

Composition of the Enemy

The average, everyday terrorist is influenced by more than desperation.

BY RICHARD MINITER

SEPTEMBER 2007 THE AMERICAN LEGION MAGAZINE pages 53

As the war on terrorism enters its seventh year, we need to know how terrorists are made. What sets them apart, and what attracts them to lives of death and murder? The standby answer is that terrorism is caused by poverty.

At first, it seems quite plausible that terrorists are poor people driven by desperation. After all, a person with a good education, a decent salary and a loving family has a lot for which to live. Religious extremists, who often claim they are impatient to die, presumably have none of these advantages.

An authoritative study of the demographics of terrorists was published by Marc Sageman of the University of Pennsylvania, and is found in his latest book, "Inside Terror Networks." Sageman is not your typical ivory-tower expert. He served as a CIA case officer working with anti-Soviet Afghan rebels in Islamabad, Pakistan, from 1987 to 1989. He then became a forensic psychiatrist, devoting countless hours to interviewing, analyzing, writing and testifying about murderers. Then came Sept. 11, 2001. "After leaving the CIA, I was happy in my naive belief that I had left all that behind me," he said. "But after 9/11, like everyone, I wanted to do something."

He decided to compile one of the world's largest terrorist databases outside government hands. He collected 400 biographies, mostly al-Qaeda members, from public records like court documents and began listing them. Fusing his skills as a CIA officer with those of forensic psychiatry, he began looking for patterns visible only after surveying large numbers of cases.

What Sageman discovered confounds most of the conventional wisdom about terrorists. These people are not poor, nor are they deprived of opportunities. "(A)bout three-fourths of global Salafi Mujahedin (the radical Islamic movement of which al-Qaeda is a part) was solidly upper or middle class," he writes.

The vast majority, 90 percent, came from caring, intact families. Sixty-three percent had attended college, as compared with the customary 5 percent to 6 percent for the rest of the Third World. In many ways, the majority of terrorists are the best and brightest of their societies.

What about the roughly one-quarter of terrorists from poor backgrounds? They are found to be either Arab emigrants from Morocco or Algeria, or French Catholics who converted to Islam, often in French prisons. Most are beneficiaries of a generous European welfare state, receiving free or low-cost housing, free education - including medical or law school - free health care and a small stipend for daily expenses. By Third World standards, these people are not poor, but rich. What these poorer terrorists have in common with their well-heeled comrades is a sense of social exclusion or alienation, a point to which I will return.

Sageman's study challenges other notions about terrorists. He finds, on the whole, that al-Qaeda recruits are not immature or easily impressionable youngsters. They join the bin Laden network at an average age of 26.

Are they crazy? Sageman doesn't think so. "As a psychiatrist, originally I was looking for any characteristics common to these men. But only four of the 400 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."

What, then, transforms these men from pillars of their societies to enemies of ours?

Sageman isn't surprised by the lack of evidence for mental disorders. "While terrorism is a profoundly anti-social activity, from the terrorists' point of view, it is also a highly social one," he said. "It is carried out by groups, groups that don't tolerate sociopaths like Unabomber Ted Kaczynski."

Nor have they suffered from soured careers. Many are professionals, mostly with backgrounds in science or engineering, or training and skills as police officers or mechanics. There is a pattern, however, to their educational choices. Few of the terrorists in Sageman's sample have studied the liberal arts or, interestingly, religion. Indeed, most were not very religious before joining the terror organization.

Seventy-three percent of Sageman's sample are married men. Again, this does not support the idea of destitution and desperation as a driving force for terrorism; employed, educated men in the Arab world are more likely to find wives than jobless, uneducated ones. Most of the rest are college students, another privileged group.

Other scholars' findings support Sageman's research. The demographics of Palestinian terrorists reveal a pattern: terrorists, especially suicide bombers, tend to be drawn from the middle class and above, and they have a much higher level of education than their countrymen.

Consider two recent studies of the demographics of Palestinian terrorists. While working for a U.N. relief agency, Nasra Hassan spent three years, from 1996 to 1999, interviewing Palestinian terrorists in the Gaza Strip. He noted, "None of them were uneducated, desperately poor, simple-minded or depressed. Many were middle class and, unless they were fugitives, held paying jobs ... Two were the sons of millionaires."

Claude Berrebi, a Princeton University economist, created a database of 285 suicide bombers' biographies, drawing on material published between 1987 and 2002 in the Arabic-language magazines of several terrorism groups: Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. He found that suicide bombers tend to come from better-off families than average. Less than 15 percent of suicide bombers are from poor families, while 30 percent of Palestinians of comparable age - 16 to 50 in both samples - are poor. Nor are they uneducated. Some 60 percent of suicide attackers in Israel or the Palestinian territories have attended or completed college, compared to less than 20 percent of the Palestinian population.

Foreign fighters in Iraq hail from the same backgrounds as other radical Islamic killers. Israeli researcher Reuven Paz studied 154 Arab terrorists killed in Iraq in 2004 and found that many were married, well-educated and from well-off Saudi families. His research was based on Web postings by radical Islamic groups, notices not meant for the outside world but for the friends and families of deceased militants.

Consider just two cases. One is medical student Ahmed Said Ghandi, who died in a suicide bombing that killed 22 people. Another is the reigning kung fu champion of Jordan. Doctors and Olympic-class athletes do not hail from the bottom of any society. Something else - not poverty - is driving these people to kill.

Interestingly, surveys of terrorists from the 1960s and 1970s reveal that it is primarily a middle-class occupation. Charles Russell and Bowman Miller tracked 350 terrorists in Latin America, Europe and Asia, including the Middle East, from 1966 to 1976 - the first decade of major terrorism. They concluded that more than two-thirds of arrested terrorists "came from the middle or upper classes in their respective nations or areas ... In fact, approximately two-thirds of these identified terrorists are persons with some university training, university graduates or post-graduate students."

Are terrorists who are not poor motivated by concern about the perceived poverty of their fellow countrymen? This is possible but seems unlikely. If the poverty of their people were an important issue, then economic deprivation would be regularly cited in terrorist manifestos or audio tapes. Yet terrorists' tracts, especially those distributed by al-Qaeda and its various affiliates, rarely mention any economic concerns.

And if sympathy for the poor is a major motivation for terrorists, the poorest countries would produce the most terrorists. Despite the odd al-Qaeda figure from Tanzania or the Koromos Islands, most hail from oil-rich lands or Western Europe. In fact, the world's poorest nations suffer more terrorism than rich countries. While violence and civil war are common at the planet's poorest places, terrorism in Burma, Chad and countries of similar economic condition is all but unheard of.

When terrorists do attack poor nations, the target is almost invariably a U.S. embassy or other building affiliated with a foreign power, and the attackers come from richer countries.

Finally, a terrorist attack, as well as the resulting clampdown by police and military, tends to be economically harmful. Businesses relocate. Investors retreat. Roadblocks and other measures restrict the movements of workers and customers. The economy of the West Bank has been devastated by bombings and Israeli roadblocks. Local Palestinians are jobless by the thousands. If improving the economic lot of their nation's poor is a goal, terrorists would not select targets certain to damage the economy. Yet new clinics, schools and bridges are frequent scenes of bombings.

Why?

The reason is simple and punctures the idea that poverty provokes terror. A terror network gets no political benefit, no credit, for its work. It is, in fact, put at a disadvantage; others are building a base of political support in the community while the terrorists are not. That's why aid workers are treated as political enemies and killed or kidnapped. From a terrorist's perspective, they are political enemies, rivals as much as any government or other terrorist group. That means terrorists worry more about winning political points than righting economic wrongs.

Terrorism is an extension of politics by deadly means. Its goals are inherently political, not economic. The chief aim of most significant terrorist campaigns - from the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka to al-Qaeda - is to force a government to yield sovereign control to the terror group over some slice of territory. Al-Qaeda wants, among other things, the closure of U.S. bases in Saudi Arabia, with the aim of taking control of the oil kingdom. These are not economic goals, but political ones.

So why do people from middle-class

families with good educations join terror networks? Research supports three related causes:

1. Alienation. Sageman's sample reveals that 80 percent are in some way totally excluded from the society in which they live. They are foreign students who do not fit in, or they are immigrants to Europe who do not assimilate. Seventy percent of the terrorists in Sageman's sample joined a terror group when they were living outside their home countries.

Mohammed Atta, the 9/11 ringleader, originally stayed with a German host family later interviewed by a colleague of mine at London's Sunday Times. They were German liberals who believed cultural exchange could bridge the divide between the West and the Middle East. With horror, they watched Atta become more and more alienated. He grew increasingly hostile to Western music, and insisted on cooking his native cuisine. They said he was overwhelmed by Western society, friendless and alone. Eventually, Atta moved out and spent as much time as possible with fellow Muslim immigrants. Then, tragically for 3,000 innocent people, he met an al-Qaeda recruiter who led him to jihad.

2. Personal bonds. Eighty-eight percent of terrorists in the Sageman study are related by blood, marriage or friendship to other terrorists. Sixty percent worship at one of 10 mosques worldwide or attended one of two now-closed schools in Indonesia. "You're talking about a very select, small group of people," Sageman concludes.

He sees a "common trajectory" for the terrorists in his study. Far from home and alienated, they sought out people like themselves and became friends with people connected to the global jihad. "When they became homesick, they did what anyone would and tried to congregate with people like themselves," Sageman said. "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 observe the Muslim etary laws. A micro-culture develops that strengthens and absorbs the participants as a unit."

3. Group dynamics. Once a network of friendships evolves into a cell, certain group dynamics take over. Cell members feel they cannot betray their friends. The suicide bombers in Spain are a perfect example, Sageman writes. "Seven terrorists sharing an apartment and one saying, 'Tonight we're all going to go, guys.' Individually, they probably would not have done it."

In time, the group fills an empty life with purpose, and the secrecy involved imbues it with a sense of importance and drama. A Hamas leader told Hassan how the organization uses indoctrination to keep cell members motivated, saying, "We focus his attention on paradise, on being in the presence of Allah, on meeting the Prophet Mohammed." The group usually videotapes a cell member declaring allegiance to the cause and willingness to die for it. The videos serve as a kind of blackmail, an implied threat to shame the individual if he thinks about backing out.

What does all of the research collectively tell us? Terrorism is caused not by mass material poverty but by individual spiritual poverty - a longing to belong, fueled by the interventions of recruiters. If counterterrorism officials can identify and arrest these recruiters, we can prevent many from joining their ranks. But teachers, principals and community leaders also have an important part to play. They need to reach out to foreign students and others who feel excluded, educating them about the psychological traps terrorists lay.

Once we acknowledge that this is how terrorists are made, we begin to understand how they can be unmade. Q

Richard Minitzer is the New York Times bestselling author of "Losing bin Laden: How Bill Clinton's Failures Unleashed Global Terror" and "Shadow War: The Untold Story of How Bush Is Winning the War on Terror." He is a fellow at the Hudson Institute.