample from the North African region and the second generation Europeans went to secular schools. About ten percent were Catholic converts to Islam, who could not have been brainwashed into Islam as children.

Another popular set of explanations of terrorism centers on mental illness or innate criminality. Such popular explanations are based on the belief that "normal" people do not kill civilians indiscriminately. Such killing, especially when combined with suicide, is viewed as irrational. The mental illness thesis is dealt a strong blow by the fact that only one percent of the sample had hints of a thought disorder, which is below the base rate for thought disorder worldwide. A variant of the abnormality thesis is that terrorists are sociopaths, psychopaths, or people with antisocial personality disorders. These terms are used to mean that terrorists are recidivist criminals, due to some defect of personality. Such recidivism implies that this personality defect had some antecedents in childhood. Out of the third of my sample where I had some fragment of childhood data, less than eight percent showed evidence of a conduct disorder. The rest of this group seems to have had normal childhood without any evidence of getting in trouble with the law.

On a logical basis, although antisocial people might become *individual* terrorists, they would not do well in a terrorist *organization*. Because of their personalities, they would not get along with others or fit well in an organization, and indeed would be least likely to join any organization that would demand great sacrifices from them. They would be weeded out early if they attempted to join. Likewise, very few people in my sample had any criminal background. Those who did came from the excluded North African immigrant community in Europe and Canada, where they

resorted to petty crime to survive. But there were no previously violent criminals in this sample. Therefore, it is more parsimonious to argue that in an organized operation demanding great personal sacrifice, those least likely to do any harm *individually* are best able to do so *collectively*.

The failure of mental illness as an explanation for terrorism is consistent with three decades of research that has been unable to detect any significant pattern of mental illness in terrorists. Indeed, these studies have indicated that terrorists are surprisingly normal in terms of mental health[6].

Group Dynamics

The above findings refute the conventional wisdom about terrorists. The global Salafi terrorists were generally middle-class, educated young men from caring and religious families, who grew up with strong positive values of religion, spirituality, and concern for their communities. They were truly global citizens, conversant in three or four languages, and skilled in computer technology. One of the striking findings of this sample is that three-fourths of the terrorists joined the jihad as expatriates, mostly as upwardly mobile young men studying abroad. At the time, they were separated from their original environment. An additional ten percent were second generation in the West, who felt a strong pull for the country of their parents. So a remarkable 84% were literally cut off from their culture and social origins. They were homesick, lonely, and alienated. Although they were intellectually gifted, they were marginalized, underemployed and generally excluded from the highest status in the new society.

Although they were not religious, they drifted to mosques for companionship. There, they met friends or relatives, with whom they moved in together often for dietary reasons. As their friendship intensified, they became a "bunch of guys," resenting society at large, which excluded them, developing a common religious collective identity, and egging themselves on to greater extremism. By the time they joined the jihad, there was a dramatic shift in devotion to their faith. About two-thirds of those who joined the jihad did so collectively with their friends or had a long time childhood friend already in the jihad. Another fifth had close relatives already in the jihad. These friendship or kinship bonds predated any ideological commitment. Once inside the social movement, they cemented their mutual bonds by marrying sisters and daughters of other terrorists. There was no evidence of "brainwashing"—the future terrorists simply acquired the beliefs of their friends.

Joining this violent social movement was a bottom-up activity. Al Qaeda had no top-down formal recruitment program. There was neither a central committee with a budget dedicated to recruitment nor any general campaign of recruitment. There was no need for either. There were plenty of volunteers who wanted to join the jihad. Al Qaeda's problem was never recruitment but selection. It was akin to applying to a very selective college. Many apply but few are accepted. Likewise, al Qaeda was able to assess and evaluate potential candidates who showed a desire to join by coming to Afghanistan for training. It invited only about 15 to 25 percent of that group to join the jihad. However, this reliance on self-recruits had a drawback: namely gaps in the distribution of the jihad. One of these gaps was the United States.

The few volunteers from the United States who came to Afghanistan to join the jihad were shocked by the anti-Americanism in the training camps, which was based on beliefs and ideas about the United States that they knew from personal experience to be false. Some, like the Lackawanna Six, tried to leave early or simply forget about their experience. Because of this gap, al Qaeda had to import terrorists from elsewhere to wage their war on U.S. soil. This was easier to do before 9/11 when there was easy access for Saudi citizens. But since 9/11, the United States has hardened the entry to the country, and increased its vigilance against suspicious foreign activities—making such operations much more difficult. The lack of an indigenous terrorist population ("sleeper cells") and the hardening of the U.S. target account for the lack of major al

Qaeda operations in the United States since 9/11. In contrast, most of the global Salafi jihad operations conducted elsewhere in the world after 9/11 relied heavily on indigenous global Salafi terrorists.

The process just described is grounded in social relations and dynamics. To look at it through individual lenses, as a Robinson Crusoe on a deserted island narrative, is to miss the fundamental social nature of this process. And this is where women play a critical role. So far, the account of the global Salafi jihad seems to be a pure male story of heroic warriors fighting the evil West. Yet women also play a critical role in this process. They provide the invisible infrastructure of the jihad. As influential parts of the social environment, they often encourage their relatives and friends to join the jihad. Many Christian converts or secular Muslims joined because of marriage to a committed wife. Indeed, invitation to join the Indonesian *Jemaah Islamiyah* depends on the background of the spouse of the applicant. And once in the jihad, single members often solidify their participation by marrying the sisters of other members. This further separates the new recruit from the rest of society and increases his loyalty to the social movement.

So far, this account has neglected the religious ideological contribution to the transformation of alienated young Muslims into fanatical terrorists. The specific interpretation of Islam that promoted this violent strategy with respect to the United States played a crucial role in this transformation. It provided the script to follow for these distressed cliques of men. But very few mosques worldwide preached this aberrant strategy to transform society using the utopian Salafi community as a model. Indeed, about ten mosques worldwide generated about 50 percent of my sample. This is a very small number, suggesting that the global Salafi jihad is a small collection of localized networks of people, rather than a more widely and randomly distributed one.

This script, stressing the justice and fairness of the original Muslim community, appeals to gifted young men who are excluded from the higher rewards of society. Combined with natural group processes, it transforms their values to conform to those of their ever closer friends. Faith and commitment are grounded and sustained in intense small group dynamics as friends and peers provide support and strength to help cope with any potential hardship. These born again believers welcome struggles in this life as a test of their faith. Over time, "authentic" Islamic spirituality and religious growth replace dominant "Western" values of career advancement and material wealth, which had contributed to their original feelings of exclusion, frustration, unfairness and injustice. They embrace Qutb's diagnosis that society faces a "crisis of values," for its main problems are not material but spiritual. The progressive detachment from the pursuit of material needs allows them to transcend their realistically frustrated aspirations, and promotes satisfaction with spiritual goals more consistent with their limited resources and opportunities—relieving the malaise arising from their exclusion and marginalized status. Their sacrifice and participation in this Islamist vanguard provide them with a sense of moral superiority, optimism and faith in the collective future. Their activism and firm belief in the righteousness of their mission generate a sense of efficacy that enables them to overcome the apathy and fear that would otherwise inhibit high risk terrorist operations.

Over time, there is a general shift in values: from the secular to the religious; from the material to the spiritual; from short-term opportunity to long-term vision; from individual concerns to communitarian sacrifice; from apathy to active engagement; from traditional morality to specific group morality; and from worldly gains to otherworldly rewards. This transformation is possible only within intense small group face-to-face interactions. The values and fellowship of these groups not only forge intense bonds of loyalty and a collective identity, but also give a glimpse of what a righteous Islamist society could be like. The small size of these cliques and the mutual dedication of their members allow them to spontaneously resolve their problems among themselves. The quality of these small and dense networks promotes in-group love, transforming self-interest into self-sacrifice for the cause and comrades. The militants' experience in these groups deludes them into believing that social problems would also be spontaneously resolved in

a righteous Islamist society, accounting for their curious lack of concern about what this ideal society would actually look like or how it might function politically or economically.

On a less positive perspective, these same group dynamics account for their hatred of Jews and the United States, as illustrated from the police wiretaps of their apartments in Montreal, Hamburg and Milan. This hatred is grounded in their everyday experience of humiliating exclusion from society at large and promoted within the group by a vicious process of one-upmanship of mutual complaints about the alienating society. This "bunch of guys" phenomenon escalates resentment into a hatred and rejection of the ambient society itself. They expressed their hatred by cursing its symbols and legitimizing myths and by endorsing a conspiracy theory of Jews corrupting a now totally degenerate and unredeemable society. The wiretaps give a hint of this visceral hatred that seeks to destroy society even at the cost of their own lives. This virulent rejection of society finds a home in the doctrine of *takfir* or excommunication of society, which is popular in militant circles and sanctions the commission of crimes against infidels in the pursuit of the jihad.

This trajectory from low-risk participation with an increasingly closer set of friends, to medium-risk proselytism for an ideal way of life, to high-risk terrorist activities is a progressive and insidious one. This progression embraces an ideology that frames activism as a moral obligation demanding self-sacrifice and unflinching commitment to the jihad. This particular interpretation of Islam stands apart in challenging the validity of mainstream Islamic faith and practices, and it isolates the new adherents to this doctrine. Their self sacrifice is again grounded in group dynamics. The terrorist is ready to show his devotion to his now exclusive friends, their group, and their cause by seeking death as a way to show his devotion to all of them. In-group love combined with out-group hate is a strong incentive for committing mass murder and suicide.

Network Analysis

The above analysis suggests that this form of terrorism is an emergent quality of dense networks rather than an aberration based in individual pathology. Doing a qualitative social network analysis on this sample generates statements that simply cannot be generated from a more individualistic perspective.

The topology of the network representing the interpersonal links in the global Salafi jihad is divided into four major clusters of terrorists that evolved individually into four different structures. There are many links between members within a specific cluster, but very few spanning two large clusters. At the center is the Central Staff cluster, which used to connect to the rest of the clusters before the United States' fall 2001 campaign against al Qaeda dramatically interfered with its communication to the social movement, and broke its operational links to the other clusters. This Central Staff consists mostly of Egyptian Islamist militants who were released from prison after Sadat's assassination and who went to Afghanistan to join the jihad against the Soviets.

They formalized their bonds of friendship and kinship into al Qaeda proper after the Soviets announced their intention to withdraw. They provide the leadership, training and ideological guidance to the movement. The structure of this cluster is difficult to describe, as most of their relationships date back to the 1970s in Egypt. It is both an informal self-organizing group of friends forged during their militant activities in Egypt and during their fight against the Soviets, and a hierarchical organization with bin Laden as its emir—supported by a *shura* composed of about a dozen members and dominated by Egyptians. The al Qaeda staff is divided into four committees, consisting of finances, military affairs, religious affairs, and public relations.

A second cluster consists of the Southeast Asian part of the social movement, dominated by the *Jemaah Islamiyah*, which is hierarchically organized around the leadership of Abu Bakar Baasyir. This cluster evolved out of the recruitment of Baasyir's students at his two schools, *Pondok Ngruki* in Indonesia and *Pesentren Luqmanul Hakiem* in Malaysia. As would be expected from

top-down recruitment of former disciples, this cluster looks like a rigid pyramid, where all the significant decisions are taken at the top and showing very little local initiative. This cluster is vulnerable to decapitation if the political will to destroy this cluster existed. This cluster has been mostly eliminated in Malaysia through aggressive government counter-terrorist action but still exists in Indonesia due to internal political reasons. This type of structure may also promote splinter group formation in the future, as has been the case in the Philippines.

The other two clusters constitute the great majority of the global Salafi terrorist social movement. They consist of Core Arabs coming out of Core Arab countries from the Arabian Peninsula, Jordan and Egypt; and Maghreb Arabs coming out of Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco and their expatriate communities, mostly in France. These clusters organized themselves spontaneously around local charismatic members, often in the vicinity of very radical Salafi mosques. This preferential attachment to the jihad resulted in a small world or cellular structure, which is decentralized with much local initiative and flexibility. As such, it is very robust, resistant against random attacks such as random arrests of its members or decapitation of its leadership.

This small world structure provided for rapid diffusion of terrorist innovation through popular social hubs and provided for flexible communication in all directions, rather than slow and vulnerable vertical communications required in strict hierarchical organizations. This communicative flexibility, based on pre-existing social bonds (kinship, friendship and later informal cliques), was a major contributing factor in the successful execution of terrorist operations. These informal communications bypassed the various rules of tradecraft advocated in the terrorist manuals, which reflected a more theoretical orientation to operational security, based on the "need to know" principle. This principle implies a hierarchical topology, with strict vertical communication. Such a communicative topology would ensure the failure of any operation because it would flood the vertical links of communication and prevent people in the field from talking to each other to overcome the inevitable obstacles arising in the field during the execution of a terrorist operation. Informal communications among intimates who knew each other, often from birth, and bypassed this security regulation violated this rule of tradecraft.

This explains an apparent inconsistency found when comparing the actual execution of global Salafi terrorist operations to policies found in their manuals. The execution of their operations was characterized by very poor tradecraft on the part of the terrorists—leaving behind documents which would immediately identify them, not using aliases but real names, using their personal phones when they knew they could be monitored, and so on. Paradoxically, it is this poor use of tradecraft that made their success possible, especially when the authorities were not paying attention to the threat. In the new post-9/11 environment, this poor tradecraft makes their detection possible and hampers their operation.

After the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan eliminated al Qaeda command and control, this social movement reverted back to its original morphology. Now, its boundaries have become very fuzzy. These new terrorists no longer formally belong to a terrorist organization. They are often a "bunch of guys" inspired by al Qaeda messages on the Internet. There is no fixed number of terrorists. The pool of potential terrorists fluctuates according to local grievances and the world situation. Activated cliques of militant friends swarm together for a specific operation. They do not respond to central command and control anymore, but are self-organizing from the bottom up, fueled by local initiative. Like the Internet, they function very well with little coordination from the top.

Gaps in the network don't last long, but become opportunities for the most aggressive to step up and fill the voids created by the elimination of the old leadership. While the old leadership has been gradually eliminated through death and capture, a complete new leadership has been reconstituted, different from the old one. Aggressive new leaders, lacking the training and support of their predecessors, conduct more frequent, reckless and hurried operations. Often, the time between conception and final execution of the operation is just weeks, not years as was true before the 9/11 operation. The difficulty of communication between the central staff and these

local groups has degraded the ability of the social movement to mount operations with the same degree of sophistication and coordination of 9/11 hijacking and 1998 East African embassies bombings. The wave of future terrorist operations will be similar in scale and execution to the bombings in Saudi Arabia, Casablanca, Istanbul and Madrid.

The distribution of the global Salafi jihad is based on the presence of militant mosques preaching the specific script advocating violence against Western civilians. This script interprets U.S. foreign political action, and transforms local grievances into global ones. Groups of friends, who had no or very distant previous connection to the movement, may elect to answer these exhortations for violence and carry out terrorist operations. This makes them very difficult to detect beforehand, for the first indication of their participation in the jihad might very well be the successful execution of their operation. This has been the scenario in Casablanca, Istanbul and Madrid.

The global Salafi jihad is a unique terrorist social movement. Traditionally, terrorist organizations consist of people from A, living in country A and attacking the government of country A. The global Salafi jihad consists of people from country A, living in country B and targeting country C. This imparts a very different dynamic to this terrorist social movement as opposed to more traditional ones. One of the major differences is that because the terrorists are completely disconnected from their target, they are not socially embedded in the society they target, as is the case of more traditional terrorist organizations. This embeddedness refers to the rich nexus of social and economic linkage between the terrorists and the society they live in.

These multiple bonds act as a limit to the damages the terrorists can bring to their environment. The lack of such bonds frees them from these responsibilities and local concerns. Unrestrained by any responsibility to their target, this free-floating network is free to follow the logic of its abstract ideology and escalate the scale of terror, culminating in the 9/11 operations. This lack of embeddedness in the target society makes possible a strategy of vast devastation and damages against the target, including the use of weapons of mass destruction, which more traditional terrorists would avoid in order not to destroy their own society. This makes the global Salafi jihad especially dangerous to the United States and its allies.

New information technology has made the global Salafi jihad possible. Prior to the 1991 Sudanese exile, Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants could not have led this social movement from the remoteness of Afghanistan. By the time he returned in 1996, technology had solved his communication problems. Satellite telephones allowed him to speak extensively with his followers in Yemen, England and Saudi Arabia; facsimiles carried his press releases to his London public relations firm; and laptops and e-mail made quick and extensive communication possible. The Internet also had a strong impact on the new, more sophisticated recruits by diffusing the violent Salafi message of the jihad, bypassing traditional imams. Since most of these computer savvy recruits had little prior religious training, they were most vulnerable to the appeal of such sites that encouraged a very aberrant interpretation of Islam and rejected traditional interpretations of Islam. The more traditional religious teachers simply could not compete with the more sophisticated militant websites, which did not require much knowledge in religion but a great deal of technical knowledge. The egalitarianism of chat-rooms on these sites also fostered a feeling of unity with other members, creating a virtual Muslim community on the Web, sustaining and encouraging extreme interpretation of the Quran and world events.

The vulnerability of the new electronic devices to interception has given the Internet more prominence in the global Salafi jihad. After the 1998 embassies bombings, bin Laden discovered through a media leak that the United States was monitoring his satellite phone conversations. He abandoned its use and communicated with his followers via his lieutenants. The post-9/11 crackdown further eroded his ability to communicate with their subordinates in the field. The old al Qaeda leadership started using Islamist websites on the Internet as indirect means of communication. This allows it to continue to provide general guidance even if it no longer exerts direct command and control over operations. For instance, it appears that the Madrid bombings

were inspired by a document anonymously posted on the Internet advocating the use of bombs just before the Spanish election in order to influence the government to withdraw its troops from Iraq. In the future, this trend will continue and the leadership of the global Salafi jihad will rely more and more on the Internet to broadcast its message and to discuss tactics, as is already done in the proliferating virtual magazines. Since it is difficult to detect people who read these postings, identification of future terrorists will become even more difficult.

Conclusion

The global Salafi jihad has now become a fuzzy idea-based network, self-organizing from below, inspired by postings on the Internet. It will expand spontaneously from below according to international political developments, without coordination from above, except for general and blind guidance. From a counter-terrorist perspective, such a loose and ill-defined network does not present hard targets for military options. More subtle methods should be used to disrupt the formation of these networks by changing the social conditions promoting them, and challenging the ideas encouraging their mobilization for the United States to address the ideology uniting this social movement. This is something that the American public is loath to do as it believes in transparency, namely that the facts speak for themselves.

Any attempt to engage in a war of ideas raises the specter of disinformation or propaganda. But the United States cannot afford to concede this ideological war, waged on the battlefield of interpretations, to the militant Islamists. It needs to develop a coherent and comprehensive strategy to deal with this new and unique threat. This involves discrediting the legitimacy of the leaders and the ideology behind the global Salafi jihad and replacing it with an inspiring vision of a just and fair partnership with Islam. Unfortunately, the United States is poorly set up to wage such a war. Our free media broadcasts statements targeted for domestic consumption which angers international audiences, for in politics the domestic agenda will always trump foreign concerns.

Such an ideological war would also require the United States to regain the credibility that it has lost in the Muslim world in the past four years because of its lack of evenhandedness in the Israeli-Palestinian problem, its invasion of Iraq on false premises, and its support of repressive Muslim regimes. U.S. words, public diplomacy, would need to be matched with deeds to regain this lost trust and credibility. Otherwise, any statement, no matter how laudable, would simply be dismissed as hypocritical and further encourage the spread of the global Salafi jihad.

About the Author

Marc Sageman is a clinical assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania. After graduating from Harvard, he obtained an M.D. and a Ph.D. in sociology from New York University. After a tour as a flight surgeon in the U.S. Navy, he joined the Central Intelligence Agency in 1984. He spent a year on the Afghan Task Force, then went to Islamabad from 1987 to 1989, where he ran the U.S. unilateral programs with the Afghan Mujahedin. In 1991, he resigned from the agency to return to medicine. He completed a residency in psychiatry at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. Since 1994, he has been in the private practice of forensic and clinical psychiatry, and has had the opportunity to evaluate around 500 murderers. After 9/11, he started collecting biographical material on about 400 al Qaeda terrorists to test the validity of the conventional wisdom on terrorism. This research has been published as *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004). Sageman has testified before the 9/11 Commission and serves as a consultant on terrorism to various government agencies.

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