

# **COMBATING TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM**

Edited by

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**2016**

James K. Wither and Sam Mullins, eds., *Combating Transnational Terrorism* (Sofia: Procon, 2016).  
doi: 10.11610/ctt.book

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**Original version:** English, 2016

**Publisher:** Procon Ltd., [www.procon.bg](http://www.procon.bg)  
3, Razluka Str., ap. 20, Sofia 1111, Bulgaria

**Cover photo** courtesy of Karlheinz Wedhorn

**ISBN** 978-954-92521-9-4 (PDF edition)

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## Chapter 2

# Terrorist Motivations

Dina Al Raffie

### Introduction

Despite the prevailing lack of consensus in the international community on a definition of terrorism, it is now widely agreed that terrorists are neither hopelessly irrational nor 'insane.' In fact, as Louise Richardson observes, the "primary shared characteristic [of terrorists] is their normalcy."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, however, this is where the similarity ends, as no single profile is exemplary of all terrorists. Rather, most studies find that the path to terrorism is paved with both individual and environmental factors that combine in different ways for different individuals. Similarly, whereas such combinations of factors may have a radicalizing effect, ideological radicalization alone does not necessitate a transition to violence, although it may increase the probability.

This chapter summarizes the various motivations of terrorists, based on several decades' worth of scholarly research. It begins by presenting a number of myths, and what terrorists are *not*, before proceeding with an overview of motivations that can broadly be categorized as either 'individual' or 'environmental.' In particular, the chapter emphasizes that terrorism is an overwhelmingly *sane* phenomenon, which is driven by a number of both individual/dispositional and environmental factors that are consciously mobilized by actors and/or organizations for the pursuit of political ends. Most importantly, radicalization relies heavily on socialization processes that not only build on existing predisposing risk-factors, but also *create* further motivations for engaging in terrorism. There is no one pathway to terrorism, no one profile of a terrorist, and no one magic formula to counter terrorism. However, a keen understanding of the potential predisposing risk-factors and motivations can better position governments to develop comprehensive responses to radicalization and terrorism in their respective states.

### Terrorist Motivation Myths

There are numerous myths about terrorist motivation, with two being the most predominant. The first is that terrorists suffer from specific psychopathologies that predispose them to violence. Whilst some studies have found certain personality traits common to individuals at differing levels and in different roles in terrorist organizations, there is little reason to believe that terrorists in general

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Richardson, *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat* (New York: Random House, 2006), 14.

are driven by psychological disorder. For example, early researchers, such as Jerrold Post, suggested that individuals in leadership positions in terrorist organizations tend to exhibit higher degrees of narcissistic and paranoid personality disorders.<sup>2</sup> A similar observation has been made regarding lone actor terrorists, where there is an above-average documented incidence of mental illness.<sup>3</sup> However, it has not been established that terrorist leaders in general suffer from personality disorders. Indeed, as Post later concluded, the “concepts of abnormality or psychopathology are not useful in understanding terrorist psychology and behavior.”<sup>4</sup> More importantly, both leaders and lone actors only make up a small percentage of all terrorists, meaning that they are atypical. Furthermore, people suffering from mental illness, or exhibiting erratic behavior are more likely to be rejected by a terrorist organization, since behaviors resulting from such traits could be threatening to both the leadership’s control over such individuals as well as the security and cohesiveness of the group. Excessively risky behavior exposes the terrorists’ clandestine activities to possible detection and disruption by the authorities. Therefore, the ideal member of a terrorist organization is someone who is mentally stable.

To give an example, although the ‘Islamic State’ (IS) does not specifically address mental health in its recruitment propaganda, it nevertheless makes it quite clear who they are looking for. According to one of their members, Abu Sa’eed al-Britani, the group seeks skilled individuals from a variety of professions to help maintain the ‘state.’<sup>5</sup> This is an indication that IS, a jihadist insurgency deemed too extreme by even the likes of al-Qaeda (AQ), requires “normal,” disciplined individuals who are capable of following orders and performing a variety of duties in close cooperation with others, which could create difficulties for people suffering from mental disorders.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See respectively Phillip W. Johnson and Theodore B. Feldmann, “Personality types and terrorism: Self-psychology perspectives,” *Forensic Reports* 5, no. 4 (1992): 293-303; and Jerrold M. Post, “Terrorist Psycho-logic: Terrorist Behavior as a Product of Psychological Forces,” in *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of Mind*, ed. Walter Reich (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 25-40.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Christopher Hewitt, *Understanding Terrorism in America: From the Klan to Al Qaeda* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Jerrold Post, “When Hatred is Bred in the Bone: Psycho-cultural Foundations of Contemporary Terrorism,” *Political Psychology* 26, no. 4 (2005): 616.

<sup>5</sup> “Isis Advertises 10 Jobs in the ‘Caliphate’ Including Press Officers, Bomb Makers and Teachers,” *The Independent*, April 10, 2015, accessed April 13, 2015, [www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-advertises-10-jobs-in-the-caliphate-including-press-officers-bomb-makers-and-teachers-10168485.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-advertises-10-jobs-in-the-caliphate-including-press-officers-bomb-makers-and-teachers-10168485.html).

<sup>6</sup> There are, however, select cases of mentally ill individuals joining IS. For instance, Australian jihadist Khaled Sharrouf reportedly suffers from chronic schizophrenia. See Sean Rubenstein-Dunlop, “Khaled Sharrouf: The Australian radical fighting for Islamic State in Iraq and Syria,” *ABC News*, August 14, 2014, accessed June 18, 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-14/khaled-sharrouf-the-australian-radical-fighting-in-iraq/5671974>.

The second myth is that poverty, poor education, and lack of employment opportunities are at the root of all terrorism. Profiles of terrorists spanning various ideologies call this into question. For example, a biographical study of approximately 400 Salafi jihadists, drawn from different countries, by psychiatrist Marc Sageman found that a significant majority (around two-thirds) were from upper/middle class families and were well-educated, based on a high percentage of college attendance figures.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, studies on both Chechen and Palestinian female suicide bombers found that most were from middle-income families and attained the level of education pursuant to national standards and their age groups.<sup>8</sup>

There are some cases where poverty or material factors do play a role. For example, it has been documented that men living in the Syrian stronghold of IS, Ar-Raqqa, have joined the insurgency in exchange for reduced taxes and improved standing in society.<sup>9</sup> A similar motivation is noted for women marrying IS commanders and other fighters in the area. The total control of Ar-Raqqa's economy by IS is part of a calculated strategy to ensure obedience from the local population and to attract supporters using economic incentives and other benefits. It would, however, be inaccurate to label forced participation as a legitimate motivation for terrorism, since joining the group is essentially beyond the control of the individual. Others will accept money from terrorist organizations in return for services that facilitate the groups' activities.<sup>10</sup> However, such motivations generally do not fall under most definitions of terrorism, as a fundamental element is the political nature of the goals pursued. Overall, poverty in general does not seem to correlate strongly with a tendency towards political violence. As Khalil Shikaki rightly notes, the constant misery of poor living conditions is hardly "... a crucial factor; if it were half the Somali population would have already blown itself up."<sup>11</sup> The same argument can be made for millions of people living in similar conditions who have not opted for violence.

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<sup>7</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Anat Berko and Edna Erez, "Martyrs or Murderers? Victims or Victimizers? The Voices of Would-Be Palestinian Female Suicide Bombers," and Anne Speckhard and Khapta Akhmedova, "Black Widows and Beyond: Understanding the Motivations and Life Trajectories of Chechen Female Terrorists," in *Female Terrorism and Militancy: Agency, Utility, and Organization*, ed. Cindy Ness (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 146–66 and 100–21 respectively.

<sup>9</sup> "How the Islamic State Uses Women to Control Women," *Syria: Direct*, March 25, 2015, accessed April 8, 2015, <http://syriadirect.org/main/30-reports/1938-how-the-islamic-state-uses-women-to-control-women>.

<sup>10</sup> For example, there have been documented examples of *Boko Haram* bribing fruit sellers to spy on government officials and burn churches. See Jacob Zenn, "Boko Haram: Recruitment, Financing, and Arms Trafficking in the Lake Chad Region," *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 10 (2014): 6.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Christopher Reuter, *My Life is a Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 10.

Finally, although a correlation between the degree of state failure and incidents of terrorism has been found,<sup>12</sup> such findings are not consistent across different studies.<sup>13</sup> Current conflicts also suggest that state failure is not a direct cause of terrorism, but rather may provide terrorist groups with opportunities to establish safe havens due to the collapse of central government.

## The Individual Level of Terrorist Motivation

Research has identified a number of factors that can account for individual motivations for terrorism. Not surprisingly, among the most important is sympathy with the terrorists' cause. Individual belief in any given cause is, therefore, an important mobilizing factor. Terrorism scholar David Rapoport has identified four primary 'waves' of terrorism that characterize many of the terrorist organizations of the last century.<sup>14</sup> Each of these waves represents groups that fought on behalf of similar causes. The 'anti-colonial wave,' which included groups like the Algerian Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), brought together individuals that had a strong desire to free their territories from Western colonial powers. Although constituting only a fraction of the populations in which they were embedded, such groups enjoyed popular support, as they were acting on behalf of wider constituencies that desired the same goals. The 'terrorists' were altruistic in that they strongly believed in a cause which was representative of a wider social group and were driven by deep-seated feelings of injustice, discrimination, and real and/or perceived grievances.

Altruism thus plays an important role as both a motivator and a tool for recruitment.<sup>15</sup> Recent terrorist campaigns, like those promoted by AQ for example, similarly claim to be acting on behalf of a particular social group. Although violent jihadists may not enjoy much actual support, they have nevertheless promoted their cause as a struggle on behalf of all Muslims. They encourage youth to join in defense of the Muslim community of believers, the *ummah*, claiming that all of its ills are part of an intentional plan of the so-called "Crusader-Zionist" alliance (i.e. the primarily Christian West and Israel) to destroy Islam. They further argue that it is an individual religious duty, or *fard 'ayn*, on Muslims to fight. As a result, it is not unusual to find individuals who join up

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<sup>12</sup> See Dipak Gupta, *Understanding Terrorism and Political Violence: The Life Cycle of Birth, Growth, Transformation, and Demise* (London: Routledge, 2008): 69–71.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, *The Global Terrorism Index 2014: Measuring and Understanding the Impact of Terrorism* (New York: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015), accessed May 22, 2015, <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Terrorism-Index-Report.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> David C. Rapoport, "The Four Waves of Terrorism," in *Attacking Terrorism: Elements of a Grand Strategy*, eds. Audrey Kurth Cronin et al. (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 46–73.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 37.



because they believe they are actually doing good on behalf of a larger social identity to which they belong.

Belief in a cause is often linked to the existence of grievances, injustice and discrimination. Whether real or perceived, they can motivate an individual for action (and here the word 'action,' rather than 'terrorism,' is used intentionally because there are several ways people respond to such conditions). Indeed, most successful terrorist campaigns will capitalize on grievances faced by those they claim to fight for. If these grievances do not exist, they will create them. For example, by framing otherwise normal daily challenges of Muslim youth in the diaspora as a deliberate strategy of discrimination against the religion, ideologues create grievances and support for their narrative that the West is in a 'war against Islam' – a cornerstone of the Salafi jihadist rhetoric. Youths may thus be incentivized to join as a means of addressing these grievances, or because they feel that governments are unable or unwilling to do so.

Traumatic experiences in an individual's life can also be a strong motivator. Returning to the previous example of female suicide bombers, many of them had suffered the loss of someone close to them (often killed by the security forces of the state), which left them with a strong desire to avenge their loved ones.<sup>16</sup> The desire for revenge is particularly strong in situations where a minority population, ethnicity or religion, is being oppressed by a state and/or the majority. A similar motivation also plays a role in many Muslim-majority countries, where there is a strong dislike of certain Western foreign policies. This creates a sense of victimization among civilian populations and consequently broadens the potential pool of recruits for terrorist organizations.

A good example of an unpopular policy is the use of drones in CT operations. This has alienated many people in affected countries and has facilitated radicalization and granted credibility to the jihadist narrative of a "war on Islam."<sup>17</sup> Individuals are thus sometimes motivated to join terrorist organizations that provide them with resources and an avenue to take revenge on their oppressors. They may join terrorist organizations because of a strong commitment to the group's ideology, but perhaps even more often as a means to address other needs.

A more strategic reason why terrorists adopt the tactics that they do is to draw attention to their cause. As one jihadist propaganda poster aptly put it, "As soon as we picked up the gun they started to listen." For many, opting for violence is not just a way to vent frustrations, but also to air grievances and make them known. Another motivation linked to grievances is known as 'relative deprivation.' Notably, this involves a combination of both individual and

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<sup>16</sup> Speckhard and Akhmedova, "Black Widows and Beyond."

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Nico Prucha, "Death from Above: Jihadist Virtual Networks Respond to Drone Strikes in Yemen," *Jihadica.com*, May 15, 2014, accessed May 22, 2015, <http://www.jihadica.com/death-from-above-jihadist-virtual-networks-respond-to-drone-strikes-in-yemen/>.

environmental factors, as it is an individual perception of existing social conditions and therefore operates on both levels. In this case, grievances result from a feeling of deprivation relative to another social group. Such feelings can create frustration, especially amongst youth who wish to occupy more prestigious positions in their societies, but are barred from doing so for a number of reasons.<sup>18</sup>

The effects of deprivation can be explained by its relationship to identity and self-worth. People in general seek identities that provide them with a positive sense of self, meaning in life, and direction. When the realities of life challenge their abilities to uphold such identities, it can create tremendous frustration and trigger a search for meaning. Put differently, when the expectation of entitlement does not meet an individual's lived experiences, that sense of deprivation can undermine self-worth and generate negative emotions. As will be shown in the next section, this feeling of relative deprivation can also be manufactured by ideologues of terrorist organizations. They can convince members of a certain group that they *should* be entitled to more and that their disadvantaged situation results from discrimination by a government or different ethnic or religious group.

Finally, identity crises resulting from factors other than deprivation are another vulnerability upon which radicals prey. An example of such a 'crisis' is seen in the experience of some Muslims from diaspora communities in primarily non-Muslim majority countries.<sup>19</sup> In these cases, Muslim second and third generation immigrants feel disconnected from the values of both their families and their societies. Traditional religious values can seem incompatible with some of the experiences of Muslims in secular societies. For example, such values tend to encourage the public practice of religion and yet secular societies are generally perceived to frown upon open displays of religiousness. In the aftermath of 9/11, the increased focus on Islam, in particular, combined with such conflicting values to create a religious identity crisis among some Muslims living in the West. This crisis then encouraged a search for meaning and truth about what it meant to be a Muslim: a question that many jihadist ideologues had long since been ready to answer.

## The Terrorist's Environment

Terrorism is a form of political violence that occurs in almost all countries and under all forms of governance. This being the case, there must be some social, political and cultural, i.e. environmental, factors that contribute to creating a fertile ground for terrorism, regardless of how a state is governed. An in-depth

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<sup>18</sup> Michael King and Donald M. Taylor, "The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 4 (2011): 609.

<sup>19</sup> Dina Al Raffie, "Social Identity Theory for Investigating Islamic Extremism in the Diaspora," *Journal of Strategic Security* 6, no. 4 (2013): 67-91.

discussion of the history of public protest, activism, and political violence is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, several observations are necessary.

To begin with, it has been suggested that there may be a link between terrorism and certain forms of repressive governance, such as military autocracies.<sup>20</sup> Authoritarian regimes monopolize political power and deny opportunities for political participation. This fuels grievances which may then manifest themselves in rebellion and/or political violence.<sup>21</sup> Whilst such an explanation appears logical, authoritarian regimes also exercise tight control over their respective populations, giving them little opportunity to organize an armed resistance.

In fact, the opportunities for terrorism may be even greater in democratic societies. A cursory glance at the recent history of Europe and the US shows that, prior to the rise of contemporary violent Islamism, both continents had suffered from violent left-wing extremism for many years, despite democratic systems of governance. For instance, during the 1970s, the US experienced a wave of bombings, largely attributable to groups such as the *Weather Underground*.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the current exodus of 'foreign fighters' to Syria and Iraq has involved thousands of volunteers from Western countries, many of whom are not clearly disadvantaged or oppressed. Whereas some terrorist organizations will emerge in response to forms of real and/or perceived state oppression (e.g. terrorism in the Israel-Palestine conflict), the reality is that state practices alone are not sufficient as drivers of terrorism. Indeed, there is little evidence to support a causal connection between governance type and terrorism.

A more necessary ingredient for mobilization in all cases of terrorism is the existence of an ideology. Ideologies play an important role in terrorism, primarily because of their ability to manipulate how people see the world and to provide convincing arguments for why and how individuals should act, i.e. they frame the cause on behalf of which individuals should fight. Robert Benford and David Snow identify three primary frames that ideologues use, of which the first two are of particular significance.<sup>23</sup> The first is the "diagnostic" frame, which provides explanations for why individuals face the problems they do. Individual motivating factors such as grievances, traumas, and injustices that are faced by potential recruits are explained as being symptomatic of a larger injus-

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<sup>20</sup> For a detailed discussion see Matthew C. Wilson and James A. Piazza, "Autocracies and Terrorism: Conditioning Effects of Authoritarian Regime Type on Terrorist Attacks," *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 4 (2013): 941-55.

<sup>21</sup> For more on political drivers of violent extremism, see Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter, *Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism* (Washington, D.C.: United States Agency for International Development, 2009), 27-38, accessed May 22, 2015, [http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/pnadt978.pdf](http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/pnadt978.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Caron E. Gentry and Laura Sjoberg, "The Gendering of Women's Terrorism," in *Women, Gender and Terrorism*, ed. Laura Sjoberg et al. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 66.

<sup>23</sup> Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 611-39.

tice that is intentionally being directed at members of a specific social group. For example, a typical jihadist narrative argues that the social ills faced by Muslims are a result of them shirking their religious duties in the face of an aggressive infidel campaign to destroy Islam. This element of ideology is the most important since "before collective action can get underway, people must collectively define their situation as unjust."<sup>24</sup> Initial framing is thus crucial to the radicalization process.

As individuals begin to adopt and internalize the frames offered by terrorist ideologues, they increasingly begin to reinterpret their surroundings in terms of injustice, which leads to a heightened sense of victimization. Because ideological frames tend to simplify issues, depicting them in a black and white manner, they often result in confirmation biases, whereby radicalized individuals only pay attention to things that confirm their beliefs, despite there being evidence to the contrary. This is a vicious cycle, which can eventually lead to violence. This becomes increasingly likely if he or she perceives that there are no credible alternatives to solving the problems that the ideology identifies. Violent ideological narratives try to ensure that such a conclusion is reached by emphasizing the futility of peaceful avenues of action and stressing the need for violence. This is readily apparent with violent jihadist organizations such as IS, which view peaceful engagement with the infidel enemy as inconceivable, while any form of coexistence is written off as religiously prohibited.

The second important aspect of ideology, the 'prognostic' frame, builds on the first by offering alternative solutions to the problems which have been identified. Carrying on from the previous example, dying for the sake of '*jihad*' by way of fighting on behalf of the embattled *ummah* is viewed as a noble, religious deed that will elevate the status of Muslims and effectively counter the Western conspiracy. The prognostic element is important as it clearly describes the 'enemy' and demarcates the in-group from the out-group. Blame is assigned to the latter, which is also often represented as subhuman. This is an important rhetorical tactic used to break down psychological barriers that recruits may have against killing other human beings. Dehumanization lowers the threshold for violence, and is designed to reduce the psychological stress associated with taking human life.<sup>25</sup>

The prescribed solutions provide the individual an opportunity to act, vent his/her frustrations, and gain a sense of purpose and meaning. In this context, the terrorist organization, as the social unit in which the ideology is practiced, shares a single, collective identity that generates a sense of belonging and acts as a surrogate family for its members. As Post remarks, "...what a wonderful feeling it is to find that one is not alone, to find other like-minded individuals, to have one's inner doubts quelled and shored up with an ideology, to be ac-

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<sup>24</sup> Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 51.

<sup>25</sup> Seth J. Schwartz, Curtis S. Dunkel, and Alan S. Waterman, "Terrorism: An Identity Theory Perspective," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32, no. 6 (2009): 540-42.

cepted at last.”<sup>26</sup> Responsibility and agency no longer rest with the individual, but with the group, which collectively decides on the actions to be taken and continues to ideologically justify them. Related ‘groupthink’ eclipses independent decision-making and fosters compliance, regardless of how irrational or extreme the proposed action may seem.<sup>27</sup>

As one study of a member of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) noted, “O’Grady [IRA member] observed that he did not grow up hating Protestants but had adopted the hatreds of his chosen group. He said: “They [Protestants] are the enemy of my people. The IRA targeted these people, and I was their instrument of death. I carry the hatred of my own group”.”<sup>28</sup> The psychosocial impact of the group on the individual’s willingness to join and stay should not be underestimated.

Similarly, the role of leaders cannot be overlooked when discussing terrorist motivations. Organized action requires organizers, and terrorist leadership of some description is often crucial for mobilization. Leaders are responsible for articulating and spreading the group’s vision, and act as role models or prototypes for those that join. Charismatic leaders that demonstrate commitment to a group’s cause are viewed as key to the success of an organization and its ideology.<sup>29</sup> For instance, despite the many luxuries that his wealth could have afforded him, Osama bin Laden always made an effort to demonstrate his commitment to the cause by living a Spartan lifestyle. It is perhaps easy to understand the appeal that such leaders may have on individuals who suffer from identity crises, are seeking direction, or else are moved by traumatic experiences that create a need for certainty and assurance. Just as Hollywood celebrities command deep admiration and loyalty from fans, so too can charismatic terrorist leaders and ideologues (see Case study 2.1).

Nevertheless, governments should take caution not to base their counter-terrorism (CT) efforts purely on ‘decapitating’ the top leadership of terrorist groups. Although there are a number of cases where the capture or killing of leaders has had a significant effect on a group’s operations, e.g. the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), others suggest that decapitation can have a negative effect. Indeed, the killing of a leader can create a ‘martyr’ and breathe new life into an organization’s momentum.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jerrold M. Post, “Notes on a Psychodynamic Theory of Terrorist Behavior,” *Terrorism: An International Journal* 7, no. 2 (1984): 248.

<sup>27</sup> Eteri Tsintsadze-Maass and Richard W. Maass, “Groupthink and Terrorist Radicalization,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (2014): 735–58.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen Worchel, *Written in Blood: Ethnic Identity and the Struggle for Human Harmony* (New York: Worth, 1999), 121.

<sup>29</sup> For more on charisma see Haroro J. Ingram, *The Charismatic Leadership Phenomenon in Radical and Militant Islamism* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, “How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups,” *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 22.

### Case Study 2.1. Anwar al-Awlaki.

The following case study is an adaptation of an in-depth report<sup>31</sup> which traces the radicalization of Anwar al-Awlaki, an American-Yemeni member of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) who was killed in Yemen in 2011 by a drone strike. At the end of his life, he was one of AQ's most prominent ideologues, responsible for inspiring a number of terrorist attacks. His story helps to illustrate how individual, social and environmental factors can progressively combine to result in increasing radicalization.

Awlaki's career as a preacher started in the mid-1990s in the US. The young cleric's religious interpretations had a distinctly conservative, Salafist flavor, which at times drew critiques from others within the community. Notably, he was openly supportive of the armed jihad in Chechnya, which he actively promoted to his followers.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, during this period Awlaki attributed Muslim troubles to a weakness in Islamic identity that was partly influenced by corrupting 'Western' values, which were causing disunity. This internal discord was aided by conflicts that were taking place in Muslim countries, further weakening the religion and its place in the world. His prognosis, as articulated in his sermons, was to strengthen Islamic identity through prioritizing observance of Islam over and above other identities. He similarly sought to raise awareness of the plight of Muslims worldwide and was obviously moved by the suffering of his co-religionists in all corners of the globe.

However, not long after the events of September 11, Awlaki disappeared from the US after reports emerged alleging connections to some of the 9/11 suicide bombers. Despite a lack of sufficient evidence at the time, increased scrutiny eventually drove him to the UK, where he became more exposed to non-violent Islamist organizations including the Muslim Brotherhood-founded Jamiat Ihyaa Minhaaj al-Sunnah (JIMAS). There, his already conservative views became more aggressive and he began to adopt more politicized opinions. Around this time, a US-led coalition invaded Taliban-governed Afghanistan, which Awlaki perceived as intentional Western hostility against Muslims. Consequently, he began shifting the blame for Islamic disunity from the lack of strong, individual faith, to what he believed was an intentional Western foreign policy of war against Islam. Coupled with an increase in Western CT efforts against violent extremists at home, Awlaki's rhetoric took on an increasingly hostile tone against non-Muslims, especially in the West. Muslims were encouraged not to integrate with others in society and those who did were painted as traitors for colluding with infidel governments to entrap their own people. Here we already begin to see the demonization of the out-group, which later became a legitimate target of violence in Awlaki's later propaganda efforts.

In 2004 Awlaki moved to Yemen, which is where his radicalization reached its peak. He was arrested in 2006 and spent time in a Yemeni prison at the behest of US authorities. Given the fact that the charges against him originated in the US (a country whose foreign policies he already perceived in an extremely negative light), it is likely that this further cemented his views that the Western "War on Terror" was really a global conspiracy against Islam. These combined experiences eventually led him to

<sup>31</sup> Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, *As American as Apple Pie: How Anwar al-Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, *As American as Apple Pie*, 25.

pledge allegiance to the leader of AQAP, Nasser al-Wuhayshi.

In the final stage of radicalization, Awlaki attributed what he believed was the decline of Islam to the failure of Muslims to wage armed jihad against their enemies. Further, Islam could only regain its supremacy on the world stage through the implementation of *sharia*. The only way to attain these goals, in his view, was by waging war on anyone who stood in their way. In the last few years of his life, Awlaki produced a plethora of jihadist propaganda that continues to be influential to this day. He was also directly or indirectly connected to a number of failed and successful attacks, including the 2009 Fort Hood shooting, the attempted underwear bombing of Northwest Airlines Flight 253, and the 2010 stabbing of a British Member of Parliament.

This case study illustrates how individual and environmental factors can reinforce each other in the radicalization process. In Awlaki's case, his increasingly extreme convictions, changes in his personal circumstances and global events combined to strengthen his perception that the West was at 'war' with Islam.

Another social unit that can influence terrorist recruitment and motivation is the family. In a study of the Southeast Asian Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), researchers found strong normative support amongst families for terrorist actions carried out by their kin.<sup>33</sup> Terrorist organizations may intentionally adopt a policy of intra-organizational marriage to create loyalty and ensure the radicalization of future generations. Some studies of Western home-grown terrorists have found similar effects. In a case study of an AQ-affiliated Tunisian network based in Milan, Lorenzo Vidino demonstrated how the radicalization of one brother eventually led two of his siblings to follow suit.<sup>34</sup> In addition to immediate family and kinship ties, there are other facilitators of radicalization, among them the Internet and social media, which are discussed in Chapter 6. Besides 'virtual' facilitators, likeminded, non-violent groups that share ideological affinities with terrorist organizations can also play a role in the overall radicalization process.

In a groundbreaking study on Islamist activism, Quintan Wiktorowicz highlights the role of ostensibly non-violent Islamist organizations in promoting many of the narratives that their more violent counterparts also subscribe to.<sup>35</sup> These groups often present themselves as legitimate religious institutions acting on behalf of minorities, primarily in the West. Examples of groups that have since been banned in many countries due to their strong potential for radicalizing youth include Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT), the UK-based al-Muhajiroun and the Sharia4 organizations that have branches in several countries.

<sup>33</sup> Michael King, Haula Noor, and Donald M. Taylor, "Normative Support for Terrorism: The Attitudes and Beliefs of Immediate Relatives of Jema'ah Islamiyah Members," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 34, no. 5 (2011): 402–17.

<sup>34</sup> Lorenzo Vidino, "The Buccinasco Pentiti: A Unique Case Study of Radicalization," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 3 (2011): 398–418.

<sup>35</sup> Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004).

Certain radical Salafi preachers, both political and apolitical, have also featured as contributors to the growth of Islamist extremism. Although not necessarily inciting violence, the puritanical religious interpretations taught by such preachers often serve a similar purpose to terrorist narratives in that they are divisive and highly critical of anyone who does not share their interpretation of the faith. Increasingly, extremist preachers will also combine strong anti-Western, anti-democratic rhetoric based on comparable critiques of Western domestic and foreign policies, and similarly call for a reformation of societies based on select readings of the Islamic *sharia*. It is thus easy to see how these facilitators, with their many ideological parallels to violent Islamist organizations, can help to ideologically prime their followers into potentially accepting more radical, violent ideas.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, it is also important to realize that mainstream Salafism is by no means an inevitable conveyor belt towards violent extremism and some believe that it may in fact help prevent people from turning to terrorism.<sup>37</sup> As Vidino has noted, “it can be argued that in some cases non-violent Islamist groups act as firewalls while in others as conveyor belts.”<sup>38</sup>

A final point of interest regarding the environment and radicalization relates to research on prisons as incubators of violent extremism. Prisons facilitate radicalization and recruitment to terrorism when imprisoned radicals are kept together or else left to mingle with ‘ordinary’ convicts. Essentially the same social dynamics that bring together individuals in support of extremist ideology on the outside can also play out in prisons. For example, Mark Hamm has researched a number of cases where individuals were radicalized behind bars, including shoe bomber Richard Reid and several of the 2004 Madrid train bombers.<sup>39</sup> More recent reports have suggested that Camp Bucca, an American military prison in Iraq, played a significant role in the development of the current leadership of IS.<sup>40</sup> It provided the insurgents with an opportunity to assemble, analyze each other’s strengths and weaknesses, and establish a hierar-

<sup>36</sup> For accounts of the experience in Germany, see Stefan Malthaner, “Contextualizing Radicalization: The Emergence of the “Sauerland-Group” from Radical Networks and the Salafist Movement,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37, no. 8 (2014): 638–653; “Salafist Efforts: Content and Objectives of Salafist Ideology,” *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*, Undated, accessed April 14, 2015, [www.verfassungsschutz.de/en/fields-of-work/islamism-and-islamist-terrorism/what-is-islamism/salafist-efforts](http://www.verfassungsschutz.de/en/fields-of-work/islamism-and-islamist-terrorism/what-is-islamism/salafist-efforts).

<sup>37</sup> For useful discussions of these issues see Alex P. Schmid, *Violent and Non-Violent Extremism: Two Sides of the Same Coin?* (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2014), accessed June 18, 2015, <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Schmid-Violent-Non-Violent-Extremism-May-2014.pdf>; Lorenzo Vidino, “Sharia4: From Confrontational Activism to Militancy,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 2 (2015): 2-16; Lorenzo Vidino, “The Role of Non-Violent Islamists in Europe,” *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 11 (2010): 11.

<sup>38</sup> Vidino, “The Role of Non-Violent Islamists in Europe.”

<sup>39</sup> Mark Hamm, *The Spectacular Few: Prisoner Radicalization and the Evolving Terrorist Threat* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

<sup>40</sup> Martin Chulov, “Isis: The Inside Story,” *The Guardian*, December 11, 2014, accessed May 22, 2015, [www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/-sp-isis-the-inside-story](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/-sp-isis-the-inside-story).



chy that was eventually to form the backbone of the insurgent group as we know it today. Indeed, prisons play a dual role. They not only protect society from dangerous individuals, but also protect dangerous individuals from being hunted on the outside. In the case of the Iraqi insurgency, being in prison meant that prominent AQ members were kept alive and could continue their efforts to radicalize and recruit.

## Conclusion

This chapter aimed to provide an overview of widely documented motivating factors for terrorism. It is a phenomenon that is driven by a complex array of elements that emerge from an individual's predispositions, experiences and environment. Motivations to commit acts of terror are thus multilayered. Therefore, in order to successfully counter terrorism we first need to distinguish between the different layers and sources of terrorist motivation. It is obvious that no single approach will suffice in challenging terrorist motivations. This is because there are various drivers at both the individual and environmental levels which, when taken together, may present multiple pathways into radicalization and violence. Not all of the factors need to be present in each individual's radicalization 'formula.' Likewise, different ideologies present differing narratives which emphasize certain factors over others. Even more confusing is the unanticipated effects that the same factors can have on different individuals, as the majority of aggrieved, disenfranchised youngsters who face identity crises will not turn to terrorism.

However, the fact remains that the risk-factors identified above will have a negative impact on a number of individuals and, for some, will provide sufficient motivation to commit acts of terrorism. Despite the complexity of the subject, the knowledge that we have gained on the 'why' of terrorism is enough to enable development of empirically informed policies to counter violent extremism. Although in all likelihood we will never be able to put an end to terrorism, we may be able to lessen its appeal over time.

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