



E-Notes

Understanding Terror Networks

by Marc Sageman

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*Marc Sageman, a newly appointed FPRI Senior Fellow, was a CIA case officer in Afghanistan between 1987–89 and is now a forensic psychiatrist. This essay is based on his FPRI BookTalk on October 6, 2004, which doubled as one of our regular Situation Reports on the War on Terrorism, held every two months. His book, *Understanding Terror Networks*, was published by the University of Pennsylvania Press earlier this year. For more information about FPRI's Center on Terrorism, Counter-Terrorism, and Homeland Security, visit www.fpri.org/research/terrorism.*

After leaving the CIA, I was happy in my naive belief that I had left all that behind me. But after 9-11, like everyone, I wanted to do something. What people were saying about the perpetrators shortly after the attacks was simply not consistent with my own experience. I began to apply the principles of evidence-based medicine to terrorism research, because there really was no data on the perpetrators. There were theories, opinions, and anecdotal evidence, but there was no systematic gathering of data.

I started gathering terrorist biographies from various sources, mostly from the records of trials. The trial that took place in New York in 2001 in connection with the 1998 embassy bombing, for instance, was 72 days long and had a wealth of information, 9,000 pages of it. I wanted to collect this information to test the conventional wisdom about terrorism. With some 400 biographies, all in a matrix, I began social-network analysis of this group.

Background

We all know that Al Qaeda is a violent, Islamist, revivalist social movement, held together by a common vision of a Salafi state. Al Qaeda proper is just a small organization within this larger social movement. We often mistake the social movement for Al Qaeda and vice versa because for about five years, Al Qaeda had more or less control of the social movement.

The segment that poses a threat to the United States came out of Egypt. Most of the leadership and the whole ideology of Al Qaeda derives from Egyptian writer Sayyid Qutb (1906–66) and his progeny, who killed Anwar Sadat and were arrested in October 1981. President Mubarak generously allowed them to be released in 1984.

Many of the released men, harassed by the Egyptian police, migrated to Afghanistan. With the end of the Soviet-Afghan War, they continued on to jihad. These Arab outsiders actually did not fight in the Soviet-Afghan War except for one small battle at Jaji/Ali Kheyl, which was really defensive: the Arabs had put their camp on the main logistic supply line, and in the spring of 1987 the Soviets tried to destroy it. So they were really more the recipient of a Soviet offensive, but they really did not fight in that war and thus the U.S. had absolutely no contact with them. I heard about the battle of Jaji at the time, and it never dawned on me to ask the Afghans I debriefed who the Arabs were. They turned out to be bin Laden and his men at the Al-Masada (Lion's Den) camp.

After the war, a lot of these foreigners returned to their countries. Those who could not return because they were terrorists remained in Afghanistan. In 1991, Algeria and Egypt complained to Pakistan that it was harboring terrorists, so Pakistan expelled them. Thus the most militant of these terrorists made their way to

Khartoum, where they were invited by Hassan al-Turabi of the National Islamic Front in Khartoum.

The Khartoum period is critical, because what these violent Salafists basically want to do is to create a Salafi state in a core Arab country. Salafi (from Salaf, "ancient ones" or "predecessors" in Arabic) is an emulation, an imitation of the mythical Muslim community that existed at the time of Mohammed and his companion, which Salafists believe was the only fair and just society that ever existed. A very small subset of Salafis, the disciples of Qutb, believe they cannot create this state peacefully through the ballot-box but have to use violence. The utopia they strive for is similar to most utopias in European thought of the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, such as the communist classless society.

In Khartoum, the Salafists theorized that the reason they had been unable to overthrow their own government (the "near enemy") was because it was propped up by the "far enemy"— the United States. So they decided to redirect their efforts and, instead of going after their own government, to attack the "far-enemy." In 1996, for many reasons, Hassan al- Bashir, the President of Sudan, had to expel Al Qaeda after the imposition of international sanctions, because the Sudanese Government was implicated in the attempt to assassinate Egyptian President Mubarak in Addis Ababa in 1995. In August 1996, within two months of returning to Afghanistan, bin Laden issued a fatwa declaring war on the United States.

The fatwa clearly articulated the new goals of this movement, which were to get the U.S. out of the Middle East so they would be free to overthrow the Saudi monarchy or the Egyptian regime and establish a Salafi state. This remains their goal and is why 9-11 happened. This is why the embassy bombing happened. It's really not so much to destroy the United States, something they know they cannot do right now. This is all why I put the start of the threat against us at 1996.

The Data

The 400 terrorists on whom I've collected data were the ones who actually targeted the "far enemy," the U.S., as opposed to their own governments. I wanted to limit myself for analytical purity to that group, to see if I could identify anything different from other terrorist movements, which were far more nationalistic.

Most people think that terrorism comes from poverty, broken families, ignorance, immaturity, lack of family or occupational responsibilities, weak minds susceptible to brainwashing - the sociopath, the criminals, the religious fanatic, or, in this country, some believe they're just plain evil.

Taking these perceived root causes in turn, three quarters of my sample came from the upper or middle class. The vast majority—90 percent—came from caring, intact families. Sixty-three percent had gone to college, as compared with the 5-6 percent that's usual for the third world. These are the best and brightest of their societies in many ways.

Al Qaeda's members are not the Palestinian fourteen-year- olds we see on the news, but join the jihad at the average age of 26. Three-quarters were professionals or semi- professionals. They are engineers, architects, and civil engineers, mostly scientists. Very few humanities are represented, and quite surprisingly very few had any background in religion. The natural sciences predominate. Bin Laden himself is a civil engineer, Zawahiri is a physician, Mohammed Atta was, of course, an architect; and a few members are military, such as Mohammed Ibrahim Makawi, who is supposedly the head of the military committee.

Far from having no family or job responsibilities, 73 percent were married and the vast majority had children. Those who were not married were usually too young to be married. Only 13 percent were madrasa-trained and most of them come from what I call the Southeast Asian sample, the Jemaah Islamiyya (JI). They had gone to schools headed by Sungkar and Bashir. Sungkar was the head of JI; he died in 1999. His successor, Bashir, is the cleric who is being tried for the Jakarta Marriott bombing of August 2003; he is also suspected of planning the October 2002 Bali bombing.

As a psychiatrist, originally I was looking for any characteristic common to these men. But only four of the 400 men had any hint of a disorder. This is below the worldwide base rate for thought disorders. So they are as healthy as the general population. I didn't find many personality disorders, which makes sense in that people who are antisocial usually don't cooperate well enough with others to join groups. This is a well-organized type of terrorism: these men are not like Unabomber Ted Kaczynski, loners off planning in the woods. Loners are weeded out

early on. Of the nineteen 9-11 terrorists, none had a criminal record. You could almost say that those least likely to cause harm individually are most likely to do so collectively.

At the time they joined jihad, the terrorists were not very religious. They only became religious once they joined the jihad. Seventy percent of my sample joined the jihad while they were living in another country from where they grew up. So someone from country A is living in country B and going after country C—the United States. This is very different from the usual terrorist of the past, someone from country A, living in country A, going after country A's government. I want to remind that I'm addressing my sample of those who attacked the U.S., not Palestinians, Chechens, Kashmiris, etc.

France happened to generate a lot of my sample, fourth behind Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Morocco. Eighty percent were, in some way, totally excluded from the society they lived in. Sixty-eight percent either had preexisting friendships with people already in the jihad or were part of a group of friends who collectively joined the jihad together: this is typical of the Hamburg group that did 9-11, the Montreal group that included Ahmed Ressam, the millennial bomber. Another 20 percent had close family bonds to the jihad. The Khadr family from Toronto is typical: the father, Ahmed Saeed Khadr, who had a computer engineering degree from Ottawa and was killed in Pakistan in October 2003, got his five sons involved: all of them trained in al Qaeda camps and one has been held for killing a U.S. medic. Their mother is involved in financing the group.

So between the two, you have 88 percent with friendship/family bonds to the jihad; the rest are usually disciples of Bashir and Sungkar. But that's not the whole story. They also seem to have clustered around ten mosques worldwide that generated about 50 percent of my sample. If you add the two institutions in Indonesia, twelve institutions generated 60 percent of my sample. So, you're talking about a very select, small group of people. This is not as widespread as people think.

So what's in common? There's really no profile, just similar trajectories to joining the jihad and that most of these men were upwardly and geographically mobile. Because they were the best and brightest, they were sent abroad to study. They came from moderately religious, caring, middle-class families. They're skilled in computer technology. They spoke three, four, five, six languages. Most Americans don't know Arabic; these men know two or three Western languages: German, French, English.

When they became homesick, they did what anyone would and tried to congregate with people like themselves, whom they would find at mosques. So they drifted towards the mosque, not because they were religious, but because they were seeking friends. They moved in together in apartments, in order to share the rent and also to eat together - they were mostly halal, those who observed the Muslim dietary laws, similar in some respects to the kosher laws of Judaism. Some argue that such laws help to bind a group together since observing them is something very difficult and more easily done in a group. A micro-culture develops that strengthens and absorbs the participants as a unit. This is a halal theory of terrorism, if you like.

These cliques, often in the vicinity of mosques that had a militant script advocating violence to overthrow the corrupt regimes, transformed alienated young Muslims into terrorists. It's all really group dynamics. You cannot understand the 9/11 type of terrorism from individual characteristics. The suicide bombers in Spain are another perfect example. Seven terrorists sharing an apartment and one saying "Tonight we're all going to go, guys." You can't betray your friends, and so you go along. Individually, they probably would not have done it.

There are potentially a lot of groups of guys around the world, who want to do something but just don't know how to do it. After 9-11, the whole network changed completely. There is no recruitment, really. In my sample, I have found no case of a recruiter. They're all volunteers. Before 9-11, a group like the Lackawanna Six would go to Afghanistan to fight a jihad. When they got to Afghanistan, they heard all this propaganda against the United States. They realized they were in the wrong place, got scared, and wanted to get out—they had no intention of becoming terrorists afterwards. Even the prosecution never suggested that they would have become terrorists. They had broken the law by going to a terrorist organization, so they pled guilty to aiding and abetting a terrorist organization, but there was no hint that they would have become terrorists.

Indeed, there are not that many terrorists in America. There have never been any sleeper cells. All the terrorists are fairly obvious. The FBI cases we see in the press tend to unravel. The Detroit group has been exonerated, and the prosecutor is now being prosecuted for malfeasance on the planted evidence. He allegedly knew exculpatory facts that he did not present to the defense. The only sleeper America

has ever had in a century was Soviet Col. Rudolf Abel, who was arrested in the late 1950s and exchanged for Gary Powers, the U2 pilot. Eastern European countries did send sleepers to this country, men fully trained who “go to sleep”—lead normal lives—and then are activated to become fully operational. But they all became Americans.

In order to really sustain your motivation to do terrorism, you need the reinforcement of group dynamics. You need reinforcement from your family, your friends. This social movement was dependent on volunteers, and there are huge gaps worldwide on those volunteers. One of the gaps is the United States. This is one of two reasons we have not had a major terrorist operation in the United States since 9/11. The other is that we are far more vigilant. We have actually made coming to the U.S. far more difficult for potential terrorists since 2001.

Until late 2001, the terror network was the project of al- Turabi, who in the early 1990s had invited all the Muslim terrorists to Khartoum. That’s how Al Qaeda learned about truck bombing from Hezbollah. Then when they were expelled from Khartoum, bin Laden had a deal with Mullah Omar where he actually had a monopoly of sanctuaries in Afghanistan — the training camp, housing, funding. Instead of raising their own money, it was much easier to go to bin Laden for it. And so, by his control of training camps, sanctuaries, and funding for five years, bin Laden was able to dominate this movement

But after 2001, when the U.S. destroyed the camps and housing and turned off the funding, bin Laden was left with little control. The movement has now degenerated into something like the internet. Spontaneous groups of friends, as in Madrid and Casablanca, who have few links to any central leadership, are generating sometimes very dangerous terrorist operations, notwithstanding their frequent errors and poor training. What tipped the Madrid group to operation was probably the arrest of some of their friends after the Casablanca bombing. Most of them were Moroccans and the Moroccan government asked the Spaniards to arrest several militants. So the group was activated, wanting to do something. Their inspiration—the document “Jihad al-Iraq”— probably was found on the Web. Six of its 42 pages argued that if there were bombings right before Spanish election, it could effect a change of government and the withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq, the expulsion of the “far enemy” from a core Arab state. From conception to execution, the operation took about five weeks.

We hear that Al Qaeda plans its attacks for years and years. It may have before 9-11, but not anymore. Operatives in caves simply cannot communicate with people in the field. The network has been fairly well broken by our intelligence services. The network is now self-organized from the bottom up, and is very decentralized. With local initiative and flexibility, it’s very robust. True, two-thirds to three-quarters of the old leaders have been taken out, but that doesn’t mean that we’re home free. The network grows organically, like the Internet. We couldn’t have identified the Madrid culprits, because we wouldn’t have known of them until the first bomb exploded.

So in 2004, Al Qaeda has new leadership. In a way today’s operatives are far more aggressive and senseless than the earlier leaders. The whole network is held together by the vision of creating the Salafi state. A fuzzy, idea-based network really requires an idea-based solution. The war of ideas is very important and this is one we haven’t really started to engage yet.

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Research Institute

1528 Walnut St, Ste 610

Philadelphia, PA 19102

Tel. 215-732-3774

Fax 215-732-4401

fpri@fpri.org

