

## **The Psychology of al Qaeda Terrorists**

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Since the attack of 9/11/01, the U.S. military is heavily engaged in the war on terror. At present, SOCOM (Special Operations Command) is the lead on the Global War on Terrorism. In support of this mission, military psychologists may be called upon to interact with al Qaeda terrorists, many of whom are already incarcerated at Guantanamo Bay under military guard. Therefore, it is important to understand the psychology of these terrorists, who wish to harm the United States of America.

The conventional wisdom about terrorists is that they are products of poverty, broken families, and ignorance who lack skills and opportunities; they are without occupational or family responsibilities, or have weak minds, vulnerable to brainwashing from madrassas or their families of origin. Alternative explanations of terrorism center on personality factors. Some claim that terrorists, especially those who commit suicide in the process of murdering innocent civilians, are mentally ill, have personality disorders, are criminals, religious fanatics, or simply evil. A third set of explanations for terrorism focuses on situational factors, namely the circumstances prevailing in the lives of the potential terrorists at the time they joined their respective terrorist organizations. The present study attempts to empirically test this conventional wisdom through accumulation and analysis of biographical data on the terrorists who wished to harm the U.S. (Sageman, 2004).

Traditionally, the study of terrorism has been hampered by attempts to define terrorism. A common quip is that one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. So, the first task was to identify whom to include in this sample. This study was interested only in the terrorists connected to the perpetrators of the attacks of 9/11. Therefore, it excluded other terrorists such as the Palestinians or Tamil Tigers, whom many people lump together, but who are not linked to the anti-American perpetrators. In order to delineate who belongs in the sample, it is necessary to define the threat to the U.S.

The terrorists who flew into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and crashed in the fields of Pennsylvania on 9/11/01 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 U.S. Al Qaeda the formal organization is the vanguard of this violent Islamist revivalist social movement. I chose to include in my sample people who belonged 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 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**

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 (Qutb, n.d.). 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 (1986) 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 further galvanized the Islamist militant movement worldwide. 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. A few of the foreign Arab fighters in Afghanistan answered his call. Most of the foreigners returned to their country. 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. During this Sudanese exile, the Islamist militants held intense discussions about their failure to capture a core Arab state and transform it into an Islamist state. Some militants argued that this failure was due to the U.S. propping up the local regimes. The strategy espoused by the most militant was to switch priorities and fight the "far enemy" (the U.S. and Jews) in order to expel them from the Middle East, so that they could then overthrow the "near enemy," their own regimes. This argument split the Islamist militant community, for many did not want to provoke and take on a powerful enemy like the U.S. When the Sudan was forced to expel the militants from their country, the few who advocated fighting the "far enemy" returned to Afghanistan. So the most militant of the most militant of the most militant returned to Afghanistan under the leadership of Osama bin Laden in the summer of 1996, and within two months of their return declared war on the United States (bin Laden, 1996). In February 1998, bin Laden extended his "Jihad against Jews and Crusaders" to include 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” (bin Laden, 1998).

With the evolution of this ideology and social movement in mind, it is now 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.

## **Methodology**

There is a paralyzing assumption in terrorism research that there is no good data for research. First, terrorists would not grant interviews to serious researchers for security reasons. Second, the state would not grant access to captured terrorists for national security reasons. Third, one is never sure 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. 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. Despite the problems listed above, 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. I considered the source of the information in assessing facts. In decreasing degrees of reliability, I favored transcripts of court proceedings subject to cross examination, followed by government documents such the 9/11 Commission Report, followed by reports of court proceedings, then corroborated information from people with direct access to the information provided, uncorroborated statements with people with that access, 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. 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. 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. Third, reliance on retrospective accounts from principals and witnesses are subject to the biases of self-report and flawed memory. These accounts were often the only available information, and were very occasionally able to be corroborated with existing contemporaneous documents. 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 was that even though each piece of information may be of questionable validity, the emerging pattern would be accurate because of the large numbers involved. A description of the whole 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 thirty-four variables, most of which dealt with their relationships to each other and are not relevant to this chapter.

### **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 countries, 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.

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 is no Afghan 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, 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 the age of twenty-six years, on average. 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 disorder. 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 (Silke, 2003).

### **Personality Dynamics**

Despite this consensus, some versions of the mental illness thesis still survive among mental health professionals, who seek an explanation for terrorism in terms of pathological personality dynamics. At present, the most fashionable versions of this thesis stem from neo-Freudian theories (Post, 1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1990/1998). While acknowledging the lack of *major* psychopathology in terrorists and *substantially* acknowledging their normality, these sophisticated versions claim that terrorists suffer from some form of personality pathology due to childhood trauma. That is, psychological forces compel them to commit acts of violence. These arguments take three forms.

All versions of the personality pathology thesis confidently assert that terrorists share common personality features: they are action-oriented, aggressive people, who are stimulus-hungry and seek excitement. Their common psychological defense mechanisms are “externalization” and “splitting”, features common in individuals with narcissistic personality disorder, often the result of childhood narcissistic wounds. The essence of the argument is that narcissistic wounds at an early age split the self into a grandiose “me” and a hated and devalued “not me” projected onto outside specific targets, which are blamed and transformed into scapegoats. Unable to face his own inadequacies, the potential terrorist needs a target to blame and attack. Acknowledging the “paucity of data

to satisfy even the minimal requirements of social scientists” and the “lack of a control group,” Post identified two types of inner dynamics that might heal a fragmented identity, resolve the split, and enable the individual to be at one with himself and society. The “nationalist-separatist” terrorists are loyal to their parents, who reject the regime; they are carrying on the mission of their parents, who were wounded by the regime. The “anarchic-ideologues” are disloyal to their parents’ generation, which is identified with the regime. Through terrorism, they are striking at their parents, seeking to heal their inner wounds by attacking the outside enemy. Post’s followers (Pearlstein, 1991; Gilmartin, 1996; Volkan, 1997; Akhtar, 1999) are mental health professionals who have little experience with terrorism. Their speculations about childhood victimization leading to “pathological” or “malignant” narcissism (or pathological anger or rage) and terrorism lack Post’s careful statements about the absence of empirical evidence for this theory.

However, Post’s twin dynamics of disloyalty to parents or the state fail to explain the global Salafi jihad. By definition, this jihad is not directed at the state (near enemy) where the terrorists grew up but at the United States (far enemy). So they could neither avenge their parents against their native state nor strike out against their parents in the symbol of their native state. The United States did not “wound” their parents in the “nationalistic-separatist” logic, and their parents are often hostile to the West rather than identifying with it, in the “anarchic-ideologue” logic. The logic of the global Salafi jihad is altogether different. The evidence from the sample of these terrorists shows well adjusted children, without any antecedents of a narcissistic personality disorder. Nor was there much evidence of “childhood trauma” described by self, friends, or relatives. As a group, they had surprisingly little personal trauma in their lives, given their origin (communities with higher mortality rate than the Western world). There is little evidence of pathological, malignant or even simple narcissism in the sample. Unlike many other terrorist organizations, Salafi groups are careful to avoid a cult of personality, for they believe that everything belongs to God. Indeed, they take seriously the notion of Islam as submission, and this is not compatible with a narcissistic cult of personality, which often degenerates in a pyramidal organization, with all the controls in the hands of the leader. Al Qaeda’s structure is quite the opposite, with a large degree of local autonomy and initiative.

A second variant of the personality pathology thesis reformulates the above dynamics to claim that terrorists suffer from paranoid personality disorder (Robins and Post, 1997). The core dynamic of the paranoid personality is surprisingly similar to that of malignant narcissism. Ideas of persecution and grandeur are a shield against uncomfortable feelings of depletion, inadequacy, shame and vulnerability. The dynamic consists of a triad of insatiable narcissistic entitlement; disappointment, disillusionment and frustration that inevitably result when the narcissistic needs are not satisfied; and narcissistic rage arising from the rejection of the entitlement and a sense of betrayal. This rage is projected onto scapegoats – hence the need to have enemies (Volkan, 1994) – and results in violence. This is the essence of the “psychopolitics of hatred” (Robins and Post, 1997). Group paranoia is viewed simply as a manifestation of the leader’s pathology. The followers suffer from a deprecation of their blemished personalities and demonstrate a readiness to hate, to imitate, to uncritically believe, and to attempt the impossible. Religious ideology provides a rationale for followers who yearn for a calling, a group to join, a leader to follow, in order to flee from the self. Their sense of

self rests upon the integrity of their belief system, which protects them against painful psychological disintegration. From this perspective, their actions are seen as defensive aggression against an enemy who is challenging their belief systems, and thereby threatening their psychological integrity and provoking passionate, often violent responses.

This account, which depends on mysterious internal forces that cannot be formally surveyed, is of course not refutable. What needs to be shown is that leaders and followers of the global Salafi jihad either suffer from paranoid personality disorder or the paranoid dynamic triad. The sample under study did not reveal a pattern of paranoid personality disorder or lifestyle before joining the jihad. The concern with security and secrecy after joining the social movement is simply a realistic necessity for survival of these clandestine organizations and not indicative of any pathology. Likewise, any politically violent group, whatever its ideology, demonizes its opponent. This is in the nature of these organizations and does not imply paranoia. Indeed, the leadership of the global Salafi jihad has been remarkably free of internal purges and vicious infighting so common with more traditional terrorist organizations. This promotion of cooperation among different local terrorist groups is not consistent with the paranoid style of leadership postulated in this second variant of the pathological personality thesis.

A third variant is a revival of the Authoritarian Personality project of the 1950s (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford, 1950). This thesis postulated that punitive child rearing results in a personality style characterized by conformity, submission to authority, and aggression toward outsiders. In looking at the biographies of the terrorists in this study, harsh child rearing is present in only a handful of cases. For the vast majority, it seems the opposite is true. The terrorists as children were overprotected in very caring families with often doting parents.

The main problem with the personality pathology explanation of terrorism is the lack of relevant data to support it. Furthermore, this thesis suffers from the fundamental problem of specificity. Concepts are stretched to be all-inclusive and lose their analytic usefulness. Such accounts become post-hoc theories that have no practical value. Conspiracy theories are a ubiquitous feature of human life, not particularly indicative of mental pathology and definitely not specific to terrorists. Experts on terrorism have tried in vain for three decades to identify a common predisposition for terrorism. The most extensive research projects focused on former German and Italian terrorists from the 1970s. The studies concluded that there was no psychological profile for terrorism. In addition, recent comprehensive reviews of the evidentiary basis of this thesis have found it to be completely unfounded (Silke, 1998; Horgan, 2003). The personality pathology thesis is not relevant to the global Salafi jihad.

### **Situational variables**

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 environments. An additional 10% 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 societies. 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, egging each other on into 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 no central committee with a dedicated budget for recruitment or any general campaign of recruitment. There was no need for them. 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 desire to join by coming to Afghanistan for training. It invited only about fifteen to twenty-five percent of that group to join the jihad.

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.

### **Motivating terrorist operations**

So far, the evidence points to mobilization into this terrorist social movement as a social process based on pre-existing friendship and kinship. But the most troubling aspect of this group of terrorists is their willingness to kill innocent civilians and themselves in the process. How does this process take place? This is where the role of religion comes into play.

Salafi ideology promotes new values, centered on personal commitment to Islam and the Islamic community. It preaches a new activist conception of Islam, where it is a personal duty incumbent on every Muslim to participate in the building of an Islamist society and state. New adherents usually welcome this new activist mandate despite considerable personal cost because it replaces the malaise of their passivity in the face their marginality in society with a new sense of purpose and efficacy born from action. It also rewards them with feelings of solidarity with small cliques of like minded militants transcending their alienation from society and its values.

This transformation starts innocuously with the lifelong struggle to become a good Muslim. In Salafi doctrine, it implies an emulation of the mythical Salaf, which means a process of self purification or struggle within oneself for the sake of God (greater jihad). His behavior must set a personal and vivid example to promote Islam as a worldview and a way of life. The novice must battle his own desires and temptation and reject material and sensual pleasures in his quest. Self-denial is difficult for life is full of temptations. This may explain the hostility at tempting and suggestive sexual images, making such self control all the more difficult.

Although this personal jihad is presented as an individual struggle against one's temptations, in reality, it is a social one. 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. The jihadists 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 frustrated realistic aspirations and promotes satisfaction with spiritual goals. These goals are more consistent with their limited resources and opportunities, and relieve the malaise arising from their exclusion and marginalized status. Their sacrifices and participation in this Islamist vanguard provide them with a sense of moral superiority, optimism and faith in a 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.

So far, this description of the transformation from a newly mobilized recruit into a motivated militant has stressed the positive and idealistic dimension of the process, much as militants report or subjectively experience it. However, there is a darker and more negative part of this process that insiders rarely talk about but outsiders clearly pick up, namely the out-group hate displayed by these groups. Such hate is loud and clear in their private speech captured in the wiretaps of the Hamburg, Montreal and Milan al Qaeda cells recorded in the late 1990's and all too visible on websites sympathetic to al Qaeda. A top-down focus on the refined abstractions of the Quran and Hadith or al Qaeda official proclamations cannot explain the unleashed hatred and passion. Only a bottom-up examination of the concrete interactions of the militants and their circumstances can account for this hatred. It 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 in 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, and 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 and challenges the validity of mainstream Islamic faith and practices and 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.

## **Conclusion**

The terrorism of the global Salafi jihad is grounded in group dynamics rather than individual pathology. Once a participant in this violent social movement, it is difficult for an individual to abandon it without betraying his closest friends and family. This natural and intense loyalty to the group inspires the participant's faith and transforms alienated young Muslims into fanatical terrorists.

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