

# Holy Warriors

## Exploring the Psychological Processes of Jihadi Radicalization

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to provide an overview of the psychology of individuals who join and engage in terrorism, and in particular of individuals who engage in jihadi-motivated terrorism such as that carried out by al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Based on the most reliable available evidence, this paper gives an account of the psychology and motivations of such individuals and the processes that facilitate and develop violent radicalization.

### KEY WORDS

Jihadi Extremism / Radicalization / Terrorism.

## Introduction

On 7 July 2005 the first Islamist suicide bombings in Europe were carried out in the UK. Four suicide bombers (three of whom were British born) detonated bombs in London during the morning rush hour; 52 people were killed by the bombers and more than 700 people were maimed and injured. Exactly two weeks later, on 21 July, more extremists attempted to carry out a second wave of suicide attacks on London's transport system but this time the devices failed to detonate and no one was killed.

Following in the wake of even more devastating attacks in Madrid in 2004, these events highlighted the severity of the threat now facing Europe from jihadi terrorists motivated by a radical interpretation of Islam. The fact that a growing number of the terrorists were home grown has represented a

disturbing development and left the authorities and others struggling to understand the radicalization process that can produce such extremists within the relatively stable and prosperous states of Western Europe.

The first hurdle to be cleared in any effort for understanding is to clarify what exactly is meant by 'terrorism'. The questions of what constitutes terrorism and who is a terrorist are deeply problematic. There is still no precise and agreed definition of terrorism, and some writers have concluded that 'it is unlikely that any definition will ever be generally agreed upon' (Shafritz et al. 1991: 260). In this article, however, I follow the concise definition provided by Crenshaw (1992: 71), who described terrorism as 'a particular style of political violence, involving attacks on a small number of victims in order to influence a wider audience'. The claims as to what behaviours fit this definition still vary considerably, but the focus of this article is very much on 'insurgent' terrorism, which is essentially a strategy of the weak, adopted 'by groups with little numerical, physical or direct political power in order to effect political or social change' (Friedland 1992: 82).

In practical terms, 'insurgent' terrorists are members of small covert groups engaged in an organized campaign of violence. This violence is often extreme and frequently indiscriminate. The terrorists themselves tend to live isolated and stressful lives and enjoy varying levels of wider support. In the past, groups that fit within this framework have included the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Basque separatist group ETA, the Red Army Faction and the Italian Red Brigades. In this article I primarily focus on al-Qaeda and the jihadi extremists affiliated with it.

The word '*jihad*' is often assumed to mean 'holy war' but the meaning is more complex than that. The phrase derives from the Arabic for 'struggle', and within Islam there are two forms of jihad: the Greater Jihad and the Lesser Jihad. The Greater Jihad refers to an individual's personal struggle to live a good and charitable life and adhere to God's commands as understood within Islam. This is a strictly personal and non-violent phenomenon. The Lesser Jihad refers to violent struggle on behalf of Islam. The *jihadis* then are literally 'those who struggle'. This term is typically used to describe individuals who have volunteered to fight in the Lesser Jihad, and the expression is used by members of groups such as al-Qaeda to describe themselves. (*Mujahideen*, meaning 'holy warriors', is another expression commonly used to refer to Muslims engaged in the Lesser Jihad).

## Quality of the research evidence

This article aims to provide an assessment of the psychological basis of jihadi radicalization. A great deal has been written on this subject since the

attacks of 11 September 2001 (9/11), and much has been claimed, but critical issues remain concerning the quality of the evidence being used to justify many claims (Ranstorp 2006; Chen et al. in press).

Most research looking at jihadi radicalization has been limited, often relying on anecdotes and a small number of case studies (e.g. Mazarr 2004; Nesser 2006). Even the best available research on this subject is almost all based on secondary analysis of data, more specifically of archival records (e.g. Sageman 2004; Bakker 2006). These, however, are traditional features of research on terrorism where over 80 percent of all research is based either solely or primarily on data gathered from books, journals, the media (or media-derived databases) or other published documents (Silke 2001). An old failing of the field has been the very heavy reliance on literature review methods. Schmid and Jongman (1988) were very critical of the paucity of fresh data that researchers were producing. In the 1990s, 68 percent of the published research essentially took the form of a literature review and did not add new information. Since 9/11, 65 percent of articles are still essentially just reviews (Silke 2006). Research providing new information is uncommon and where there is new information this is mostly gleaned indirectly from reports in the media (e.g. Pape 2005).

Currently, only about 20 percent of research articles provide substantially new knowledge that was previously unavailable to the field. The field thus is top heavy with what are referred to as pre-experimental research designs. Unfortunately, these are 'the weakest designs since the sources of internal and external validity are not controlled for. The risk of error in drawing causal inferences from preexperimental designs is extremely high and they are primarily useful as a basis . . . for exploratory research' (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias 1996: 147). For example, in only 1 percent of research reports have systematic interviews been used to provide data and to date no such interview study has been carried out with jihadis.

The limitations of available research can be illustrated by reviewing two of the key studies so far published on jihadi extremism. Sageman (2004) studied 172 individuals who were or are members of extremist Islamist organizations. The data came from publicly available sources, mainly media reports and transcripts of court proceedings. These sources are not always reliable, and the study also suffers from the lack of a comparison with individuals who are not members of extremist groups. Nevertheless, the research still provides a useful analysis of the backgrounds of extreme Islamists, and many of the findings are very relevant to this paper. For example, the study provided a detailed description of the profiles of jihadis with respect to education, family background, childhood, socioeconomic background, religiosity, professions, and so forth. Sageman also explored the process of recruitment into the jihad, and the lives of the 172 revealed that a surprisingly

large proportion joined in small groups (and not as isolated individuals). Even bearing in mind the acknowledged weaknesses, this study represented a major step forward in social science research on al-Qaeda and jihadi extremism, and was a significant improvement on the much more journalistic accounts that had largely dominated (e.g. Gunaratna 2002; Burke 2004; Vidino 2006).

A second significant study is the one by Bakker (2006), which in many respects is essentially a replication of the earlier study by Sageman (2004). It has a narrower focus in that it considers only jihadis active in Europe, but the data set is larger than Sageman's, with information on 242 individuals who had been involved in jihadi terrorist attacks and attempts. As did Sageman, Bakker relied on open source data for this study, again using court and media reports.

Currently, there is no published research where the researchers have had direct access to the jihadis. The result is that all of the analysis is done at a distance. This means either relying on media or court reports, as Sageman and Bakker have done, or else drawing inferences from other populations that are believed to be relevant in some way to the jihadis. For example, Ansari et al. (2006) distributed attitudinal questionnaires to 80 practising Muslims in the UK. The questionnaires contained Likert-type measures of attitudes towards religious martyrdom, terrorism, violence, suicide, jihad and 9/11. In-depth interviews were also carried out with 13 respondents. This research found that social identity had a major impact on attitudes: respondents who felt their primary identity was Muslim held more positive views towards jihad and martyrdom, whereas respondents with a dominant British identity did not. Such studies are helpful in highlighting the key role identity plays, but the work is limited because of the small sample size and the fact that the respondents were not actually jihadis. Nevertheless, even the pool of studies like this is currently very limited.

A different research strategy is to draw upon information about other terrorist groups that are thought to be similar or to generalize about new forms of terrorism. There is an increasing trend for commentators to argue that we are currently experiencing an age of New Terrorism (e.g. Laqueur 2000; Kegley 2002). This thesis argues that terrorism today is significantly different from terrorism in the past, primarily because it is now more lethal, more violent and more heavily motivated by fundamentalist religion. Al-Qaeda and its affiliates are held up as a good example of this new type of terrorist group. Implicit in the thesis is an assumption that any understanding gained from an analysis of the Old Terrorism is not very relevant to the understanding of the new form.

However, the New Terrorism thesis is overemphasized. At heart, the argument often shows a poor awareness of the history of terrorism and

overlooks the many examples of lethal, violent and fundamentalist terrorist groups of the past. For example, the Muslim Moros campaign of suicide terrorism against US forces in the Philippines at the start of the 20th century closely mirrors many of the problems faced by the Americans in Iraq at the start of the 21st century (Woolman 2002).

Further undermining the idea that the New Terrorists are a breed apart are the reports from researchers who have been able to interview terrorists from many different groups and who have found more similarities than differences between the different factions (e.g. Horgan 2005). Ultimately, although context matters, this does not mean that research focused on the IRA, for example, is not relevant for understanding the experience of other terrorist groups, and vice versa. However, the New Terrorism thesis biases our understanding of terrorism. It encourages the belief that terrorism today is essentially a new phenomenon and that new ways of thinking are needed to understand it. Post (1990: 29) noted that every 'terrorist group is unique and must be studied in the context of its own . . . culture and history'. Although this is true, it is also the case that terrorist groups often have a great deal in common and terrorist campaigns often follow similar patterns. It would be wasteful to ignore entirely the insights and lessons from studies of other groups and conflicts (Silke 2003).

## The psychology of terrorism

When confronted with atrocities such as the Madrid and London bombings, it can be very difficult to consider the perpetrators as rational and mentally healthy individuals. On the contrary, it is much easier to view them as highly deviant personalities who are very likely to suffer from mental illness and psychopathological disorders. Indeed, it is not just the general public who feel this way. Many researchers on terrorism have shared this view, and some have argued that terrorist groups are made up of a mix of individuals suffering from psychopathic and paranoid personality disorders (e.g. Post 1986; Pearlstein 1991; DeMause 2002). Such views have had a powerful impact on government policy decisions.

As social science grapples to improve our current understanding of terrorism, much of the research it is drawing on was originally aimed at explaining how and why people were able to commit atrocities in past ages. For example, after the end of the Second World War a number of surviving Nazis, including Hermann Goering and Rudolf Hess, were tried for war crimes at Nuremberg. Prior to the trials, 16 of these Nazi leaders were assessed by an Allied psychologist. The psychologist concluded that their scores were those of violent, power-hungry personalities, obsessed with

death and lacking in any real human feeling. This was pretty much what the world expected from the men responsible for the horror of the Holocaust. Years later, however, the same Nazi scores were inserted among a selection of scores from a group of average Americans. This mix was given to a panel of experts who failed entirely to identify anything unusual about the Nazi leaders, and instead concluded that *all* of the scores reflected stable and healthy personalities (Harrower 1976).

What had happened with the Nazis is an example of attribution theory. Attribution theory has shown that we tend to view our own behaviour as stemming from situational or environmental forces, but that we see the behaviour of other people as stemming from internal forces, such as their personality (Quattrone 1982). If people are involved in extreme and violent acts, we tend to assume that their personality must be similarly extreme and deviant. We then tend to make any available evidence fit in with our assumptions. This is exactly what happened with the captured Nazis, and the same effect can be seen in the way most people consider the psychology of terrorists.

Why does someone become a terrorist? The first answer offered to this question was to suggest that (like the Nazi leaders) terrorists must be psychologically different from everyone else. Their abnormality accounts for their involvement in terrorism. This view was very popular in the 1970s and it has survived in some form or other since then. As evidenced only too forcefully on 11 September 2001, terrorist violence can often be extreme, and extreme violence has a special ability to provoke extreme views about the perpetrator. Despite the indiscriminate and extreme violence of many terrorist attacks, the vast majority of research on terrorists has concluded that the perpetrators are not psychologically abnormal (Silke 2003; Horgan 2005). On the contrary, many studies have found that terrorists are psychologically much healthier and far more stable than other violent criminals (e.g. Lyons and Harbinson 1986). An act of extreme violence does not in itself show that the perpetrator is psychologically distinct from the rest of humanity. Although a few psychologists believe terrorists are mentally abnormal, their conclusions are based on very weak evidence (Silke 1998 provides a review of this literature). Psychologists who have met terrorists face to face have nearly always concluded that these people were in no way abnormal, and on the contrary that they had stable and rational personalities.

This is not to say that people suffering from psychological disorders are never found in terrorist groups. They are, but these are the exception and not the rule. Quite simply, such people do not make good terrorists. They lack the discipline, rationality, self-control and mental stamina needed if terrorists are to survive for any length of time (see Taylor 1988). When they are found, they tend to be fringe members of the group and not central characters.

Overall, terrorists are a very heterogeneous group and the range of people who become involved in terrorism is vast. They can vary hugely in terms of education, family background, age, gender, intelligence, economic class, and so on. Consequently, the manner in which they became a terrorist can also vary, and factors that played a pivotal role in one person's decision to engage in terrorist violence may play a peripheral role in the decision-making of others, or indeed may have played no part at all.

Despite this heterogeneity, four decades of research have shown that a number of factors appear to be relatively common in the background of terrorists (Silke 2003). Becoming a terrorist is for most people a gradual process (Horgan 2005), and progressing through the different stages is usually not something that happens quickly or easily. However, considering the factors in the following sections will help in gaining understanding and insight into this process. Not all of these factors will necessarily be present in the experience of every terrorist, but most will be there at least to some degree. Neither are their boundaries exclusive. They interact and mesh together in a complex manner that can often be very difficult to disentangle or differentiate in the case of any one person. Ultimately, it is the combined impact of a number of factors that pushes and pulls someone into becoming a terrorist, and these factors will vary depending on the culture, the social context, the terrorist group and the individual involved.

## Age and gender

As yet, there is no scientific evidence of any genetic role in determining why certain people become involved in terrorism, and specific biological approaches to explaining terrorism have tended to be very flawed (see Silke 1998).

The most important biological factors associated with joining a terrorist group are age and gender. Although a causative role for these factors is not entirely unambiguous, there is certainly a correlation between these two factors and most recruits to terrorist organizations. Ultimately, most people who join a terrorist group are young – by young here I am referring to teenagers and people in their early twenties. Further, most recruits to terrorist groups are male.

It is already well established in other spheres that young males are associated with a multitude of dangerous and high-risk activities (Farrington 2003). Statistics on violent crime consistently show that perpetrators are most likely to be males between 15 and 25 years of age (e.g. Budd et al. 2005). This is a very robust finding that is remarkably stable across cultures and regions (e.g. Schönteich 1999). More crime in general is committed by

teenagers and young adults than by any other age category. Adolescence brings with it a dramatic increase in the number of people who are willing to offend, and cross-cultural studies tend to show that the peak age for male offending has generally been between 15 and 18 years of age, falling off quickly for most individuals as they grow older (Farrington 2003).

Research studies have found that between 54 percent and 96 percent of young men have been involved in some form of delinquent behaviour, with good international agreement on this finding (e.g. Fox and Zawitz 2006). Consider for example the research by Junger-Tas (1994), who compared delinquency rates in five countries and found that 64–90 percent of all young men surveyed admitted to having committed a criminal offence (with around 45 percent having committed at least one offence in the previous 12 months). These rates are far higher than those for other age groups. As Moffitt (1993: 675) noted, ‘actual rates of illegal behaviour soar so high during adolescence that participation in delinquency appears to be a normal part of teen life’.

There is also widespread agreement that young men are more heavily involved in crime than are young women, in terms of both the quantity and the severity of the offences. Studies on violent crime for example show that the ratio of male to female offenders varies by at least 2:1 to 4:1 in western cultures, with this ratio generally climbing higher the more serious the offences become (e.g. Rutter et al. 1998).

Explaining why young men are so inclined to get involved in deviant behaviour is not straightforward. There has been a great deal of research on juvenile delinquency, but most of this has focused on examining life-course persistent offenders – the small minority of adolescents who continue to offend at significant levels into their adult life (Hollin et al. 2002). These individuals normally comprise no more than 4–7 percent of all juvenile offenders and a range of factors have been found to predict these persistent offenders (such as family criminality, poor school performance, family poverty, poor housing and high impulsivity). Yet, in focusing so much attention on life-course persistent offenders, surprisingly little effort has been devoted to the majority who cease deviant activity in their twenties.

Nevertheless, there is widespread recognition that most young men get involved in some form of criminal activity and deviancy during their teenage years. This involvement tapers off dramatically as individuals get older, having all but vanished for most by the time they reach 28. With terrorism, the same factors that attract young men to deviant activity in other spheres can also play at least a partial role in the attraction terrorism holds for a few. Higher impulsivity, higher confidence, greater attraction to risk-taking and a need for status can all work to give life as a terrorist a certain appeal for some young males. As discussed later, a desire for revenge and retribution is an extremely common motive for joining terrorist groups and again research

indicates that young men hold the most positive attitudes toward vengeance and are the ones most likely to exhibit and approve of vengeful behaviour (Stuckless and Goranson 1992; Cota-McKinley et al. 2001).

Although young men make up the majority of terrorist recruits, some recruits are female and a few are much older. Out of 242 jihadi terrorists identified by Bakker (2006) in his review of jihadi terrorism in Europe since 2001, 5 were women. The review found a relatively wide age range, stretching from 16 to 59 at the time of their arrests, but most of the jihadis were in their teens to mid-twenties (Bakker 2006).

Further, it is also very evident that, even in troubled regions such as Northern Ireland, the vast majority of young males living in the affected communities do not in fact become terrorists. The unavoidable conclusion then is that other factors besides age and gender must be playing crucial roles in the process and decision to become a terrorist.

## Education, career and marriage

In considering the factors associated with violent radicalization, especially towards jihadism, it is worth focusing on some surprising findings. Traditionally, factors such as good educational achievement, good socio-economic background and marriage have been associated with a reduced likelihood of criminal offending. An analysis of the backgrounds of jihadis, however, suggests that such trends do not apply as strongly to them.

Sageman's (2004) survey of members of extremist Islamist groups found that they generally tend to be well educated as a group. Over 60 percent had some higher or further-level education. Such findings undermine the view that Islamic extremism can be explained as a result of ignorance or lack of education. Similarly, Sageman (2004) found that about three-quarters of Islamist extremists came from upper- or middle-class backgrounds. A relatively small proportion (27 percent) came from working-class or poor backgrounds. Poorer individuals accounted for a larger proportion of Bakker's (2006) sample, but there was still a very large middle-class element. This undermines explanations for involvement in extremism resulting from personal poverty or deprivation. Further, at the time of joining, the majority of Islamists had professional occupations (e.g. physicians, teachers) or semi-skilled employment (e.g. police, civil service, students). Less than a quarter were unemployed or working in unskilled jobs.

Finally, Sageman (2004) found that 73 percent of members were married, and that most of these men had children. Bakker (2006) also found relatively high levels of marriage among jihadis. Family commitments have clearly not prevented individuals from embracing jihad.

It is often assumed that getting married and settling down is a significant factor in explaining desistance from crime in general. There is some research support for this view, but research findings show that the relationship is not entirely straightforward (Farrington and West 1995). Some criminological research has highlighted that marriage at a young age either can have no impact in terms of diminishing offending behaviour, or else can be associated with an increase in criminality. The quality of the relationship, for example, as opposed to the fact that it exists has been found to be a crucial factor. West (1982) found that marriage had no effect among very young adults and that a preventive effect occurred only among older adults. Ouimet and LeBlanc (1993) found that cohabitation with a partner is positively associated with crime among very young adults (18–23 years old). In this study, marriage was found to contribute to desistance only after the age of 24. Ouimet and LeBlanc explained the negative impact of an early marriage or cohabitation in terms of seeing it as a possible sign of impulsiveness and that marriage at such young ages could lead to significant economic difficulties and family discord.

Building on such findings, Sampson et al. (2006) argued that marriage becomes a positive influence for desistance only once the relationship meets certain quality criteria. Strong social relationships need time and effort to develop. As a result, a marriage or other significant relationship cannot be expected to exert its fullest impact until a sufficient amount of time has passed. Laub and Sampson reviewed data from a series of longitudinal studies of criminal behaviour. The results showed that desistance from crime is facilitated by the development of *quality* marital bonds, and that this influence is gradual and cumulative over time. On average, a five-year-old marriage has more of an impact on desistance than a one-year-old marriage. Thus, the timing and quality of marriage matter: early marriages characterized by social cohesiveness lead to a growing preventive effect. Laub and Sampson (2001) concluded that the effect of a good marriage takes time to appear, and that the influence grows slowly until it inhibits crime.

In considering jihadi terrorism, a further important issue is whether there are different marriage patterns within Muslim communities and the possible impact of practices such as arranged marriages. Research on jihadis has found very high levels of marriage among members of such groups. For example, Sageman (2004) found that 70 percent of members of groups such as al-Qaeda were married. This included many individuals who carried out suicide attacks.

The UK's 2001 census found that young British Muslims (16–24 year olds) had the highest rates of marriage of all groups in the UK (National Statistics Online 2007a): for example, 22 percent of Muslims in these age ranges were married. (The Muslims were the third-lowest group to be

co-habiting but not married; Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims were the groups least likely to co-habit.) Christians and those with no religion were the least likely to be married – just 3 percent of 16–24 year olds in each group. Divorce rates among Muslims also appear to be low: 17 percent versus 34 percent for Christians and 43 percent of those with no religion. Thus the high levels of marriage seen among jihadis may simply be a reflection of wider cultural practices and, as a result, the relationships between marriage and desistance from crime that have been observed for other groups may not apply to Muslims. Further, Sageman (2004) highlighted that many jihadi marriages are to wives who share strong ideological beliefs supporting jihadism (or that the wives' families share such beliefs). Thus the marriage provides an essentially endorsing environment for jihadist views as opposed to a restraining influence.

Also of relevance is the importance of peers in facilitating radicalization. Warr (1998) has argued that many of the benefits of marriage in reducing illegal behaviour relate to its impact on peer interaction. He found that marriage leads to a sharp decline in time spent with friends and hence reduces exposure to delinquent peers. On this argument, marriage is an important influence in favour of desistance when it reduces, weakens and severs ties with delinquent associates. In the case of married jihadis, this effect does not occur and peer interactions remain substantial in the lives of the extremists as they are radicalized.

The findings on education and economic background add to a growing body of research that has found that there is no clear link between poverty or deprivation and membership of extremist organizations (Maleckova 2005). The explanation proposed by Maleckova is that terrorists are motivated by belief in a political cause and not by economic factors. Thus, factors associated with desistance among other types of criminal offender (who often *are* motivated by economic factors) will have less of an impact on political offenders. As summarized by Maleckova (2005: 41):

Just as political participation is much more typical of people who are wealthy enough to concern themselves with more than mere economic subsistence while the impoverished are less likely to vote, the poor are also less likely to become engaged in terrorist organizations.

## Social identity

Identity has been shown to play a vital role in explaining involvement in terrorism. Recruits always belong to the section of society that supports or shares the aims, grievances and ambitions of the terrorist group. In the case of jihadi extremism, individuals need to have a strong sense of Muslim identity and,

equally, to identify strongly with the wider Muslim community – the *umma*. Recruits consistently report that, prior to joining, they perceived they had a very strong connection to other Muslims across the globe. This wider connection brought with it a sense of responsibility for these other Muslims, even when the individual had never met them or travelled to their lands. Research has shown that individuals who rate their Islamic identity as being more important than their national or ethnic identity express more positive views on topics such as jihad and martyrdom (Ansari et al. 2006). Further, the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey in the UK found that Muslims are more likely than any other religious groupings to rate their faith as their primary identity, and that this effect is particularly strong among young people aged 16–24 (Attwood et al. 2003).

The key aspects of social identity in the context of jihadism are (1) the role of religion and (2) group loyalties.

### *The role of religion*

Religion is assumed to lie at the heart of Islamist terrorism and, to a degree, this is justified. As a movement, the global Salafi jihad has a strategic religious agenda with the ultimate goal of recreating past Muslim glory in a great Islamist state stretching from Morocco to the Philippines, eliminating present national boundaries. It preaches *salafiyyah* (from *salaf*, the Arabic word for ‘ancient one’ and referring to the companions of the Prophet Mohammed) – the restoration of authentic Islam – and advocates a strategy of violent jihad, resulting in an explosion of terror to wipe out what it regards as local political heresy. The global version of the movement advocates the defeat of the western powers that prevent the establishment of a true Islamist state (Sageman 2004).

Whereas the global jihad has a strategic religious aim, the religious backgrounds of the people who join the jihad is not as clear-cut. Indeed, Sageman (2004) found that only 18 percent of Islamist extremists have had an Islamic religious primary or secondary education. In contrast, 82 percent went to secular schools. These data undermine the view that Islamic extremism can be best viewed as resulting from brainwashing by teachers in madrassas as part of normal primary or secondary education.

Sageman (2004) also found that 45 percent of Islamist extremists were described by family and peers as being religiously devout as youth. The majority, however, were not described as being religious as youth. Further, 8 percent were raised as Christians and converted to Islam later in life. There was a definite shift in the degree of devotion, however, prior to joining: 99 percent of members were described as being very religious prior to joining – this represents a major change from the situation when they were younger. Sageman explained this change as originating from a desire

for companionship, which was realized within the context of mosques. In the West, many individuals were recruited at a time when they were living away from their family home and old friends. Often the individuals were living in a foreign land and were even more isolated from the society around them. In the expatriate community from which most recruits come, especially in the West, the most available source of companionship with people of similar background is the mosque. The mosque provides a setting for non-radical individuals to socialize, but once groups form, in some cases a process leading to increased religious devotion started. These findings suggest that the mosque often provides the setting in which small groups become radicalized but that this radicalization does not typically result from the teachings of the official hierarchy within the mosque.

It is important to stress that not all Salafist Muslims support the global jihad. Indeed, such individuals remain a minority among Salafists. Thus, in order to understand the mind-set of Islamist terrorism, one needs to move beyond the limits of religious doctrine and explore other driving factors.

### *Group loyalties*

To a large extent, becoming involved in the jihad is a group phenomenon. Individuals tend not to join the jihad as isolated individuals. Rather, it is within small groups that individuals gradually become radicalized. This is a trend identified by both Sageman (2004) and Bakker (2006). Usually, members undergo a long period of intense social interaction with a small group of friends, developing a strong mutual intimacy, which relieves their previous isolation.

In his analysis of 242 jihadis, Bakker (2006) found that these individuals tended to become involved in terrorism through networks of friends or relatives and that generally there were no formal ties with global Salafi networks. In short, the individuals were not becoming radicalized because of the efforts of an al-Qaeda recruiter, but rather the process was occurring almost independently of established jihadis.

Within the group context, individuals gradually adopt the beliefs and faith of the group's more extreme members (in a psychological process known as 'risky shift'). As both Sageman and Bakker found, individuals' new Salafi faith resulted in their becoming more isolated from older friends and family, and led to an ever-increasing dependence on, and loyalty towards, the group. With an increasing focus on this small group, their religious faith became more important and more intense. The polarization experienced within the group, combined with an increased sense of group identity and commitment, helped to radicalize individuals and facilitate their entry into the jihad in a way that was approved by their new social peers.

## Marginalization

Social marginalization appears to be a common factor in the backgrounds of most jihadi recruits. Research has shown that most members of groups such as al-Qaeda joined the jihad while they were living in a foreign country or when they were otherwise isolated from older friends and family. Often these individuals were expatriates – students, workers, refugees – living away from home and family. Sageman (2004) found that 70 percent joined in a country where they had not grown up; 8 percent were second generation and might not have been fully embedded in their host country. In total, 78 percent of the recruits had been cut off from their social and cultural origins, far from family and friends.

## Discrimination

If such marginalized groups are discriminated against or internal sections believe that there is discrimination, then there will always be sections within such communities who will be receptive to radical ideologies that advocate changing or reforming the established, mainstream social system. The aim of these changes will be to improve the lot of the disadvantaged group. People on the margins have less to lose if the current social order is maintained and conceivably a great deal to gain if it is radically changed. For example, a number of factors have been identified as important elements in driving the political conflict in Northern Ireland from 1969 and for increasing support within Catholic communities for extremists (O'Leary 2007). In the context of the Northern Irish conflict, these factors included:

- economic deprivation
- educational underperformance
- insufficient political representation

As a result, most Catholics in Northern Ireland had relatively little to gain by supporting the status quo of Protestant-controlled government, which ran the province until 1972, and potentially a great deal to gain if they could substantially reform or abolish that system of government. Among a disadvantaged Catholic population, ideologies advocating regime change would always have some support and, in the face of continuing discrimination, ideologies advocating even violent action to change the status quo attracted significant support from some quarters.

In the context of jihadi extremism, it is currently clear that Muslim populations in the West are experiencing considerable disadvantage. Indeed, statistics suggest that the Muslim population within the UK is far more

disadvantaged than Catholics were in Northern Ireland in 1969. Compared with the UK population as a whole, Muslims have three times the unemployment rate; a higher proportion are unqualified; and a higher concentration are living in deprived areas (National Statistics Online 2007b). Muslims are significantly underperforming in secondary education and are also under-represented in higher education: 36 percent of the population as a whole have no qualifications, compared with 43 percent of Muslims.

In proportional terms, the number of UK politicians from Muslim backgrounds is also out of balance. Approximately 3 percent of the UK population is Muslim but they only have 0.3 percent of the country's Members of Parliament (MPs) and 0.9 percent of district councillors. For levels to be proportionate, this would require 19 Muslim MPs (as opposed to the current 4) and 675 district councillors (as opposed to the current 217).

This is a problem repeated in other European countries. There are 15 million Muslims in the European Union, reflecting approximately 3 percent of the total population. However, Muslims hold only 0.8 percent of the seats in the European Parliament: out of 785 representatives only 6 are Muslim.

Given such levels of disadvantage, it is not surprising that many Muslim communities have come to view themselves as being unfairly marginalized. Other statistics, such as the fact that Muslims are grossly over-represented in among prison populations, do not help (July 2005). The poor performance of Muslims on these measures can be interpreted in different ways – just as various interpretations of Catholic deprivation were offered in the 1960s – but the imbalance certainly creates a sense of dissatisfaction within the communities affected. Once a community and the individuals within that community have been largely excluded from mainstream society, they will lose much of their vested interest in maintaining that society.

If such deprivation is combined with exposure to an extremist ideology that advocates reforming or even replacing the current order, then an important step towards becoming an active extremist is taken. However, although many people are politically committed to a variety of causes, few are willing to commit acts of violence to further these ideals. To move into terrorism still requires something more.

## Catalyst events/perceived injustice

One of the most important elements in understanding the psychology of why people become extremists is an appreciation of the psychology of vengeance. It has long been recognized that for most terrorists a key motivation for joining a terrorist organization ultimately revolves around a desire for revenge (Schmid and Jongman 1988).

Within the context of jihadi terrorism, the perception of a strong shared identity and link with the wider Muslim world – the *umma* – has serious consequences when the individual perceives that some Muslim communities are being treated brutally or unfairly. Perceived injustices are important drivers of individual decisions to become involved in militant activism. Catalyst events (i.e. violent acts that are perceived to be unjust) provide a strong sense of outrage and a powerful psychological desire for revenge and retribution (Silke 2003). Importantly, one does not need to experience these unjust events first hand in order to feel sufficiently motivated to become a terrorist. Indeed, the events do not even have to involve friends or family members. Many terrorists report that they first joined the organization after witnessing events on television or other media (e.g. O’Callaghan 1998). Although they did not come from the area where the events occurred – or indeed even know the people who lived there – at some level they identified with the victims. This identification, combined with the perceived injustice of the event, can provide a strong motivation to become involved in the jihad.

Such exposure is frequently facilitated through viewing extremist propaganda. This propaganda may be extremely biased, but usually there is a basis of truth and reality to the events portrayed. Islamist recruits tend to be extensively exposed to such propaganda material, with graphic images of abuse and violence being drawn from a wide range of conflicts involving Muslim populations, including Kashmir, Chechnya, Bosnia and the Palestinian Territories (Weimann 2006). US foreign policy is also heavily emphasized, with recent propaganda focusing on the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. In a number of public statements (including the last statements of suicide bombers) Islamists specifically draw attention to these conflicts as a justification for their own violence.

Exposure to death-related imagery, such as that contained in the jihadi propaganda, results in what psychologists refer to as a ‘mortality salience’ effect. A variety of research studies have shown that mortality salience generally increases identification with and pride in one’s country, religion, gender, race, etc. (for a review see Pyszczynski et al. 2002). Crucially, mortality salience can lead to an increase in support for extremism when it is linked to group identity. For example, one study found that under mortality salience conditions white Americans expressed more sympathy and support for other Whites who expressed racist views. Similarly, Pyszczynski et al. (2006) found that Muslim college students in the Middle East who were reminded of death showed increased support for other students who voiced support for suicide attacks. Significantly, the mortality salient group also indicated that they would be more willing to take part in a suicide attack themselves.

One important element of the desire for vengeance is the surprising willingness of individuals to sacrifice and suffer in order to carry out an act of revenge. As Cota-McKinley et al. (2001: 343) comment, ‘vengeance can have

many irrational and destructive consequences for the person seeking vengeance as well as for the target. The person seeking vengeance will often compromise his or her own integrity, social standing, and personal safety for the sake of revenge.' This observation is supported by a number of research studies (e.g. Fehr and Gächter 2002; Fowler 2005). In one Swiss study, researchers gave students a cooperative task of the 'prisoner's dilemma' kind: all students in the study will benefit provided each behaves honourably, but those who cheat will benefit more provided they are not caught (Tudge 2002). The students were rewarded with real money if they did well and fined if they did not. They were also able to punish fellow players who had cheated by imposing fines, but could do this only by forfeiting money themselves. This meant that those who punished others frequently would end up with considerably less than those who punished others only a little. Participants tended to punish cheats severely, even though they lost out by doing so. People seem to hate cheats so much that they are prepared to incur significant losses themselves in order to inflict punishment on the transgressors.

Cota-McKinley et al. (2001) show that revenge can fulfil a range of goals, including righting perceived injustice, restoring the self-worth of the vengeful individual and deterring future injustice. The vengeful individual 'sends the message that harmful acts will not go unanswered' (Kim and Smith 1993: 40). Not only is the goal to stop this particular form of maltreatment in the future, it is to deter this transgressor from wanting to commit similar crimes; additionally, vengeance may stop other potential offenders from committing similar crimes or from even considering similar crimes.

Significantly, some individuals are more vengeance prone than others. Men hold more positive attitudes towards vengeance than women do, and young people are much more prepared to act in a vengeful manner than are older individuals (Cota-McKinley et al. 2001). It is not surprising then to find that most recruits to terrorist groups are both young and male. In addition, some evidence exists to suggest that religious belief also affects one's attitude to vengeance, with more secular individuals showing less approval of vengeful attitudes (Greer et al. 2005).

## Status and personal rewards

As well as providing an outlet for desires for vengeance, terrorist groups offer other inducements and rewards to outsiders. There are considerable dangers in becoming a terrorist. It can be an isolated, stressful and extremely dangerous existence. Recruits to the IRA, for example, were warned that they could expect only one of two things for certain from joining the organization: a lengthy prison sentence or a violent death (e.g. Collins 1997; McGartland 1998). Hardship and suffering are seen as inseparable aspects of life as a

terrorist, yet there are still often benefits and advantages to being in a terrorist group. For example, in many communities and societies, terrorist groups and their members are regarded as courageous, honourable and important. As one Palestinian terrorist described it, '[r]ecruits were treated with great respect. A youngster who belonged to Hamas or Fatah was regarded more highly than one who didn't belong to a group, and got better treatment than unaffiliated kids' (Post and Denny 2002). It helps to remember that some communities see members of these organizations or movements not as 'terrorists' but rather as 'freedom fighters', 'rebels' or 'the resistance'. One cannot avoid the fact that applying the label 'terrorist' is often a value judgement (and a negative one) and is often a label imposed from outside of the communities and culture that the terrorists belong to. Those within that culture can reject the term or else reject such a clumsy effort to describe the actors in black and white terms. Ultimately, in many communities joining a terrorist group increases the standing of a teenager or youth considerably. As another Palestinian terrorist put it: 'After recruitment, my social status was greatly enhanced. I got a lot of respect from my acquaintances, and from the young people in my village' (Post and Denny 2002).

As well as increased status and self-esteem, life as a terrorist offers potential recruits excitement and danger. Becoming a jihadi is a dangerous, high-risk decision. Research has long shown that young males in particular are much more attracted to high-risk behaviour than are other segments of the population. The propaganda material developed by jihadi groups often attempts to portray the jihadi lifestyle as an exciting, dangerous and meaningful one. In recruitment videos seen by me, jihadis are shown training with a wide variety of weapons, including assault rifles, machine guns, rockets and hand grenades. There is also often footage of actual attacks against enemy targets.

Overall, such material paints a portrait of jihad as an exciting, dangerous and rewarding activity. This may be an unrealistic portrayal, but it will certainly have an appeal to some viewers. It is clear from other sources, however, that danger and excitement are a feature of life as a terrorist. Indeed, former terrorists, when asked what they miss about their old life as active members, often talk about the closeness they felt with group members, the sense of shared risk and common purpose. In their eyes, life as a terrorist had an intensity and purpose that life outside of the organization noticeably lacked. As a former IRA member described it:

A part of me missed being in the IRA. I had spent six years leading an action-packed existence, living each day with the excitement of feeling I was playing a part in taking on the Orange State. At the very least, such activity gave a strange edge to my life: I lived each day in a heightened state of alertness. Everything I did, however trivial, could seem meaningful. Life outside the IRA could often feel terribly mundane ... I lived life with a weird intensity. I felt myself part of a large family whose members

had powerful emotional links to each other. The idea of turning my back on the IRA had become as repugnant to me as turning my back on my own children. As soon as I left this intense environment I found myself missing my comrades: the dangers and risks we shared brought us close. (Collins 1997: 158, 363)

A former Italian terrorist, when asked was there anything they missed from their experience in a terrorist group, replied: 'The fact of being totally at risk' (De Cataldo Neuburger and Valentini 1996: 137). It is important then not to underestimate the appeal that this sense of risk and excitement will exert on potential recruits, especially on those who are otherwise living an ordinary but dull existence.

## Opportunity and recruitment

People cannot become active terrorists unless they can find a terrorist group that is willing to let them join. The individual – now located in the appropriate social grouping and motivated by a desire for retribution – needs to identify an accessible avenue into a terrorist group. He or she is hampered in this task because terrorist groups are nearly always illegal and membership is a punishable crime. This presents difficulties for potential terrorists: they must try to identify current members in order to facilitate entry into the organization, yet they risk exposing themselves to the security services if they approach the wrong person at the wrong time.

For ethnic terrorist groups such as Hamas or the IRA, the problem is largely overcome by the use of legal political front organizations. Hamas, for example, is a very large group and many elements of it are engaged in non-violent legitimate activity. The organization openly runs and is associated with many schools, hospitals, charities, businesses and mosques (Gunning 2007). For individuals interested in joining, it is not at all difficult to make enquiries about doing so with people involved in the organization and for them to be directed to the appropriate people. Similar situations exist elsewhere, particularly in the case of nationalist and ethnic conflicts.

Some terrorist groups will accept almost any individual who asks to join, but the vast majority of groups will closely vet all applicants. Other groups will first arrange for applicants to carry out some minor illegal acts to test their commitment. If the candidate carries these out successfully, then he or she is formally accepted into the terrorist group.

For the individual who cannot identify a route into an established terrorist group, or is refused membership after applying, the remaining options are to form their own group or to wage a one-person terrorist campaign. For example, the American far right's concept of 'leaderless resistance' explicitly endorses a philosophy of individuals (or small groups) mounting operationally

independent campaigns of violence for ideologically similar reasons. The concept was first pushed in books such as *The Turner Diaries*, but has now been taken up and advocated very strongly on the Internet as well (Joyce-Hasham 2000).

Prior to 9/11, mosques played a key role in providing potential jihadis with a route into groups such as al-Qaeda. Radical imams acted as a magnet for potential recruits – for example, Omar Mahmoud Othman (alias abu Qatada) and Mustafa Kamel (alias abu Hamza al-Mazri), who were active in London. Indeed, a very high proportion of the UK's Islamist extremists can be linked by their attendance at one of two London mosques: Brixton mosque and Finsbury Park mosque. At both national and international levels these mosques established a reputation for hard-line extremist preaching that advocated the use of violence for furthering the global Salafi jihad.

It is not always the case that a radical imam actively recruits potential jihadis; rather, the social interactions between attendees listening to the sermons at these mosques builds and reinforces ideological commitment. The mosques offer opportunities for people to meet new friends and foster the development of an ideological commitment to the jihad, and (critically) provide links to the jihad through already connected members. Finsbury Park mosque was closed for an extended period following a major police raid on 20 January 2003. The police statement at the time of the raid stated that:

[The raid] was aimed specifically at individuals who have been supporting or engaging in suspected terrorist activity from within the building. Police believe that these premises have played a role in the recruitment of suspected terrorists and in supporting their activity both here and abroad.

## Conclusions

The preceding discussion has highlighted that Islamist terrorists do not fit many of the stereotypes that shape public expectations. The individuals involved do not suffer from mental illness or disorders, but instead are generally ordinary and unremarkable in psychological terms. Their involvement in terrorism is usually the result of a gradual process – typically occurring over a period of years. The sense of personal identity and social networks of potential recruits are both extremely important factors. Most terrorists become radicalized as members of a small group of like-minded individuals. These groups do not start out as radical but become so gradually over time. Sometimes the initial contacts are facilitated at mosques, but the relative isolation of the individuals from the surrounding society beforehand appears to play an important role in the early bonding of the group.

As the members of a group become more interested in their faith, the concern about abuses experienced by Muslims elsewhere becomes a more prominent issue. Provocative and explicit propaganda can fuel these concerns, though it is worth noting that both Muslims and non-Muslims in the wider society can share many of these concerns.

Ultimately, ordinary psychological processes and small group dynamics play a major role in understanding Islamist radicalization. It can be very difficult, however, to see beyond the common myths and assumptions that are often offered as explanations for terrorist violence. Partly this is because the process of involvement is, in many respects, at odds with our understanding of the development and course of other types of offending. Farrington (2003: 224–5) summarized our existing understanding of other offenders:

The main risk factors for the early onset of offending before age 20 are well known ... individual factors (low intelligence, low school achievement, hyperactivity-impulsiveness and risk-taking, antisocial child behavior, including aggression and bullying), family factors (poor parental supervision, harsh discipline and child physical abuse, inconsistent discipline, a cold parental attitude and child neglect, low involvement of parents with children, parental conflict, broken families, criminal parents, delinquent siblings), socioeconomic factors (low family income, large family size), peer factors (delinquent peers, peer rejection, and low popularity), school factors (a high delinquency rate school) and neighbourhood factors (a high crime neighbourhood).

Yet most of these factors are absent in the lives of jihadis, and indeed many terrorists appear to come from backgrounds that would normally protect against the onset of offending. This makes it clear that terrorists cannot simply be regarded as typical criminals; on the contrary, they are a distinct group, and in many ways the origins of their unconventional behaviour are exceptional. This distinctiveness also helps to explain why many of the factors that are normally associated with desistance, such as marriage, education and a career, often do not have the same influence on this group. Criminology will have to work hard to develop theories and models that can comfortably account for the distinctive patterns seen in the lives of terrorists.

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