



Terrorist Dropouts

Learning from Those Who Have Left

Michael Jacobson

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Contents

About the Author	v
Preface	vii
Executive Summary	1
1. Introduction	4
2. Reasons for Leaving.	8
3. Considerations for Policymakers.	21
4. Conclusion.	34

About the Author

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The opinions expressed in this Policy Focus are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, its Board of Trustees, or its Board of Advisors.

Preface

I FIRST GREW INTERESTED in the subject of terrorist dropouts as a result of my work on the 9-11 Commission, where I was assigned to the team putting together the story of the plot. While it was rather startling that al-Qaeda had managed to convince nineteen young men to participate in a suicide attack, what may have been even more interesting was that some of those selected for the plot had backed out, even in the face of pressure from al-Qaeda. In reviewing the organization's now twenty-year history, it becomes clear that these so-called September 11 dropouts were hardly alone. Since al-Qaeda's earliest days, seemingly committed members have withdrawn from the group, and this trend has continued to the present. Al-Qaeda is not alone in suffering this fate: its affiliates, such as Jemah Islamiyah (based in Southeast Asia) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, as well as Hamas and other terrorist groups have all experienced defections, as have Islamist extremist groups like the international Hizb al-Tahrir. Why do people choose to leave these groups? What, if anything, makes them different from those who decide to remain? And what can the United States and other governments learn by studying these dropouts?

In this Policy Focus, I attempt to answer some of these questions by reviewing the publicly available cases of those who have left terrorist and extremist organizations. For this project, I conducted approximately twenty-five interviews in the United States and abroad. I spoke to a wide variety of people, including a number of former terrorists and extremists, whose insights were critical to understanding the phenomenon. I also met with psychologists and psychiatrists with experience in this area, current and former U.S. and European government officials, community workers, academics, and other experts. In addition, I

reviewed the available and relevant open source literature, including books, journal articles, news articles, and trial transcripts.

Understanding how to reverse or stop radicalization takes on increased urgency for the U.S. government as it copes with evidence of a growing problem on the home front. For years, the common view has been that, in contrast to Europe, the United States does not have a serious radicalization issue. Yet the slew of cases over the past year involving U.S. citizens who were radicalized and apparently eager to strike targets here and abroad has raised new concerns about the threat of homegrown terrorism. Senior Obama administration officials have acknowledged candidly that Washington's view of the situation has changed. As U.S. attorney general Eric Holder observed in a July 2009 speech after a spate of arrests in the United States, the "whole notion of radicalization is something that did not loom as large a few months ago . . . as it does now."¹ And in December, Homeland Security secretary Janet Napolitano noted that "home-based terrorism is here. And like violent extremism abroad, it is now part of the threat picture that we must confront."² I am hopeful that this study and the recommendations I offer will be useful for policymakers—both in the United States and abroad—as they grapple with these difficult and sensitive issues.

This project was possible only because the Washington Institute for Near East Policy gave me the space, support, and time to research, write, and complete this study. I am especially grateful for the support of the Institute's Board of Directors and Board of Trustees, executive director Dr. Robert Satloff, and deputy director for research Dr. Patrick Clawson. Special thanks go to the two expert outside

1. Pierre Thomas, Jason Ryan, and Theresa Cook, "Holder: Homegrown Terror Threat Increasing," ABC News, July 29, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=8202511>.
2. Department of Homeland Security, "Readout of Secretary Napolitano's Remarks to the America-Israel Friendship League," December 3, 2009, http://www.dhs.gov/ynews/releases/pr_1259860196559.shtm.

reviewers—Paul Cruickshank at the New York University Center for Law and Security and Lorenzo Vidino at the United States Institute of Peace—and to my colleagues at the Institute who provided valuable feedback on drafts and helped make this a far better product. This project would have been very difficult to complete without the extremely able support of the various research assistants and interns who

contributed along the way, including Ben Freedman, Julie Lascar, Albar Sheikh, Becca Wasser, and Sana Mahmood. And particular thanks go to my colleague, friend, and frequent coauthor Dr. Matthew Levitt, director of the Institute’s Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, with whom I’ve now had the pleasure of working, both inside and outside of government, for many years.

Executive Summary

THERE IS GROWING RECOGNITION that capturing or killing every terrorist is not a realistic strategy and that we need to spend more time exploring the radicalization process—what motivates people to become extremists in the first place. Despite this, little study has been undertaken of the “flip side”—those who decide to leave terrorist and extremist organizations.¹ Developing a better grasp of this “dropout phenomenon” is critical for the counterterrorism efforts of the United States and its allies, particularly because this knowledge can help shape the myriad counterradicalization programs springing up in the Middle East, Asia, and Europe.

Numerous candidates present themselves for study. Despite al-Qaeda’s reputation for ferocity, secrecy, and esprit de corps, the organization has been plagued by desertions since its earliest days. More recently, key ideologues and leaders have turned against the organization, challenging al-Qaeda’s vision for the global jihad. Yet al-Qaeda is hardly alone in suffering from this phenomenon. Some of its affiliates have experienced important losses as well, ranging from foot soldiers to key leadership personnel. Terrorist groups not affiliated with al-Qaeda, such as Hamas, have also had seemingly committed members leave the fold. Even outwardly nonviolent Islamist extremist groups are far from immune—Hizb al-Tahrir, for example, has been plagued by numerous defections over the years. Although such groups may not explicitly endorse violence, they contribute to the radicalization problem because many of their long-term goals are similar to al-Qaeda’s. Accordingly, examining the cases of extremists who have left is an important part of this study.

Analysis of individual dropout cases clearly shows that no single overarching reason explains why individuals leave terrorist or extremist groups, just as no

single reason leads to their radicalization in the first instance. A wide variety of triggers, ranging from the strategic to the petty, have ultimately led to their disillusionment. The most common factors include concerns about the organization’s direction, goals, or hypocrisy; disappointment with the reality of life in a terrorist or extremist group; and a feeling of being mistreated or undervalued. Families can play a key role in persuading their relatives to leave these organizations, though they can play a destructive role as well. A change in circumstances—such as leaving a terrorist training camp or a similar insular, fanatical environment and relocating elsewhere—also often marks a significant turning point in a decision to withdraw. Perhaps surprisingly, prison, which is often viewed as an incubator for radicalization, has served as an opportunity for people to rethink their support for terrorist or extremist causes. There is no obvious profile of dropouts, and this diverse group includes leaders and important ideologues, operational chiefs, midlevel operatives, foot soldiers, and prospective recruits.

For policymakers, understanding what motivates members of terrorist or extremist organizations to leave is critical to designing effective programs to encourage them to make the break. Unfortunately, the process of withdrawing is not always so straightforward, making the analysis of what is likely to work somewhat difficult. Leaving a terrorist or extremist group is often a lengthy, convoluted, and complicated process. Perhaps even more important, it does not always result in the group member’s abandoning his radical beliefs, so “success” in this area can be difficult both to define and to achieve.

Nonetheless, several patterns emerge that should give policymakers cause for optimism. First, it is clear that many of those who have left terrorist and extremist

1. A notable exception is the scholarship of John Horgan and Tore Bjorgo, who have been researching and writing about this topic for a number of years. The following are two examples of their important work in this area: Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan, eds., *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, (New York: Routledge, 2009); and John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements*, (New York: Routledge, 2009).

organizations have done so without being harmed or even threatened. And second, these organizations are often hit hard when leadership defections take place.

A close study of the numerous cases presented in this study shows several ways in which the U.S. government can encourage and even accelerate the dropout phenomenon. The recommendations given here can be broken down into three broad areas: public messaging, partnerships with nongovernmental actors, and counterradicalization program development.

Public Messaging

Undermine leadership: “Naming and shaming,” or undermining terrorist and extremist leadership, should be one part of the U.S. government’s counterradicalization approach. It is vital to craft messages that significantly detract from the authority and credibility of these leaders and call into question the strategic direction of their organizations.

Publicize that leaving is possible: It is not well known that, in many cases, members can leave terrorist and extremist groups without being harmed. The United States and its allies should do a better job of publicizing the cases of people who have successfully left so that those on the inside will realize that withdrawing is an option.

Demonstrate the hypocrisy of terrorist groups: An effective counternarrative should demonstrate the hypocrisy of terrorist and extremist groups. The suffering of civilians, including other Muslims, at the hands of terrorists should be one part of this counternarrative. Terrorists are increasingly involved in a variety of criminal activities, and painting them as common criminals may also help demonstrate the impurity of their ideology.

Challenge al-Qaeda’s ideology: The United States should continue to exploit and amplify existing ideological divisions within terrorist and extremist organizations and widen the gap between extremists and their followers and potential recruits. It should highlight

voices critical of al-Qaeda, particularly former high-level members and ideologues, even though the United States may still take issue with some of their views.

Focus on the reality of life as a terrorist: Another key aspect of encouraging defections should be a focus on the reality of terrorist life. If people are joining because the terrorist lifestyle seems glamorous or because they believe they are fulfilling some larger purpose, demonstrating the reality—such as the bleak conditions in terrorist training camps—will help to dispel these myths.

Find the most effective messenger: Governments are seldom the most effective messengers for encouraging terrorists and extremists to turn their backs on the cause. Former terrorists and extremists are obvious candidates for the job.

Stronger Partnerships

Involve families: The families of terrorists and extremists—in particular, wives and parents—can have an important role to play in trying to persuade their relatives to leave, and stay out of, these organizations. They should be an integral element in any counterradicalization program.

Develop additional non-law-enforcement mechanisms to address radicalization: Currently, the Federal Bureau of Investigation is the main U.S. resource for individuals who have concerns about potential radicalization. The government should therefore work with communities to develop alternative, non-law-enforcement mechanisms at the local level, both governmental and nongovernmental, to deal with radicalization. This is an area in which a number of European countries, particularly the Netherlands, are ahead of the United States, and the U.S. government should look abroad for ideas as it develops its own mechanisms.

Program Development

Create a counterradicalization forum: Government leaders should establish a “counterradicalization forum” so that policymakers and practitioners from

around the world can compare notes and best practices. One of the functions of this forum should be to conduct comprehensive assessments of all aspects of the radicalization process, including withdrawal from terrorist and extremist groups. As governments develop counterradicalization programs, they should use the results of their studies to determine what is likely to work.

Customize counterradicalization programs: It is clear that an effective counterradicalization program cannot take a “one-size-fits-all” approach. The more a program can be personalized, the better its chance of success. In designing individually tailored programs, it is essential to understand why a person was first attracted to the terrorist or extremist cause, since there is often a link between what makes people join and why they choose to leave.

Focus on prisons: While prisons have often been viewed as incubators for radicalization, the U.S. government should also view them as incubators of opportunity. Examples abound of people who went into prison as extremists and came out with far more moderate views. The United States should focus on developing comprehensive counterradicalization programs for those serving time in prison and encourage its allies to do the same.

Target vulnerable cell members: Not all members of terrorist or extremist networks are equally committed to the cause. Those who are wavering could be extremely helpful to U.S. law enforcement and intelligence officials as they attempt to determine which terrorists might be induced to switch sides. The United States and its allies should take advantage of these potentially vulnerable group members.

1 | Introduction

RECOGNITION HAS GROWN over the past few years that capturing or killing every terrorist is not a realistic strategy, and that we must focus more on understanding how and why individuals become terrorists and extremists in the first place. Former defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld posed this fundamental question in an infamous 2003 memorandum, asking, “Are we capturing, killing or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the madrassas and the radical clerics are recruiting, training and deploying against us?”¹ It was becoming depressingly clear that the answer was no.

Today, more than eight years after the September 11 attacks, the focus of U.S. and international counterterrorism efforts has shifted, with far more attention being paid to the “softer” side of the fight against terrorism alluded to by Secretary Rumsfeld. For example, a growing emphasis has been placed on studying and understanding the radicalization process. In September 2007, for example, the New York Police Department released a valuable assessment analyzing how and where radicalization occurred in eleven terrorist cells in the West.² The federal government also looked at this issue in the July 2007 National Intelligence Estimate titled “The Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland.”³ Academics have begun to explore this issue as well.

In addition to increasing their focus on studying radicalization, governments have been more active in addressing it. A number of governments in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East have established programs specifically designed to halt or reverse the radicalization process, or to prevent it from occurring in the first place. Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Egypt, Indonesia, and

Singapore, as well as Britain and the Netherlands, are among those countries that have implemented these types of programs in recent years.

While this increased government action is promising, and while these types of programs have had some measure of success, governments have often fallen short because they failed to rely adequately on empirical evidence to determine which approaches are likely to work. Perhaps the most glaring deficiency is how little attention they have paid to how people who are radicalized, sometimes to the point of violence, decide to leave terrorist and extremist organizations.

Developing a better grasp of this “dropout phenomenon” is critical to counterterrorism efforts by the United States and its allies for several reasons. Most important, governments could use the knowledge to shape their counterradicalization programs. Though a review of the dropout cases shows clearly that they do not have a common profile and that a wide range of reasons exists for their defections, governments could nonetheless learn many lessons from studying this varied group. In addition, understanding why people leave terrorist and extremist groups could help both governments and nongovernmental entities craft messages to draw away those already in such groups. This is an area in which Western governments have struggled notably since the September 11 attacks, and a new approach is needed. As Charles Allen, undersecretary of the Department of Homeland Security, said in a May 2008 speech, “No Western state has effectively countered the al-Qaeda narrative” at this point.⁴ Without knowing why people become disillusioned with terrorist and extremist organizations, it is difficult to determine what type of message would be most effective,

1. Memo from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, October 16, 2003, <http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/executive/rumsfeld-memo.htm>.
2. Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat*, New York Police Department, August 15, 2007, http://www.nypdshield.org/public/SiteFiles/documents/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf.
3. Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “The Terrorist Threat to the U.S. Homeland,” July 2007, http://www.dni.gov/press_releases/20070717_release.pdf.
4. Charles Allen, “Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century: Implications for Homeland Security” (speech, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 6, 2008), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC07.php?CID=395>.

and who should deliver it. Understanding why people voluntarily leave these groups may also enable governments to do a better job of predicting whether an individual—or even a cell—is likely to carry out an attack, and may help determine which cell members are particularly vulnerable to recruitment by government security services.

Over the past several years, al-Qaeda has been put on the defensive by a small but growing cadre of Muslims who are challenging its strategic use of violence, especially against fellow Muslims. Former terrorist supporters and extremists are turning against their old groups, and this is contributing to the expansion of existing organizational fissures. While these are positive developments that may help significantly to prevent the next wave of potential terrorists from adopting extremism, we must ask what effect these renunciations will have on current terrorists and extremists and on others on the path to extremism. What could turn a would-be terrorist away from this path? Would messages from former terrorists and extremists carry particular weight?

Unfortunately, the answers to these important questions are fairly limited at this point. To gain more insight into these issues, begin to answer these fundamental questions more effectively, and create an effective counterterrorism and counterradicalization strategy, we must explore real-life cases.

Terrorist vs. Extremist Organizations

This study looks at former members of both Islamist terrorist organizations and extremist groups. The difference between the two types of organizations is that terrorist groups actively engage in violence while extremist groups do not explicitly endorse it—though the latter may subscribe to al-Qaeda’s long-term goals and contribute to the radicalization problem. In a number of cases, members of extremist groups have left them to join terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda, but this study does not cover such people, since they do not fit within the definition of “dropout” adopted

for this monograph. The State Department often refers to extremist organizations like Hizb al-Tahrir (HT) as “conveyor belt groups,” since they can transform people into “sympathizers, supporters, and ultimately, members of terrorist networks.”⁵

Another key difference, which flows from the first, is that terrorists engage in illegal activity, while extremist groups generally do not (though some countries have banned certain Islamist extremist organizations, such as HT, nonetheless). Members of terrorist groups have often, by definition, committed an illegal act, particularly as more countries criminalize membership in a terrorist organization or attendance at a terrorist training camp. This distinction between terrorist and extremist groups has important implications for those leaving these groups. These implications will be explored at length below.

While it is understandable that the U.S. government would focus primarily on those who have joined terrorist networks, the United States cannot afford to concentrate on terrorist groups alone. In developing counterradicalization programs and policies, it is essential that the government must also include extremist groups in its analysis, since reducing the appeal of such groups will have important implications for U.S. policy. This study finds that similar factors frequently cause people to leave both kinds of groups; such a finding could yield important lessons for policymakers who desire to facilitate or even accelerate the withdrawal process.

The Long History of Defections

Over the past several years, al-Qaeda’s leadership has faced increased pressure on the battlefield as the United States and its allies have stepped up their efforts to track down and kill key figures in the group. What may be even more damaging to the long-term health of the organization, however, is that a number of important leaders, clerics, and ideologues have begun to turn on al-Qaeda. The most prominent is former Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) head Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, also

5. U.S. Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2008*, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2008/122411.htm>.

known as Dr. Fadl. Al-Qaeda often cited his treatises as ideological justification for its actions, but Dr. Fadl has now firmly renounced Usama bin Laden and has written a new book rejecting al-Qaeda's message and tactics.⁶ Other important high-level defectors include:

- Sheikh Salman bin Fahd al-Awdah, an extremist cleric whose incarceration by the Saudis in the 1990s reportedly helped inspire bin Laden to action. In September 2007, al-Awdah went on television to decry al-Qaeda's actions, asking bin Laden, "How much blood has been spilt? How many innocent people, children, elderly, and women have been killed . . . in the name of al-Qaeda?"⁷
- Hassan Hattab, one of the founders of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which is now called al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Hattab has repeatedly and publicly called on the members of his former organization to disarm and accept the Algerian government's amnesty offer.⁸
- Six leaders of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), a longtime al-Qaeda ally. These men recently issued recantations challenging al-Qaeda's global vision for jihad in a book of more than 400 pages entitled *Corrective Studies in Understanding Jihad, Accountability, and the Judgment of the People*.⁹

These recent and highly significant developments involving former leaders and key ideologues follow a long history of defections that have plagued al-Qaeda since its earliest days, despite its reputation for ferocity, secrecy, and esprit de corps. Such defectors include three former members who turned against the

organization and served as key U.S. government witnesses in the embassy bombing trials in early 2001:

- Jamal al-Fadl, a Sudanese national, who was one of the first al-Qaeda members and was involved in the unsuccessful efforts in the early 1990s to procure uranium for the organization¹⁰
- Essam al-Ridi, an Egyptian, who first traveled to Afghanistan in 1982 to fight the Soviets and later purchased an airplane in the United States for al-Qaeda¹¹
- L'Houssaine Kherchtou, a Moroccan, who joined the organization in 1991 and trained to serve as bin Laden's personal pilot¹²

Even bin Laden's September 11 plot was not entirely successful in retaining recruits. Two Saudis selected for the attack, Mushabib al-Hamlan and Saud al-Rashid, decided not to participate after leaving the training camps in Afghanistan, and in summer 2001, Ziad Jarrah—who ultimately participated in the attack by seizing control in the cockpit of Flight 93—was considering withdrawing from the operation. In an emotional conversation, Ramzi Binalshib, the Hamburg-based liaison between the cell and al-Qaeda's leadership, persuaded Jarrah to stay the course.¹³

Defections from al-Qaeda have continued since the September 11 attacks. For example, Sajid Badat, a young Muslim from Gloucester, England, was trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan to use shoe bombs to destroy aircraft and was assigned to target airliners traveling from Europe to the United States. While his associate, Richard Reid—now better known as "the shoe bomber"—unsuccessfully attempted to blow up

6. Lawrence Wright, "The Rebellion Within," *New Yorker*, June 2, 2008, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/06/02/080602fa_fact_wright.

7. Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "The Unraveling," *New Republic*, June 11, 2008, <http://www.tnr.com/article/the-unraveling-0>.

8. BBC, "Algerian Militants Urged to Disarm," April 17, 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/6562777.stm>.

9. Frank J. Cilluffo and F. Jordan Evert, *Reflections on Jihad: A Former Leader's Perspective*, George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute, October 16, 2009, <http://www.gwumc.edu/hspi/policy/ReflectionsOnJihad.pdf>.

10. Fadl testimony in *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, February 7, 2001.

11. Ridi testimony in *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, February 14, 2001.

12. Kherchtou testimony in *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, February 20–22, 2001.

13. *9-11 Commission Report*, <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.

an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami, Badat abandoned the plot, leaving his dismantled bomb in his parents' house.¹⁴

Al-Qaeda is hardly alone among global jihadist groups in experiencing defections. Some of its affiliates have had important losses as well, ranging from foot soldiers to key leadership personnel. Al-Qaeda's Indonesian-based affiliate Jemah Islamiyah (JI) was dealt a blow when Nazir Abas, one of its four regional commanders, left the organization.¹⁵ Noman Benotman, a former leader of the al-Qaeda-affiliated LIFG who now lives in London, abandoned the jihadist cause, turning against al-Qaeda first privately, then more publicly.¹⁶ Benotman also played a key role in facilitating the recent public recantations by other former LIFG leaders. In June 2008, Abu Hadhifa, a longtime veteran of the Algerian jihad who had risen to become commander of AQIM's forces in eastern Algeria,

dropped out of the organization and turned himself in to Algerian authorities.¹⁷

This phenomenon is not limited to al-Qaeda or its affiliates. Hamas has also experienced defections; a notable example is that of Mosab Hassan Yousef, the son of a prominent Hamas leader, who abandoned the group and moved to the United States in 2006, converting to Christianity in the process.¹⁸

Islamist extremist groups are also far from immune. HT has been plagued by numerous defections over the past several years. The most visible were those of Maajid Nawaz and Ed Husain, who went public with their concerns about the group and founded the Quilliam Foundation, which they describe as "Britain's first Muslim counter-extremism think tank."¹⁹ The remaining question, however, is why these people left, and what governments can do to stimulate further defections.

14. Daniel McGrory and Zahid Hussain, "New Wave of British Terrorists Are Taught at Schools, Not in the Mountains," *Times Online*, July 14, 2005, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article543782.ece>.
15. Bob Simon, "Switching Sides: Inside the Enemy Camp," *60 Minutes*, May 6, 2007, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/05/04/60minutes/main2761108.shtml>.
16. Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "The Unraveling," *New Republic*, June 11, 2008, <http://www.tnr.com/article/the-unraveling-0>.
17. MEMRI Blog, "Report: Al-Qaeda Maghreb Commander Turns Self In," June 8, 2008, http://www.thememriblog.org/blog_personal/en/7847.htm.
18. Jonathan Hunt, "Son of Hamas Leader Turns Back on Islam and Embraces Christianity," Fox News, August 12, 2008, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,402483,00.html>.
19. Susannah Tarbush, "The Quilliam Foundation," *al-Hayat*, May 26, 2008. For a detailed analysis of the Quilliam Foundation, see James Brandon, "The UK's Experience in Counter-Radicalization," *CTC Sentinel* 1:5 (2008).

2 | Reasons for Leaving

AN EXAMINATION OF DROPOUT cases shows that no clear, overarching reason why people leave terrorist or extremist groups; rather, a wide variety of reasons, ranging from the strategic to the petty, can contribute to disillusionment. Furthermore, no readily discernable profile exists for dropouts, a category that includes terrorist leaders and important ideologues, operational chiefs, midlevel operatives, foot soldiers, and prospective recruits. Nonetheless, some commonalities are worth exploring further.

Interpreting Islam Incorrectly

Those leaders who have recently defected all cite al-Qaeda's inaccurate interpretation of Islam as a major factor in their decision. For example, during his imprisonment in Egypt, the aforementioned Dr. Fadl wrote the treatise *Wathiqat Tarshid al-Aml al-Jihadi fi Misr w'Al-Alam* (commonly translated as "Rationalizing Jihad in Egypt and the World"). In it, he argued that al-Qaeda's version of jihadism is reprehensible and a violation of the principles of Islam and *sharia* (Islamic law): "We are prohibited from committing aggression, even if the enemies of Islam do that." He also noted that it is not in keeping with the Quran to kill people solely because of their nationality, particularly given that such acts often harm "innocent Muslims and non-Muslims." A comparison with Fadl's earlier statements illustrates how dramatically his views on the relationship between Islam and jihad have evolved. For example, he once argued that jihad is Islam's natural state and the "only way to end the domination of the infidels."¹ (Despite this turnaround, Fadl's views on violence still contain potentially troubling

contradictions; see the next chapter for a discussion of these issues.)

Noman Benotman, the former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) leader, attacked al-Qaeda on similar grounds. After years of privately criticizing bin Laden, he argued in a public letter in 2007 that al-Qaeda's tactics were a violation of Islam's support for protecting "man's religion, life, mind, off-spring and wealth" and called for the group to cease military operations. These sentiments were repeated in a 2009 book by LIFG members refuting al-Qaeda's ideology.² Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) founder Hassan Hattab expressed similar thoughts in 2009, calling on his former comrades to turn themselves in to the Algerian government. Citing several verses from the Quran and other religious texts, Hattab asked rhetorically, "What law or moral code could allow this? Is this really a jihad that would please God?"³

Former Jemah Islamiyah (JI) commander Nazir Abas began to turn on his organization when it adopted a bin Laden *fatwa* (religious edict) calling for attacks on civilians and urging bin Laden's followers to kill Americans and Jews everywhere.⁴ Abas, alone among the JI commanders, refused to carry out an ordered attack, believing that jihad should be fought only on the battlefield in defense of Islam and that the killing of civilians had nothing to do with holy war. According to Abas, he did not consider bin Laden's *fatwa* to carry any religious weight because "bin Laden is not qualified to issue a *fatwa*."⁵ He later said that he felt "sinful" after the 2002 Bali bombings because he had helped train the bombers responsible for the attacks, as well as hundreds of others.⁶ Abas expressed

1. Britta Sandberg, "Turning Their Backs on Jihad," *Salon*, July 16, 2008, <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2008/07/16/jihad/print.html>.
2. Frank J. Cilluffo and F. Jordan Evert, *Reflections on Jihad: A Former Leader's Perspective*, George Washington University Homeland Security Policy Institute, October 16, 2009, <http://www.gwumc.edu/hspi/policy/ReflectionsOnJihad.pdf>, pp. 1–2.
3. Nazim Fethi, "GSPC Founder Calls for al-Qaeda Surrender in Algeria," *Magharebia*, January 21, 2009, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2009/01/21/feature-01.
4. Bob Simon, "Switching Sides: Inside the Enemy Camp," *60 Minutes*, May 6, 2007, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/05/04/60minutes/main2761108.shtml>.
5. Chris Holm, "Southeast Asia in the Shadow of Terror," *Asia Times*, September 12, 2006, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/HI12Ac01.html.
6. See Bob Simon, "Switching Sides: Inside the Enemy Camp," *60 Minutes*, May 6, 2007, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2007/05/04/60minutes/main2761108.shtml>.

the belief that his fellow JI members had an incorrect understanding of the group's mission. In his view, legitimate jihad was the sort being waged in Afghanistan and the Philippines, against an enemy attacking a Muslim community. And even in those situations, he believed that one must distinguish between attacks against military targets and those against civilians. Since dropping out of JI, Abas has turned against the organization and has been cooperating with the Indonesian government, even testifying publicly against the group's leadership.⁷

Another notable defector, albeit less well known, is former al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) commander Hudayfa Abu Yunis al-Asimi. According to his family, al-Asimi turned himself in to Algerian authorities in June 2008 after reaching the conclusion that the jihad in Algeria was illegitimate.⁸

Beyond the issues of religious legitimacy, several defectors have been concerned about how the actions of terrorist and extremist groups affect perceptions of Islam around the world. Usama Hassan, who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s and now preaches against jihad at a London mosque, worried that global jihadists were destroying Islam's reputation. This was one of the factors motivating him as he decided to turn away from his previous path. Hassan believed that people have "had enough of Islam constantly being equated with terrorism."⁹ Similarly, Maajid Nawaz, a former Hizb al-Tahrir (HT) leader and recruiter, turned away from Islamism because he "recognized it as the curse of Islam."¹⁰

Objections to Group's Direction

Some of those who left al-Qaeda have been less troubled by the religious implications of the group's activities and whether they are consistent with Islam, and more focused on the practical impact of al-Qaeda's actions and strategic direction. Usama bin Laden's son

Omar, who decided to quit al-Qaeda in the wake of the September 11 attacks, is one such example. Calling the attacks "craziness," Omar declared that "those guys are dummies. They have destroyed everything, and for nothing. What did we get from September 11?"¹¹ Interestingly, Noman Benotman had similar practical objections to al-Qaeda's plans well before he turned publicly against the group. He also had real differences with bin Laden over the global jihadist movement's direction and claims to have asked him at a 2000 summit to get out of the terrorism business, having realized that both of them were fighting a losing battle. Benotman argued to bin Laden that al-Qaeda's sole focus on the United States as the "head of the snake" would hurt the efforts of groups such as the LIFG to overthrow the apostate Arab regimes, which Benotman viewed as the real problem. Benotman later said that he made a "clear-cut request" to bin Laden to stop attacking the United States because it would "lead to nowhere," but bin Laden disregarded his concerns. After the September 11 attacks, Benotman resigned from his position in the LIFG, concerned that the United States would respond to the attack by targeting not only al-Qaeda, but his group as well.¹²

Hassan Hattab, the former GSPC leader, had similar issues with his organization's approach. Believing that jihad should be limited to military targets and avoid inflicting damage on Algeria's civilian population, he was especially disturbed by the group's strategic reorientation after it officially joined al-Qaeda, renamed itself "al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," and began to attack Western targets in Algeria. After a 2007 attack on a United Nations facility killed thirty-three people, he criticized GSPC for drifting away from its original, more narrow goals and called on its members to lay down their weapons. Hattab also accused the group's leaders of trying to turn Algeria into a second Iraq.¹³

7. Ibid.

8. MEMRI Blog, "Report: Al-Qaeda Maghreb Commander Turns Self In," June 8, 2008, available at: http://www.thememriblog.org/blog_personal/en/7847.htm.

9. Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "The Unraveling," *New Republic*, June 11, 2008, <http://www.tnr.com/article/the-unraveling-0>.

10. Britta Sandberg, "Turning Their Backs on Jihad," *Salon*, July 16, 2008, <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2008/07/16/jihad/print.html>.

11. Peter Bergen, "War of Error," *New Republic*, October 22, 2007, http://www.newamerica.net/publications/articles/2007/war_error_6154.

12. Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "The Unraveling," *New Republic*, June 11, 2008, <http://www.tnr.com/article/the-unraveling-0>.

13. Lamine Chikhi, "Bombers Seek 'Second Iraq' in Algeria: Islamist," Reuters, April 16, 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL16316379>.

Of course, for many in terrorist organizations, opposition to a specific attack is not sufficient grounds to leave. For example, a number of key figures in al-Qaeda's Shura council, including Taliban leader Mullah Omar, did vote against going forward with the September 11 attacks, yet these dissenters did not leave when bin Laden chose to proceed.¹⁴

More tactical and operational differences with the leadership have also played a role in terrorist disillusionment. For example, the previously mentioned Egyptian defector Essam al-Ridi said that during battles against the Soviets in Afghanistan, he resented taking orders from bin Laden and other leaders who lacked military experience. He later testified that, for him, the final straw was a battle in which many jihadists died—in his view, due to leadership incompetence—but al-Qaeda declared victory nonetheless.¹⁵ September 11 hijacker Jarrah was unhappy with Muhammad Atta's leadership style and felt excluded from the broader decisionmaking process.¹⁶

Disillusionment with Group's Hypocrisy

When leaders of a terrorist or extremist organization appear to be hypocritical, not living up to the pure religious standards they espouse, this can take a toll on the group's adherents. The extremist group al-Muhajiroun, based in the United Kingdom, suffered a blow in the late 1990s after reports that its leader, Omar Bakri, was receiving welfare payments from the government. Given that Bakri constantly attacked the government and called it illegitimate, the disclosure of the payments led some other members to question his commitment.¹⁷ Kamran Bokhari, a former Islamist activist who now analyzes militant Islamic groups for the global intelligence company

STRATFOR, explained that when a group's "ugly side is revealed . . . when the leadership is no longer seen as pursuing altruistic goals," but rather favoring its own self-interest, this can greatly affect how its members see it. When this occurs, according to Bokhari, "the group is then viewed as no different from other corrupt political entities," and its proclaiming itself "the torchbearer of Islam renders it even worse."¹⁸

Part of Ed Husain's disillusionment with HT came about for similar reasons. Husain was troubled that HT was supposed to be a religious organization, yet its leaders left little time in their daily schedules to pray. He also viewed the religiosity in the group as "contrived." Members were more concerned about showing off and letting their bosses know how many Muslims they had tried to recruit that day than about genuine spirituality. When Husain complained to HT's leaders about this situation, they were dismissive of his concerns.¹⁹

In one respect, terrorist groups have become increasingly hypocritical: their involvement in criminal activity has grown, making it far clearer how inconsistent their actions are with their supposedly upright religious principles. For example, the al-Qaeda-inspired cell that executed the devastating 2004 Madrid train bombing that killed almost 200 people partially financed the attack by selling hashish.²⁰ The terrorists who attacked the London transport system on July 7, 2005, were also self-financed, in part through credit card fraud.²¹ And in Southeast Asia, the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jemaah Islamiyah financed the 2002 Bali bombings in part through jewelry-store robberies.²² While terrorist groups are involved in a wide range of criminal activity, from cigarette smuggling to sales of counterfeit products, the

14. *9-11 Commission Report*, <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>, pp. 250–52.

15. Ridi testimony in *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, February 14, 2001.

16. *9-11 Commission Report*, <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.

17. Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005). Terrorism expert Paul Cruickshank points out that not all members of the group would have a negative reaction, and some would undoubtedly be pleased to see that the organization was draining resources from the *kuffar*, or infidels. Email exchange with Paul Cruickshank, December 19, 2009.

18. Kamran Bokhari's written responses to questions from author, October 30, 2009.

19. Interview with Ed Husain, September 16, 2009.

20. Associated Press, "Madrid Train Bombings Probe Finds No al-Qaeda Link," March 9, 2006, http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2006-03-09-madrid_x.htm.

21. Financial Action Task Force (FATF), *Terrorist Financing* (Paris: FATF, February 29, 2008).

22. Wahyoe Boediwardhana, "Possible Terrorist Link to Jewelry Theft: Police," *Jakarta Post*, August 25, 2009, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2009/08/25/possible-terrorist-link-jewelry-theft-police.html>.

nexus of drugs and terror is particularly strong. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, nineteen of the forty-three U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations are definitively linked to the global drug trade, and up to 60 percent of terror organizations are suspected of having some ties with the illegal narcotics trade.²³

Terrorist groups attempt to justify such hypocrisy, often on religious grounds, though hardly convincingly. A leader of Fatah al-Islam, an al-Qaeda-linked group based in Lebanon, rationalized his group's bank-robbing activities by noting that "stealing money from the infidels, from the usurious banks and the institutions which belong to the infidel regimes and states, is a legal thing which Allah has permitted us to do. This money is being seized from them and instead directed towards jihad."²⁴ In 2006, Khan Muhammad, an Afghan Taliban member later convicted of drug trafficking and narco-terrorism in the United States, explained his involvement in the Afghan drug trade as part of his desire to see "God turn all the infidels into corpses," adding, "whether it is by opium or by shooting, this is our common goal."²⁵ (A U.S. district court sentenced Muhammad to life in prison in January 2009.)

While the growing connection between terrorist groups and crime is a dangerous trend, it may offer opportunities for the United States and its allies to demonstrate the hypocrisy of these organizations. Of course, it is possible that members of these groups will be persuaded by their leaders' shallow, religiously based arguments that drug dealing and other forms of criminal activity are both permissible and justifiable. But even if that is the case, identifying and highlighting this hypocrisy may still have great resonance with those outside the organizations who are otherwise vulnerable to the terrorists' message.

Concern about Specific Violent Acts

While some members of terrorist organizations support the group's strategic goals and direction in principle, their loyalty may extend only so far. When they are asked to carry out an attack, their support can waver. In fact, Germany's Federal Intelligence Agency (BFV) has studied these issues closely, and it found that when a person is asked to carry out a violent attack by an avowedly religious group, doubts can arise. According to the BFV, the apparent hypocrisy gap between "planned actions" (usually violent acts) and "religious principles" can create profound dissonance, undermining commitment to the organization.²⁶

Consider the case of Tawfik Hamid, a member of Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) in the 1980s, who was asked by one of the group's leaders to participate in the kidnapping and murder of an Egyptian police official. At that point, he had been in the group for approximately eighteen months and was a relatively dedicated member. And yet, he notes, the request "reawakened his conscience." He began to think more critically about his role in the organization and to question the group's teachings. Soon afterward, he left the EIJ to join a less radical Islamist group. Hamid noted that he had experienced some earlier doubts when he witnessed EIJ members beating up a teacher at a school, but this later request catalyzed his thinking.²⁷

Even seemingly committed jihadists not involved in a particular attack can have second thoughts when they see the effects of violent acts firsthand. For Usama Hassan, who fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the turning point was the 2005 attack on the London transport system that killed fifty-two. Hassan, who had supported al-Qaeda for many years, "was devastated by the attack. My feeling was, how dare they attack my city?"²⁸ Ed Husain was horrified when a fellow HT

23. Michael Braun, "Drug Trafficking and Middle Eastern Terrorist Groups: A Growing Nexus?" Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch #1392, July 25, 2008, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2914>.

24. NEFA Foundation, "The Truth about the Assault on Fatah al-Islam in Syria," November 29, 2008, <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/nefa-fatahislam1208.pdf>.

25. Del Quentin Wilber, "Afghan Farmer Helps Convict Taliban Member in U.S. Court," *Washington Post*, December 23, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/12/22/AR2008122202359.html>.

26. BFV written responses to questions from author, October 13, 2009.

27. Interview with Tawfik Hamid, July 31, 2009.

28. Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "The Unraveling," *New Republic*, June 11, 2008, <http://www.tnr.com/article/the-unraveling-0>.

sympathizer stabbed to death a non-Muslim student on his college campus. Though HT did not officially endorse violence, Husain blamed the group for creating the environment that allowed this type of event to take place. While he had subscribed to HT's radical mandate and mission, he had always felt as if he were campaigning for something remote. This event, however, really "hit home," causing him to do some serious thinking about the organization. A short time later, Husain decided to leave HT.²⁹

Of course, in addition to the moral dilemmas some people face when asked to carry out an attack, a number have defected for a more basic reason: fear. This appears to have been a significant factor in the case of Sajid Badat, a British citizen trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan to serve—along with the now infamous Richard Reid—as a "shoe bomber" on a flight from Europe to the United States. Badat had written to his parents early in his terrorist career of a "sincere desire to sell my soul to Allah in return for Paradise." He later left this path because, as he told prosecutors, he wanted to "introduce some calm in his life."³⁰ Al-Qaeda member Muhammad al-Owhali, who participated in the 1998 U.S. embassy attack in Nairobi, was supposed to be killed in the blast, but fled the scene at the last minute.³¹ In the failed attacks in London on July 21, 2005, one of the bombers, Manfo Kwaku Asiedu, a thirty-two-year-old British Ghanaian, abandoned his bomb in a West London park, turning himself in to British police on July 26. At his trial, Asiedu claimed that he had been an unwilling participant, that he had learned of the plan only several hours before the attack, and that he feared he would be killed by his coconspirators if he backed out. While it is difficult to sort out fact from fiction in this account, it does appear likely that fear played a role in his last-minute decision to discard the explosive device.³²

Petty Grievances

Strategic differences appear to be an important factor causing al-Qaeda members to drop out, yet petty grievances have also played a role. This is particularly true for foot soldiers and lower-level operatives. Money has frequently been the source of the grievances, as some terrorists have felt inadequately compensated and therefore unfairly treated. For example, Jamal al-Fadl, an early member of al-Qaeda, began embezzling funds from the organization during its years in Sudan because of dissatisfaction with his salary. Al-Fadl received \$500 a month, while the Egyptians were paid \$1,200. In all, he stole approximately \$100,000. When bin Laden learned of al-Fadl's actions, he ordered him to repay the money. Al-Fadl repaid about \$30,000, then fled, fearing retribution if he did not refund the full amount.³³

L'Houssaine Kherchtou, on the other hand, who had trained to be bin Laden's pilot, became bitter when a bin Laden aide turned down his request for \$500 to cover the costs of his wife's cesarean section. His anger grew when al-Qaeda paid the expenses of a group of Egyptians sent to Yemen to renew their passports. "If I had a gun," Kherchtou later testified, "I would shoot [bin Laden] at that time."³⁴ He was also bitter when bin Laden ordered his followers to cut back on spending, believing that the al-Qaeda leader—a notoriously rich Saudi—was being stingy. When the organization moved to Afghanistan, Kherchtou refused to follow, thus violating his oath to bin Laden. He eventually ceased to consider himself a member of the organization.³⁵

Unmet Expectations

A number of prospective terrorists have been deterred by the harsh reality of life in terrorist training camps. Arriving with high expectations of glamour and

29. Interview with Ed Husain, September 16, 2009.

30. "Gloucester Shoebomber Jailed for Thirteen Years," *Times Online*, April 22, 2005, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article384323.ecc>.

31. Jason Burke, "The Suicide Bomber Who Changed His Mind," *Observer*, August 5, 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2001/aug/05/life1.lifemagazine8>.

32. BBC, "Profile: Manfo Kwaku Asiedu," November 9, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6634913.stm.

33. Fadl testimony in *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, February 7, 2001.

34. Kherchtou testimony in *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, February 20–22, 2001.

35. Judy Aita, "Bombing Trial Witness Describes Nairobi Surveillance Mission," *Washington File*, February 23, 2001, <http://usinfo.org/wf-archive/2001/010223/epf502.htm>.

excitement, they find that their experiences do not live up to their lofty visions. This appears to occur most often with recruits from the West who may not have grown up in luxury but are used to more comfortable surroundings than those in the training camps. One British counterterrorism official notes that this phenomenon appears to be on the rise in the UK: prospective terrorists from England travel to the tribal areas of Pakistan for training but quickly return home after feeling let down by their experiences.³⁶

Given the changes al-Qaeda has had to make to its training camps in the wake of the September 11 attacks, its difficulties keeping new recruits are hardly surprising. Before the attacks, al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups had established large-scale, well-organized camps in Afghanistan offering new recruits extensive training in a variety of disciplines. This included not only religious study and indoctrination but also weapons training and physical fitness. Some recruits were trained in more advanced terrorist techniques, such as explosives and assassination.³⁷ While getting to the training camps was not easy and often involved circuitous, demanding routes, once in the camps, recruits enjoyed relative security and a standard routine.³⁸ The training camps are very different now. With al-Qaeda on the run and under surveillance and attack, camps are far more ad hoc and much smaller, and they often do not offer the type of comprehensive training previously available.³⁹ As a result, the experience is likely less satisfying for the recruits. Particularly for those joining primarily out of a sense of adventure, the camps are bound to be a disappointment.

The experiences of a group of Belgian and French recruits who traveled to Pakistan for training in 2007 are illustrative in this regard. Before leaving Europe, the

group had watched al-Qaeda videos showing recruits engaging in vigorous military training exercises and tackling the camp obstacle courses. Yet after months in Pakistan with little actual training, the men confronted their handler, who admitted that the videos were “propaganda.” The recruits were also bitter that they had to pay for their equipment and housing. Often prohibited from going outdoors due to security concerns, they were frequently moved from one safe house to another and were not needed or used in the fighting against U.S. or Pakistani forces. Four of the seven soon tired of life in Pakistan and returned to Europe.⁴⁰

Even before the September 11 attacks, the training camps were not to everyone’s liking. A group of six young Yemeni Americans from Lackawanna, New York—who were later charged with supporting terrorism and pleaded guilty—were particularly disappointed with their training camp experiences. Five of the six ended up leaving the camps early, despite pressure from Kamal Derwish, the al-Qaeda recruiter who had spent time in Lackawanna and persuaded them to attend the camps. The youths had a variety of complaints, ranging from the grueling training schedule, to the punishments for poor progress, to the intensity of the hatred expressed toward the United States. When Yasein Taher returned from the infirmary and reported that the food was better there, Shafal Mosed faked a leg injury and spent the rest of his time in the infirmary. Salim al-Alwan became more and more distressed about being there and told the camp commanders that he wanted to leave. When al-Alwan received permission to go after meeting with bin Laden, four of the others decided to join him. Only one member of the group, Jaber Elbaneh, decided to stay.⁴¹

36. Interview with British official, September 2008. See also Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, p. 31, describing the “mismatch between the fantasy and the reality” of life as a terrorist.

37. *9-11 Commission Report*, <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Associated Press, “Al-Qaeda Training Camps Go Local, Mobile,” November 9, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/11/09/world/main5584584.shtml>.

40. Paul Cruickshank, “The 2008 Belgian Cell and FATA’s Terrorist Pipeline,” *CTC Sentinel*, April 2009, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/CTCSentinel-Vol2Iss4.pdf>; Jason Burke and Ian Black, “Al Qaida: Tales from Bin Laden’s Volunteers,” *Guardian*, September 10, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/sep/10/al-qaida-terrorism-bin-laden>. Three of the seven—Moez Garsallaoui, Hamza al-Alami, and Hicham Zrioul—did not return and remain at large in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. Email exchange with Paul Cruickshank, December 19, 2009.

41. Dina Temple-Raston, *The Jihad Next Door: The Lackawanna Six and Rough Justice in an Age of Terror* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007).

Poor Treatment

For some lower-level fighters, the realization that terrorist organizations see them as expendable pawns has been eye opening. For example, Hanif Qadir, a relatively successful British businessman, was recruited by al-Qaeda in the wake of the 2001 U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and persuaded to drop everything to travel there to fight American troops. Qadir noted that the recruiter was “good at telling you what you wanted to hear” and that he had touched all his “emotional buttons.” On his way to Afghanistan from Pakistan, he came across a group of wounded mujahedin, including a young boy, who had been injured in the fighting. One of them yelled, “These are evil people....We came here to fight jihad, but they are just using us as cannon fodder.” This stark message, according to Qadir, “kicked me back to reality,” and he immediately returned to the UK. Once back, he said, he wanted to find the al-Qaeda recruiters and “cut their heads off.”⁴²

Ahmed al-Shayea, who was badly injured in Iraq carrying out a truck-bomb attack in 2004, turned on al-Qaeda for similar reasons. Permanently disfigured in the attack, he began to question the group’s purpose and mission. Later, he spoke out publicly against al-Qaeda, saying that “I think God took me out of death to show others what can happen. If you join al-Qaeda, they will use you, and maybe you will die.”⁴³ He now says that he realizes he was wrong and that “there is no jihad. We are just instruments of death.”⁴⁴

Mohammed Robert Heft, a Canadian convert to Islam who was a follower of a radical Islamist movement called Takfir wal-Hijra, became disillusioned when he realized how little value he held in the eyes of those he was trying to protect. In 2003, outraged that the United States appeared to be planning an attack on Iraq, Heft decided to go there to help fight the American infidel invaders. Taking a sword with him, he planned to go

to a mosque to defend it against U.S. forces. The Iraqi government, however, had different plans and decided to use him as a human shield, sticking him in a diesel plant in an effort to prevent a U.S. attack on the facility. While there, Heft realized that the Iraqis were not particularly religious and were actually uneducated and quite naive. He left Iraq in disappointment and abandoned the extremist cause, shifting his efforts to a battle against radicalization in his native Canada.⁴⁵

The U.S. government has, at times, been able to take advantage of al-Qaeda’s poor treatment of its foot soldiers. Such an approach paid dividends in the case of L’Houssaine Kherchtou.⁴⁶ When the U.S. government first began interrogating him, he was reluctant to cooperate, even though he was upset with al-Qaeda and had left the organization. Ali Soufan, an FBI agent involved in the debriefing, said later that when Kherchtou was asked, “Do you think bin Laden really cares about you?” this was a turning point. Kherchtou, still upset with al-Qaeda for rejecting his request for money for his wife’s cesarean section, changed his mind and began to cooperate, eventually serving as one of the key witnesses for the U.S. government in the embassy bombing trial.⁴⁷

Of course, while leaders may become disillusioned and turn away from their organizations for more strategic and “big picture” reasons than do the foot soldiers, personal and petty factors are undoubtedly at play for the leaders as well. The reasons they cite publicly may not always tell the whole story. For example, while Nazir Abas may have taken issue with JI leaders’ interpretation of bin Laden’s *fatwas*, personal slights may also have played a role in his departure. Terrorism expert Marc Sageman says that one major reason Abas dropped out was that he was not “one of Hambali’s boys,” meaning that he was not in the organization’s inner circle.⁴⁸ As a U.S. government official noted, by

42. Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, “The Unraveling,” *New Republic*, June 11, 2008, <http://www.tnr.com/article/the-unraveling-0>.

43. Nic Robertson, “Failed Suicide Bomber Turns on al-Qaeda,” CNN, August 11, 2009, <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/meast/09/14/reformed.jihadist/index.html>.

44. Associated Press, “Truck Bomber Turns against Jihad,” July 29, 2007, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20018405/>.

45. Telephone interview with Mohammed Robert Heft, October 1, 2009.

46. Kherchtou testimony in *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, February 20–22, 2001.

47. Telephone interview with Ali Soufan, September 22, 2009.

48. Interview with Marc Sageman, September 10, 2009.

dropping out, Abas effectively traded one leadership role for another, going from terrorist commander to outspoken JI critic. This new role likely fulfilled his need to feel important in the same way that being a key member of JI had.⁴⁹

Cognitive Dissonance

To understand why people leave terrorist or extremist organizations, it is useful to know why they were attracted to “the cause” in the first place, as a close connection often exists between the reasons people join and reasons they leave. As former Islamist activist Kamran Bokhari says, “There is a correlative between the motivations for joining and the reasons for leaving. The subject joins because he/she is in search of something. If that is not attained, then the disappointment can be grounds for disassociation.”⁵⁰

Events that conflict with a terrorist or extremist’s established worldview can be particularly powerful forces causing him to question why he joined in the first place. This “cognitive dissonance” can shake his confidence in his belief system in surprising ways.

For former HT leader Maajid Nawaz, this type of event occurred while he was serving time in an Egyptian prison. Amnesty International took him on as a “prisoner of conscience,” pressing the Egyptian government to release him from custody. Nawaz, viewing the West as the enemy, was shocked that Amnesty would be willing to support him, and he admits that this “opened my heart to the fact that the ‘enemy’ went out on a limb to defend me, making me realize that there were good non-Muslims.”⁵¹ This was one of the factors that led him to reevaluate his belief system, and it was the turning point in the process that led to his public renunciation of HT.

For former JI commander Abas, his treatment in an Indonesian prison contributed to a shift in

thinking. Surprised not to be beaten or tortured and, by contrast, to be treated quite humanely and in a very “Islamic” manner, Abas later recounted that his invitation by his interrogators to pray with them undermined JI’s contention that “the government was *murtad*,” or apostate.⁵²

A British government psychologist who works with extremist populations said that Abas’s experience with cognitive dissonance is typical. These organizations foster polarized and rigid worldviews, encouraging members to love one another and hate those on the outside. When people not in the organization, whom members have been trained to hate, show unanticipated respect and kindness, this can throw an element of confusion into the terrorist’s worldview.⁵³ Of course, such an experience on its own is highly unlikely to persuade someone to abandon the terrorist cause, but in some cases, it can apparently put such a person on the path to dropping out.

Former FBI investigator Ali Soufan applied this principle effectively during his time at the bureau. He has publicly given several examples in which he was able to gain the trust of and “flip” seemingly hardened al-Qaeda members, in part by treating them better than they had expected. The most vivid of these examples is Abu Jandal, a former bin Laden bodyguard who ended up in Yemeni custody after the September 11 attacks. Soufan was eventually granted access to the former bodyguard in a Yemeni prison. Jandal came to the interview with preconceived notions about the West, viewing the United States as “Satan” and the ultimate enemy. He had likely never met an American before, so his impressions were based entirely on this simplistic view. Early in the interrogation, Soufan noticed that Jandal was not eating the cookies offered to him. When he discovered that Jandal was a diabetic, he found him sugar-free cookies, and Jandal consumed them eagerly.

49. Interview with U.S. government official, June 22, 2009.

50. Written responses from Kamran Bokhari to questions from author, October 30, 2009. See also Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, p. 151.

51. Maajid Nawaz, “The Way Back from Islamism,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch #1390, July 16, 2008, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2911>. See also the full audio of the speech on which this article is based (audio link included at the above webpage).

52. Zachary Abuza, “The Rehabilitation of Jemaah Islamiyah Detainees in Southeast Asia: A Preliminary Assessment,” in *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, Tore Bjorgo and John Horgan, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2009).

53. Interview with British government official, July 2009.

At that point, Jandal still was not cooperating, but he did begin to look at Soufan willingly. Soufan took a series of additional steps to encourage Jandal to recognize that his views of Americans might be off-base. Soufan's background as a Lebanese American Muslim fluent in Arabic who held an important government position probably made Jandal further question what he had been taught. Eventually, Jandal began to cooperate and provided important information about al-Qaeda to the U.S. government.⁵⁴

Soufan's experiences with Fahd al-Quso, another al-Qaeda member, also show how inaccurate terrorists' views of America can be and how the United States can use this to its advantage. When Soufan began his questioning, al-Quso told him that the two should wait for the interrogator, assuming, because of Soufan's understanding of terrorist organizational dynamics, general background knowledge, and language abilities, that Soufan was the translator (after all, translators, unlike interrogators, are usually natives of the country in question). Eventually, Soufan was able to get al-Quso to cooperate as well.⁵⁵

This approach would not be effective in all cases. Many terrorists have spent time in the West and, with firsthand knowledge of Americans and non-Muslims, would be unlikely to experience such surprise or the resulting cognitive dissonance. Noman Benotman is a good example. During his teenage years, he spent summers living in England with a British family, and he therefore did not believe himself to be as narrow-minded as many of the other jihadists in Afghanistan. He has admitted to knowing that claims that the West was evil and at war with Islam were "rubbish."⁵⁶ Benotman was far more focused on combating what he saw as the most pressing threat to Libya, Muammar Qadhafi's regime; he was not interested in waging jihad against the West. It is likely due to Benotman's early life experiences that he never truly subscribed to al-Qaeda's vision of global jihad and ultimately broke with the organization.

Overall, cognitive dissonance is a key factor in starting terrorists and extremists on the road to withdrawal. When they begin to experience cracks in their worldview, they undoubtedly have a harder time remaining committed jihadists. Of course, cognitive dissonance on its own will not necessarily be a sufficient spark for dropping out. As will be discussed later, in many cases, people have serious doubts about the organizations or causes they have joined, but they are still unwilling to defect, or they feel unable to do so. In other cases, people continue to hold radical beliefs but, for one reason or another, decide that they are no longer interested in this path. This will be explored later in the study as well. Those caveats aside, figuring out how to instill doubt effectively from the outside is one of the most important and difficult challenges governments face.

The Role of Family

Terrorist cell members who maintain contact with friends and family outside the organization are more likely to withdraw than those whose social network is more limited. The September 11 plot offers a number of vivid examples. Two of the potential plotters, Saud al-Rashid and Mushabib al-Hamlan, abandoned the plot after returning to their home country of Saudi Arabia following training in Afghanistan. After receiving his U.S. visa in preparation for the attacks, al-Hamlan contacted his family, despite his al-Qaeda handlers' clear instructions not to do so. When he found out that his mother was ill, he decided not to return to Afghanistan, even in the face of ongoing pressure from al-Qaeda. Al-Hamlan subsequently moved back in with his parents and resumed his college studies.⁵⁷ Saud al-Rashid's story may illustrate even more dramatically the role that family can play in the dropout process. According to Khaled Shaikh Muhammad, the mastermind of the September 11 attacks, Rashid may have abandoned the plot because his family found out about his involvement and confiscated his passport.⁵⁸

54. Telephone interview with Ali Soufan, September 22, 2009.

55. Ibid.

56. Telephone interview with Noman Benotman, November 2, 2009.

57. *9-11 Commission Report*, <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.

58. Ibid.

Muhammad Atta, the operational leader of the hijackers, appeared to recognize that contact with family members could undermine the hijackers' level of commitment. He therefore forbade the eighteen other hijackers in the United States from contacting their families to say good-bye, undoubtedly out of concern that the families might try to dissuade them from participating. In fact, Ziad Jarrah's unwillingness to cut ties with his fiancée in Germany and his family in Lebanon was one cause of strife in his relationship with Atta.⁵⁹ The shoe-bomber case provides a similar example. Sajid Badat, like al-Rashid and al-Hamlan, appears to have made the decision to abandon the plot once he returned to his home country and resumed contact with his family.⁶⁰

A case in the United States further illustrates the useful role family can play in reversing individuals on the path toward radicalization and perhaps even toward terrorism. In 2008, Mohamed Elibiary—head of the Freedom and Justice Foundation in Texas, a nongovernmental organization that works to promote better relationships between the government and Arab and Muslim American communities—received a call from a cleric in Houston who was concerned about a situation in New York. The cleric had been contacted by the sister of a young Egyptian American who had discovered that her troubled and increasingly radical brother was headed for Pakistan. The young man had been traumatized by the death of his father, which in turn had thrown his worldview into turmoil. Elibiary developed a two-track approach to try to resolve the situation. The cleric recontacted the sister in New York and instructed her to have another sister—who was living in Egypt with their mother—fly to Dubai immediately to intercept her brother at the airport before he could transfer to his flight to Pakistan. When the Egypt-based sister met up with her brother, she informed him that their mother was distraught and ill

and that he could not risk doing anything that would exacerbate the situation. In case this part of the plan failed, Elibiary also contacted an official he trusted at the FBI and provided a briefing on the situation. According to Elibiary, the youth agreed to return to the United States, where a variety of mentors and counselors took him under their wing and he is now leading a productive life.⁶¹

A number of the governments that have developed their own counterradicalization programs have recognized the importance of families. The Saudis involve families in all aspects of the rehabilitation process. This includes not only the promise of benefits—financial and otherwise—if the detainee stays out of trouble, but also potential threats to hold the family accountable should the person “relapse.” U.S. director of national intelligence Dennis Blair stated in a February 2009 response to Congress that Saudi “family members are asked to monitor the released detainee and told that they will be held responsible for the detainee’s actions.”⁶²

In countries like Saudi Arabia, where the family and tribe are fundamental to the societal framework, coercion and threats are particularly effective in ensuring that families pay close attention to the activities of their wayward member. This helps explain why the Saudis are reluctant to accept any of the Yemeni detainees in Guantanamo into their rehabilitation program. They are concerned that they will not have the same kind of leverage over Yemenis as they do with their own nationals, since Yemenis do not have extensive family or tribal ties within the Saudi kingdom. The Saudis offer various incentives to former detainees and their families to try to keep them on the right path, including assistance finding a job and spouse and financial support and housing.⁶³

Mohamed al-Sharkawy, an imam in the United Kingdom who works closely with the British government on

59. Ibid.

60. Daniel McGrory and Zahid Hussain, “New Wave of British Terrorists Are Taught at Schools, Not in the Mountains,” *Times Online*, July 14, 2005, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article543782.ece>.

61. Interview with Mohamed Elibiary, September 18, 2009.

62. “DNI Responses to Questions for the Record from the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” from a February 12, 2009 hearing.

63. Christopher Boucek, “Saudi Arabia’s ‘Soft’ Counterterrorism Strategy: Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Aftercare,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2008, <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=22155>, pp. 7, 19.

a deradicalization program for former prisoners, argues that wives are far and away the most important actors in determining whether a husband will be able to break away from terrorist and extremist influences. In his program, al-Sharkawy focuses on educating and counseling wives, who in his view have felt the greatest burden while their husbands are imprisoned and will play the greatest role in ensuring that they stay on the right path. According to the imam, other family members can play a critical role as well. He has handled about 400 cases and claims that he has managed to rehabilitate and reintegrate a high percentage of those who have gone through his program. The exceptions to this overall record of success, he notes, are the those who had no family ties in the UK.⁶⁴

In Singapore, wives are now a key part of the deradicalization and disengagement processes. The government offers counseling sessions to wives of former JI members and assistance finding jobs and a steady income stream. This is done to ensure that wives and families do not have to rely on JI's social networks while their husbands are in prison, since this could increase dependence on the terrorist group and make it harder to cut ties.⁶⁵

Former HT member Ed Husain says that a number of factors contributed to his growing disillusionment with the group, but his wife (then fiancée) played a particularly important role. Husain says that in one sense, falling in love replaced extremism in his life and gave him a new purpose. He also notes that he did not want his wife's parents to view him as the "crazy son-in-law."⁶⁶

He believes that parents can also play a constructive role in the deradicalization and disengagement processes. One reason for this, he says, is that Islam

has a strong tradition of obedience to one's parents, and Muslims are even specifically commanded to pray for their parents. In fact, the Quran does not allow Muslims to go on jihad without parental permission, and, claims Husain, the Prophet Muhammad actually turned people away if they had not received this approval.⁶⁷

Of course, families can also play a destructive role in the process, particularly when they hold radical or extremist views. Mosab Hassan Yousef, the son of a prominent Hamas member, has described how hard it was for him to leave. Calling it "the most difficult decision in my life," he notes that his family pleaded with him not to go public with his renunciation of Hamas. His defection has caused problems for his father within Hamas, and Yousef says that his mother cries "all day long."⁶⁸ In the Hamas-governed Gaza Strip, where "martyrdom" is encouraged and families are rewarded for their relatives' suicide attacks,⁶⁹ it is perhaps not surprising that families do not always play a constructive role in the dropout process. For Maajid Nawaz, the decision to leave HT was harder because his wife and son had become members. As a result, Nawaz separated from his wife and for a period of time had no contact with his son.⁷⁰

For some terrorists and extremists, family ties actually provide the first exposure to radical organizations and ultimately serve as the greatest motivation for joining. This is particularly true for terrorist groups in Southeast Asia, such as JI, the Abu Sayyaf Group, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. Membership in these groups, according to terrorism expert Todd Helmus, is "frequently the result of family, tribal, or clan introductions."⁷¹

64. Telephone interview with Mohamed al-Sharkawy, October 22, 2009.

65. Abuza, in *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, p. 202.

66. Interview with Ed Husain, September 16, 2009.

67. Ibid.

68. Catherine Elsworth and Carolynne Wheeler, "Mosab Hassan Yousef, Son of Hamas Leader, Becomes a Christian," *Telegraph*, August 24, 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/palestinianauthority/2613399/Mosab-Hassan-Yousef-son-of-Hamas-leader-becomes-a-Christian.html>.

69. Ibid.

70. Interview with Ed Husain, September 16, 2009.

71. Todd Helmus, "Why and How Some People Become Terrorists," in *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together*, Paul K. Davis and Kim Cragin, eds. (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009), http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG849.pdf, p. 79.

Even when families attempt to play a constructive role, they do not always succeed. Abdallah Saleh Ali al-Ajmi, a Kuwaiti national who spent time in Guantanamo, was repatriated in 2005. Though al-Ajmi's family members tried to reintegrate him into Kuwaiti society, they ultimately failed, and he carried out a suicide attack in Iraq in 2008.⁷²

Terrorist and extremist groups recognize the important role family can play, both in keeping a person in a group and in drawing him away. Al-Qaeda, for example, provides additional benefits to members with families so that the need to support a family does not force anyone to leave the organization. According to documents released by the U.S. Army in 2006, al-Qaeda gave its married members 6,500 rupees, plus 700 rupees for each additional wife.⁷³ In addition, married men received seven vacation days per month instead of the five days that single members were granted.⁷⁴ Perhaps not surprisingly, research has found that Islamist terrorist groups have been able to attract and retain married men. Marc Sageman, a terrorism expert and former Central Intelligence Agency officer, found during the course of research for his book *Understanding Terror Networks* that 73 percent of terrorists involved in global jihad were married and the "vast majority" had children.⁷⁵

Extremist groups often make every effort to bring families into the fold. Ed Husain says that when he began dating the woman who is now his wife, HT leaders encouraged him to recruit her into the organization, though she refused to join.⁷⁶ Al-Muhajiroun, a British extremist group formerly headed by Omar Bakri, took substantial steps to ensure that entire families were committed to the organization. Bakri developed structures to include wives and children in the group's activities so

that members would not leave when they got married and began having children. For example, Bakri offered educational sessions every week just for women, who were invited to bring their children along. Attendees would then recruit other women to come to the lectures and join the organization.⁷⁷ By including women and making them feel like an important part of the group, Bakri hoped to avoid situations in which wives pressured husbands into leaving. He also ran what terrorism expert Paul Cruickshank describes as an "extremist matchmaking service," introducing members to prospective spouses and performing marriage ceremonies.⁷⁸

Change in Circumstances

Alongside family influences, a change in circumstances can also affect the deradicalization and disengagement processes. When seemingly committed terrorists leave an insular, fanatical environment in which they are surrounded only by like-minded jihadists, their enthusiasm for the cause can wane. Becoming a suicide bomber may seem like a worthy goal when a person is surrounded by others who support and encourage it, but outside this environment, a suicide attack may no longer be quite as appealing. As discussed earlier, Sajid Badat explained to the police after his arrest that he withdrew from the shoe-bomb plot because he wanted to "introduce some calm in his life."⁷⁹ The same may have occurred with the two prospective September 11 hijackers whose resolve to participate in the attacks appears to have waned once they left Afghanistan. In fact, Ziad Jarrah was alone for much of the time he was in the United States, away from Atta and the other members of the Hamburg cell, which may help explain why he was apparently

72. Interview with U.S. government official, July 22, 2009.

73. "West Point Cadets Are Stealing al-Qaeda's Playbook," ABC News, May 26, 2006, http://blogs.abcnews.com/theblotter/2006/05/west_point_cade.html. The currency in question is presumably the Pakistani rupee.

74. Defense Intelligence Agency Translation, "Al-Qaeda: Constitutional Charter, Rules and Regulations," <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/aq/pdf/AFGP-2002-600175-Trans.pdf>.

75. Marc Sageman, "Understanding Terrorist Networks," Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 1, 2004, <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/20041101.middeast.sageman.understandingterrornetworks.html>.

76. Ibid.

77. Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

78. Email exchange with Paul Cruickshank, December 19, 2009.

79. "Gloucester Shoebomber Jailed for Thirteen Years," *Times Online*, April 22, 2005, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article384323.ece>.

the only one of the nineteen to experience real second thoughts about going through with the attack.⁸⁰

Abdelghani Mzoudi, another member of the so-called Hamburg network, told others that his level of commitment to the extremist cause varied depending on where he was. Mzoudi described himself as a strong Muslim when he was in Germany with his radical friends, but a weak Muslim when he was at home in Morocco, away from these influences.⁸¹ For Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, who worked at the al-Haramain Foundation's Oregon office for a year before law school, a change in circumstances allowed him to reconsider his once-radical beliefs. While at al-Haramain, a nongovernmental organization with headquarters in Saudi Arabia that was later designated by the United States as a provider of "financial and material support to al-Qaida,"⁸² Gartenstein-Ross was surrounded by extremists and discouraged by friends from interacting with those outside the organization. In an environment in which it was difficult to challenge those espousing extremist views, Gartenstein-Ross became quite radical in his own right. After leaving al-Haramain to go to law school in New York, he began to question the belief system he had adopted during his time at al-Haramain, eventually rejecting it entirely.⁸³

While most analysis of prisons has focused on them as potential sites for radicalization, prisons can also be places of opportunity. As a British government psychologist noted, in prison, terrorists or extremists find themselves in a completely different environment, forced to interact with a wide variety of people, including non-Muslims.⁸⁴ Not surprisingly, then, a number of people have turned away from jihadism or

extremism while incarcerated. British-born HT leader Maajid Nawaz began to experience doubts about his organization during his time in an Egyptian prison. As he later recounted, "My experience in prison was a critical step in my de-radicalization." The prison was a relatively free environment for open conversation, and Nawaz was surrounded by secular Egyptian activists such as Ayman Nour and Said Ibrahim. Nawaz also learned Arabic while imprisoned and began to read a wide range of classical Islamic texts, broadening his horizons.⁸⁵ Mosab Hassan Yousef turned away from Hamas, and even from Islam, while in prison. He later said that while serving time in an Israeli prison, he began to read a wider range of materials, including the Bible. In studying the Bible verse by verse, he began to "see things in a different way" and came to believe that "the problem is Islam."⁸⁶

Mansour al-Nogaidan, a former Saudi extremist, also found that exposure to new literature in prison broadened his horizons and changed his worldview. Before his stint in a Saudi jail, al-Nogaidan issued *fatwas* calling on his followers to attack video stores in Riyadh, which he viewed as tied to Western infidels. As he later explained, "If you ask any sheik, he will say the Western values sold in video stores are forbidden in Islam. But the government sheiks won't give you the right to destroy them. So we decided to make our own decrees."⁸⁷ While in prison, al-Nogaidan began to read books espousing a more moderate version of Islam, and his views slowly changed. By the end of his second prison term, he questioned the basic tenets of Wahhabism—the strict, Saudi-originated form of Islam embraced by many jihadists—eventually (and publicly) calling it the "source of terrorist thinking."

80. *9-11 Commission Report*, <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

82. Press Room, U.S. Department of the Treasury, June 19, 2008, <http://treas.gov/press/releases/hp1043.htm>.

83. Interview with Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, July 30, 2009.

84. Interview with British official, July 2009.

85. Maajid Nawaz, "The Way Back from Islamism," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch #1390, July 16, 2008, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2911>. See also the full audio of the speech on which this article is based (audio link included at the above webpage).

86. Jonathan Hunt, "Son of Hamas Leader Turns Back on Islam and Embraces Christianity," Fox News, August 12, 2008, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,402483,00.html>.

87. Elizabeth Rubin, "The Jihadi Who Kept Asking Why," *New York Times*, March 7, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/07/magazine/the-jihadi-who-kept-asking-why.html?pagewanted=1>.

3 | Considerations for Policymakers

FOR POLICYMAKERS, understanding why people leave terrorist or extremist organizations affords critical insights for designing effective programs to encourage or even accelerate defections. Unfortunately, the withdrawal process is seldom linear, making the analysis of what is likely to work somewhat difficult. Leaving a terrorist or extremist organization is often a lengthy, convoluted, and complicated process, and perhaps even more important, it does not always lead to an abandonment of radical beliefs. Therefore, “success” in this area can be both difficult to define and to achieve.

Despite these challenges, several patterns should give policymakers cause for optimism. First, it is clear from an examination of dropout cases that, perhaps surprisingly, individuals can withdraw from a group without being harmed or even threatened. And second, when leaders turn against their former organization, they can impede its progress in significant ways.

The Process of Leaving

Leaving a terrorist or extremist group is often a drawn-out process, and as John Horgan also found, “Progression through these stages is not necessarily linear.”¹ While a particular event—such as the September 11 attacks—is often the final straw, seeds of dissonance that blossom into full-blown doubts can arise much earlier. Even serious doubts, however, are not always enough to make a person leave, and in any case, it is not always entirely clear what is meant by “leaving.”

In some cases, people who seem to have “left” a terrorist or extremist organization return before making a final break. This illustrates how convoluted and complex the process can be. For Mansour al-Nogaidan, the fiery Saudi imam mentioned in the previous chapter, it took two stints in a Saudi prison to rethink his views fully. When first imprisoned for issuing *fatwas* to blow up video stores in Riyadh, al-Nogaidan read a book by a

Jordanian scholar that called the Quran a “living” document. He reacted with shock, and his intellectual transformation was sparked. He later noted, however, that it is hard to pinpoint exactly the first step in his dropout process, and that it is “like a glass of water. You can’t find the first drop.” After his release, al-Nogaidan—still an imam—had a foot in two worlds. He still had ties to the jihadist movement but was also struggling with what he had learned in prison. Arrested again in 1995 in the wake of the car-bomb attack on the OPM Sang, a joint Saudi-U.S. facility in Riyadh used for training the Saudi National Guard, al-Nogaidan continued his intellectual quest and developed far greater doubts about Wahhabism and Salafism, the latter a form of Sunni Islam that espouses practicing the religion as it was in the days of the Prophet Muhammad. After the September 11 attacks, he wrote an op-ed calling both ideologies the cause of terrorism, seemingly making a final break with his former beliefs.²

Ghaffar Hussain has a similar story. A Hizb al-Tahrir (HT) activist from the ages of fifteen to eighteen, Hussain was completely dedicated to the group’s ideology. Nevertheless, while attending University of Wales, a college with a small Muslim population, he lived a typical student life and had little contact with the group. After college he moved to London, an HT stronghold, where he reengaged with the organization. Yet his doubts about HT’s views had grown while he was in college, and he started challenging the leadership over the group’s ideology. When they had no answers, he chose to leave again. Over the next four to five years he began reading more widely, and he says that as a result, “the whole thing fell apart” and he eventually joined left-wing movements instead.³

For Mohammed Robert Heft, the Canadian former extremist who joined the radical movement Takfir wal-Hijra in 1999, the process was also lengthy and

1. John Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism: Accounts of Disengagement from Radical and Extremist Movements*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 151.
2. Elizabeth Rubin, “The Jihadi Who Kept Asking Why,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2004, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/03/07/magazine/the-jihadi-who-kept-asking-why.html?pagewanted=1>.
3. Interview with Ghaffar Hussain, August 24, 2009.

circuitous. Heft first became disillusioned when one of the leaders told him that it was legal to steal from Western drugstores because the stores were owned by unbelievers. He began to distance himself from the group and moved from Canada to Taiwan to teach English. In the meantime, he got in touch with a Sufi Muslim in Saudi Arabia who introduced him to a more tolerant and mystical version of Islam that was very different from what he had once followed. As discussed earlier, Heft's path again shifted dramatically in 2003 as the U.S. war against Iraq appeared imminent. Traveling to Iraq to fight the American invaders, he found himself used as a human shield. He became disillusioned once again, this time presumably for good.⁴

The lack of a clear definition of "leaving" can be seen in the cases of L'Houssaine Kherchtou and the young Yemeni Americans from Lackawanna. Kherchtou, the Moroccan who served as an al-Qaeda pilot in the 1990s, decided not to accompany Usama bin Laden to Afghanistan in 1996 because he was bitter about the way he had been treated, and he later said that he no longer considered himself an al-Qaeda member at that point. This did not mean, however, that he was willing to cooperate with the U.S. government, and it took some persuasion before he agreed.⁵ As for the young men from Lackawanna, it appears that they returned to the United States unhappy with their experiences in Afghanistan and content to resume their old lives. Nothing indicates that they planned to carry out an attack in the United States, and they appeared happy to put that chapter of their lives behind them. Dennis O'Hara, Lackawanna's police chief at the time, later asked, "Were they a sleeper cell? If they were, they were deep asleep."⁶ Nonetheless, since they likely still held some radical views and they did not formally

renounce al-Qaeda, it is difficult to determine whether they had truly "left" an organization they had never officially joined.

Exit Costs

One factor discouraging defection is the potential "exit costs," or the sacrifices the dropout will have to make. The obstacles are often very practical ones. Potential dropouts may have cut off ties with family and friends—a step many terrorist and extremist groups encourage—leaving their social network composed entirely of members of the group. A RAND Corporation study on deradicalization found that "one of the most common reasons for staying in the group is that the activist has nowhere to go, because of the nature of the relationships he or she destroyed or abandoned when joining the group in the [first] place....Moreover, even if the activist no longer believes in the group's ideology or political goals, leaving the group is akin to leaving a family, a community, and an identity."⁷

In addition, increasingly, members of terrorist organizations are unwelcome in their former communities, even if they claim to have changed. Indeed, as Southeast Asian terrorism expert Zachary Abuza notes, the success of a government counterradicalization program is "driven in large part by societal attitudes: will former terrorists be welcomed back into society, or will they be treated as outcasts?"⁸

Furthermore, dropouts sacrifice psychological benefits by leaving the group. Tawfik Hamid, formerly of Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), observed that membership in a terrorist group confers status, authority, respect from others, and a sense of self-importance, all of which made it hard to leave. Such factors likely affect the decisions of others as well.⁹

4. Telephone interview with Mohammed Robert Heft, October 1, 2009.

5. Telephone interview with Ali Soufan, September 22, 2009.

6. "Chasing the Sleeper Cell," *Frontline*, PBS, October 16, 2003. Transcript available online at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/sleeper/etc/script.html>.

7. Darcy M. E. Noricks, "Disengagement and Deradicalization: Processes and Programs," in *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together*, Paul K. Davis and Kim Cragin, eds. (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009), http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG849.pdf, p. 302. See also Bjorgo and Horgan, *Leaving Terrorism Behind*, pp. 40–42.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 303–4.

9. Interview with Tawfik Hamid, July 31, 2009.

Ghazi Hamad, a twenty-five-year member of Hamas, is a good example of a person who had obvious doubts but chose not to leave his group permanently. Hamad, who had served five years in Israeli prisons, was the editor-in-chief of the Hamas weekly newsletter and the organization’s spokesman. Dismayed by the 2007 Hamas coup in Gaza, he resigned in protest from his spokesman position. In a letter calling the coup a “serious strategic mistake,” he described the situation in Gaza as “miserable and wretched” and called on his fellow Hamas members to “own up to our mistakes.”¹⁰ Though he initially distanced himself from the organization, he never formally defected, and he eventually returned to the fold, accepting a post as Gaza’s “head of borders and crossings.”¹¹ It is not clear why Hamad did not leave, given the strength of his outrage, but the sacrifices he would have had to make on many fronts likely played a role.

Interestingly, some observers believe that it can be more difficult for converts and those who grew up nonreligious to leave the fold than for those born into practicing Muslim families. Ed Husain said that it was easier for him to withdraw when he began to doubt HT’s interpretation of Islam because he knew that other viable Muslim lifestyles existed. Having grown up in a religious, but moderate, household with parents who practiced Sufism, he knew that leaving HT did not have to mean abandoning Islam completely.¹² For those new to Islam—who might know only one rigid, extremist version of the religion—it might be harder to walk away.

In addition to considering exit costs, potential drop-outs weigh exit benefits, particularly when a government offers inducements for leaving. While material benefits are important, many other incentives exist as well. For example, when former Jemah Islamiyah (JI) commander Nazir Abas agreed to cooperate with the Indonesian government against JI, he was probably

motivated partially by the prospect of remaining an important figure with a great deal of stature, even if in a different context.¹³

Given the high cost of defecting, it is not surprising that many members of terrorist and extremist groups remain, despite serious doubts. Those whose entire world revolves around the group would bear too many personal costs if they left. According to Ghaffar Hussain, the former HT member, some people in that group have serious doubts but have nonetheless convinced themselves to stay.¹⁴ Kamran Bokhari, the former Islamist activist, adds that there are people who tend to give the extremist groups the “benefit of the doubt” even though they may no longer believe in the cause.¹⁵

This is likely why people who find the courage to leave often do so when they experience a change in circumstances. Their terrorist or extremist friends are not nearby to exert the same type of peer pressure, and with these new circumstances they may have established (or reestablished) social and professional ties, making this a good time to try to start over.

Islamist vs. Nonreligious Groups

Some believe it is more difficult to extract people from Islamist terrorist groups than from nonreligious extremist groups. The Germans, for example, who have been dealing with neo-Nazi and right-wing groups for decades, have developed exit programs to persuade members of these groups to leave. Yet they have not established similar programs for Islamist terrorist or extremist organizations, in large part because they believe that it is far more difficult to persuade people to leave such groups. According to Burkhard Freir, vice chief of the German Federal Intelligence Agency (BFV), it is easier to reintegrate neo-Nazis into society than Islamist terrorists and extremists because the former believe in the authority of the state, whereas

10. “Hope and Fear in Palestine,” *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, PBS, January 24, 2006, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/middle_east/jan-june06/palestine_1-24.html.
 11. Integrated Regional Information Networks, “Egypt-OPT: Some 1,600 Gazans Allowed to Cross into Egypt,” April 21, 2009, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,IRIN,,PSE,4562d8cf2.49f012ba1c,0.html>.
 12. Interview with Ed Husain, September 16, 2009.
 13. Interview with U.S. government official, July 22, 2009.
 14. Interview with Ghaffar Hussain, August 24, 2009.
 15. Written responses from Kamran Bokhari to questions from author, October 30, 2009.

the latter regard the state as illegitimate.¹⁶ For this reason, members of Islamist extremist and terrorist groups automatically regard government-run programs with great suspicion and take them less seriously than members of neo-Nazi and right-wing groups.¹⁷

Even with Islamist groups, the process of leaving and the considerations for leaving can differ from group to group, and particularly between terrorist and extremist groups. While defecting from a terrorist organization would seem to be more difficult than leaving an extremist group, the reality is not always so straightforward. On the one hand, members of terrorist groups can be prosecuted when they rejoin society; they are also unlikely to be welcomed back by their communities and are often far more radical than members of extremist groups, which may make it difficult to persuade them to defect. On the other hand, governments may have more leverage in coercing people to leave terrorist than extremist organizations, holding the prospect of prosecution over their heads if they do not cooperate. In addition, as the terrorist threat has evolved, terrorist networks have grown more decentralized, more fluid, and less hierarchical. A so-called terrorist network may consist of a “bunch of guys,” as terrorism expert Marc Sageman has described it, “hanging out” and spouting hateful rhetoric, with not all of the members equally committed to taking action.¹⁸ “Leaving” this type of network is not a formal process, but may simply mean no longer associating with the same social circle. This is quite different, of course, from a sworn al-Qaeda member withdrawing from involvement in a plot, or even from a committed HT member leaving the organization.

Disengaged vs. Deradicalized

It is troubling from a policy perspective that a person may leave a terrorist or extremist organization without fully rejecting the ideology. A significant

difference exists between disengagement and full ideological deradicalization.

The most obvious and prominent example of this phenomenon is Dr. Fadl, the former leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad discussed in the previous chapter. While rejecting al-Qaeda’s global vision, he remains supportive of armed jihad in certain contexts. In his treatise “Rationalizing Jihad in Egypt and the World,” he makes clear that the key is knowing when it is appropriate to engage in jihad; he believes that Muslims should “fight, on God’s behalf, against those who fight you, but do not exceed the limits.”¹⁹ With all of Fadl’s criticisms of al-Qaeda’s vision of jihad, he has not issued condemnations of attacks against Israel or Israeli targets, a point that al-Qaeda’s number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, noted in attacking Fadl’s hypocrisy.²⁰

Nazir Abas, the former JI commander, likewise has not rejected all his previous views. Even after cooperating with the Indonesian government, he did not hold the view that attacking a repressive government was wrong; his qualms about JI and other terrorist organizations’ actions extended only to their violence against civilians. As Abas stated, “I couldn’t understand exploding bombs against innocent civilians was jihad. That was the difference that made me escape from the group.”²¹ According to terrorism expert Zachary Abuza, Abas is not alone among former JI members in retaining many of his radical views. Abuza notes that “many of those ‘deradicalized’ remain committed to the goals of JI in establishing an Islamic state and the imposition of *sharia*. Disengagement does not necessarily mean deradicalization. Many of those who have been ‘rehabilitated’ and released remain committed to the goals of the movement and the establishment of an Islamic state.”²²

In his book *Inside the Jihad: My Life with al-Qaeda*, Omar Nasiri, a Belgian who spent time in training

16. Deutsche Presse Agentur [German Press Agency], “Ausstieg für islamistische Extremisten schwer” [Exit difficult for Islamic extremists], August 24, 2009.

17. BFV written responses to questions from author, October 13, 2009.

18. Interview with Marc Sageman, September 10, 2009.

19. Britta Sandberg, “Turning Their Backs on Jihad,” *Salon*, July 16, 2008, <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2008/07/16/jihad/print.html>.

20. Ibid.

21. *Indonesia Matters*, “Nasir Abas on Jamaah Islamiyah,” February 12, 2006, <http://www.indonesiamatters.com/104/nasir-abas-on-jamaah-islamiyah/>.

22. Abuza, in *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement*, p. 194.

camps in Afghanistan even while cooperating with the British and French governments, made it clear that his perspective has not entirely changed since his days in Afghanistan. Nasiri writes in the book's conclusion that although he assisted European governments, part of him "remains a mujahid," and he believes that foreign governments, especially the United States, should "get off our land" and stop interfering in the politics of Muslim nations (remember Nasiri's citizenship). If they fail to do so, Nasiri warns ominously, "they should be killed."²³

A number of experts caution that deradicalization has its limits and that people can be "deprogrammed" only to a certain extent. Sheikh Ali Gomaa, Egypt's grand mufti, says that "our experience with such [terrorists and extremists] is that it is very difficult to move them two or three degrees from where they are. It's easier to move from terrorism to extremism or from extremism to rigidity. We have not come across the person who can be moved all the way from terrorism to normal life."²⁴ The BFV notes that "deradicalization can only be achieved in small steps," and that "this process will most probably be all the more difficult, the further the radicalization has proceeded."²⁵ John Horgan, director of the International Center for the Study of Terrorism at Pennsylvania State University, who has studied and written extensively about terrorist defections, concurs. According to Horgan, "In a sample of individuals I interviewed from 2006–2008, while almost all of the interviewees could be described as disengaged, not a single one of them could be said to be deradicalized."²⁶

Undoubtedly many terrorists cannot be rehabilitated at all, and no deradicalization or counter-

radicalization program would have any impact. Terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna, who has worked extensively with Singapore's government to develop a counterradicalization program, gives JI terrorist Zulkifli bin Hir, currently imprisoned in Indonesia, as an example. After meeting Gunaratna, bin Hir told a prison guard he wanted to gouge Gunaratna's eyes out. Gunaratna recommended putting bin Hir in isolation so he would not influence other prisoners whom the government might be able to rehabilitate.²⁷ The Saudis appear to recognize this reality as well: terrorists and extremists with blood on their hands are not eligible to participate in the rehab program. As U.S. director of national intelligence Dennis Blair noted in his February 2009 response to Congress, "Many of the more hardened terrorists do not undergo rehabilitation," which in Blair's view strengthens the credibility of the Saudi program.²⁸

In Yemen, the issue is even more complicated. For example, Judge Hamoud Hitar, the country's deradicalization program head, has defended the government's widely criticized efforts: "Yemen has created a new way to fight terrorism. We proved to the world that the tongue and pen are more powerful than weapons."²⁹ Specifically, he claimed that of the 420 prisoners he worked with until 2006, none had gone on to conduct an attack in Yemen. This apparent record of success is less remarkable than meets the eye, however. Hitar acknowledged that he could not in good conscience tell detainees to eschew militant attacks in other Muslim countries where Western troops were located: "As long as the U.S. army and British army are conquering them," he stated, "Muslims have the right to fight and defend their lands and themselves. The jihad is a part of our religion." It is

23. Omar Nasiri, *Inside the Jihad: My Life with al-Qaeda* (New York: Basic Books, 2006). Nasiri made clear in a phone interview how surprised he was to be hearing from The Washington Institute and asked why I thought he would be willing to help on a project like this. "Didn't you read the last two pages of my book?" he asked. Those pages detail his lingering hatred for the United States (telephone interview with Omar Nasiri, September 21, 2009).

24. Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "The Unraveling," *New Republic*, June 11, 2008, <http://www.tnr.com/article/the-unraveling-0>.

25. BFV written responses to questions from author, October 13, 2009.

26. Darcy M. E. Noricks, "Disengagement and Deradicalization: Processes and Programs," in *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together*, Paul K. Davis and Kim Cragin, eds. (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2009), http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG849.pdf, p. 308. See also Horgan, *Walking Away from Terrorism*, pp. 151–153.

27. Telephone interview with Rohan Gunaratna, August 19, 2009.

28. "DNI Responses to Questions for the Record from the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence," from a February 12, 2009 hearing.

29. Hugh Macleod and Nasser Arrabiyye, "Airline Bombing Plot: Al Qaeda Supporting Cleric May Face Arrest," *Guardian*, January 7, 2010.

hardly surprising, then, that individuals like Nasser al-Bahri, a former bin Laden bodyguard who went through the Yemeni program, still publicly espouse violent jihad. Al-Bahri, who is now a businessman in Yemen and no longer an active jihadist, told a *Washington Post* reporter recently that he still admires bin Laden and that “America is a legitimate target.”³⁰

The Impact of Dropouts

When a movement’s leader abandons the cause, it can have a far greater impact on the organization’s future than defection by a lower-level operative or foot soldier. The example of the Egyptian group al-Gamaa Islamiyah (IG) is illustrative. IG was involved in a variety of terrorist plots and attacks in the 1990s, both within Egypt and abroad. The group’s spiritual leader, the so-called “blind sheikh,” was convicted for his role in the plot to blow up New York City landmarks in 1994. In 1997, IG’s leaders announced a unilateral ceasefire and began trying to persuade its members to abandon violence.³¹

Given how poorly the leaders had performed over the years—their terrorist activities achieved none of their political goals and merely led to an Egyptian government crackdown—it looked like their efforts to persuade the rank and file to abandon violence might be an uphill struggle. Yet with the exception of a few midlevel commanders, the members went along with the disengagement strategy. Particularly surprisingly, the leadership was able to persuade IG supporters and operatives outside of Egypt to adopt this new strategy as well. Omar Ashour, an expert on IG and deradicalization, argues that the leaders had enough charisma and stature to overcome their earlier strategic failings.³²

Similarly, Dr. Fadl’s highly publicized recantations had a real impact on the state of Egyptian Islamic Jihad. According to Ashour, approximately 600–700 members of the organization heeded Fadl’s call and

abandoned political violence. Ashour notes, however, that Fadl’s efforts to transform EIJ were less successful than IG leaders’ attempts with their own organization. EIJ was far less hierarchical, composed as it was of small cells reporting to an EIJ member outside of the country, for operational security reasons. When Dr. Fadl publicly denounced violence, many EIJ operatives went to their respective cell leaders and asked whether they should follow suit; the response was often no.³³

Interestingly, a look back at earlier and far less successful Egyptian government efforts to persuade IG and EIJ members to defect illustrates how important leaders are in these types of endeavors. In the early 1990s, the Egyptian government developed a “repentance program” involving a media campaign with clerics that aimed to draw away IG and EIJ fighters. The government chose to bypass the organizations’ leadership and engage directly with lower-level members. This effort failed almost completely, and it was not until the government began to target and involve the groups’ leaders that its initiatives became more successful.

As discussed earlier, Noman Benotman, a former key Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) leader, played a constructive role in convincing imprisoned organization members to renounce their jihad against the Libyan government. Benotman, who now lives in London, traveled to Libya more than twenty-five times over a two-year period to convince the jihadists to recant. In the end, these efforts paid off, and in summer 2009, former LIFG members issued a document of more than 400 pages denouncing and attempting to delegitimize violence. According to terrorism expert Paul Cruickshank, the LIFG recantations—like those of the EIJ and IG leadership—had a major impact on the rank and file of the organization, with the vast majority endorsing the shift away from jihad.³⁴

30. Sudarsan Raghavan, “Bodyguard Is among Ex-Guerrillas in Yemen,” *Washington Post*, January 6, 2010.

31. In November 1997, the group carried out an attack in Luxor, Egypt, in which fifty-eight tourists and a handful of Egyptians were killed. This was not actually an indication that the ceasefire had failed, according to IG expert Omar Ashour; the low-ranking group members who carried out the attack were never told about the ceasefire and were simply carrying out earlier orders (Washington Institute roundtable with Omar Ashour, August 19, 2009).

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Email exchange with Paul Cruickshank, December 19, 2009.

Even lower-level commanders can have an impact on their followers when they defect. For example, in 2005, Taliban subcommander Mullah Hajji Jalani renounced the Taliban and joined Takhim e-Sohl, the Afghan government reconciliation program. According to the U.S. government, Jalani's decision caused twelve other former Taliban loyalists to join the program as well.³⁵

While renunciations by former terrorist leaders have the greatest effect on those still active, their impact can take varied forms. For example, renunciations by Fadl and others, such as the Saudi clerics, put al-Qaeda's leadership on the defensive. According to Ted Gistaro, former U.S. government national intelligence officer for transnational threats, al-Qaeda was forced to spend half of its "airtime" in 2008 responding to these criticisms, and Zawahiri even wrote a 200-page response to Fadl's in-prison treatise.³⁶ This was quite a divergence from previous years, when al-Qaeda proactively shaped its public message and the United States and other countries were generally on the defensive. It is still unclear whether these statements by former leaders and ideologues are sufficient to turn the tide against al-Qaeda and the global jihad, but at the very least, they appear to have unsettled al-Qaeda, which is no small feat.

One of al-Qaeda's main concerns has undoubtedly been that it would lose its religious legitimacy as well-known clerics and religious figures turned against it. Not surprisingly, Kamal ElHelbawy, a spokesman for the Muslim Brotherhood in the West who resigned from that position in 1997, observes that "thinkers and scholars" are among the most effective people at persuading extremists and terrorists to abandon their cause because they can use religious arguments to buttress their case. According to ElHelbawy, telling

extremists and terrorists that their actions "can lead to hell [rather than] to Paradise" and that their actions would "displease God" is a powerful counterradicalization argument.³⁷

Interestingly, these renunciations by former ideologues and leaders appear to be having an impact, despite frequent questions about whether the change of heart was voluntary. Fadl's renunciation, for example, took place while he was in an Egyptian prison, leaving skeptics to attribute his 180-degree shift entirely to pressure from the Egyptian government. Zawahiri directly addressed this issue in an al-Qaeda video, noting that Fadl's book announcement was faxed to an Arabic-language newspaper in London, and asking if they "now have fax machines in Egyptian jail cells" and whether "they're connected to the same line as the electric-shock machines."³⁸ An editor of the London newspaper *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, Mohammed al-Shafey, said he had the same reaction at first, thinking when he read the fax that "he must have been coerced." According to al-Shafey, "Only later, when I read his new book, did I realize that he really meant what he wrote."³⁹ Others may have had the same experience as al-Shafey: initial skepticism followed by conviction, upon reading Fadl's tome, that his scathing commentary on al-Qaeda was genuine. The bottom line, however, is that these renunciations by Fadl and other former leaders appear to be making a difference.

Of course, former terrorist leaders are not always successful in their attempts to disseminate the dropout narrative. Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) founder Hassan Hattab, who left the group in 2003 and turned himself in to Algerian authorities in 2007, has been quite public in his criticism of his old organization, calling on it to disarm and accept the government's reconciliation

35. American Forces Press Service, "Former Taliban Commander Joins Forces with Afghan Government," August 8, 2005, <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=16943>.

36. Ted Gistaro, "Assessing the Fight against al-Qaeda" (speech, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 12, 2008). Summary of speech available online at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC07.php?CID=414>.

37. Written answers from Kamal ElHelbawy to questions from author, October 14, 2009.

38. Lawrence Wright, "The Rebellion Within," *New Yorker*, June 2, 2008, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/06/02/080602fa_fact_wright#ixzz0YedAaVIE.

39. Britta Sandberg, "Turning Their Backs on Jihad," *Salon*, July 16, 2008, <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2008/07/16/jihad/print.html>.

offer.⁴⁰ Yet the GSPC—now known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, or AQIM—has ignored Hattab's pleas, declared its founder an “apostate,”⁴¹ and continued plotting attacks against Algerian and Western targets.

It is also important not to underestimate the significance of lower-level defections; an operative who provides governments with detailed information on group members, plans, and operations can cause serious harm and put the organization on the defensive. A great deal of what the U.S. government knew about al-Qaeda prior to the September 11 attacks, for example, came from dropouts Jamal al-Fadl and L'Houssaine Kherchtou.

Withdrawing without Repercussions

Many people are able to leave terrorist and extremist organizations without negative repercussions. This is not widely known, and it is often assumed that these dangerous groups harm, or threaten to harm, anyone who considers dropping out.

Mushabib al-Hamlan is a good example. Selected for the September 11 plot and scheduled to travel to the United States for training, he changed his mind and abandoned his involvement in the attack. Al-Qaeda's muted reaction is somewhat surprising, particularly given that al-Hamlan knew important information about a major al-Qaeda operation. Khaled Shaikh Muhammad sent another al-Qaeda operative to visit him to find out why he had dropped out and to persuade him to rejoin, but when al-Hamlan expressed no interest, it appears that al-Qaeda gave up.⁴²

An even more striking example, perhaps, is Jamal al-Fadl, who embezzled some \$100,000 from al-Qaeda and was told to repay the money, yet suffered no other

consequences or threats. Al-Fadl ended up leaving the organization soon after.⁴³

Another such case involves the Yemeni Americans from Lackawanna, New York, who decided to leave the training camps in Afghanistan early and were allowed to do so. One of the men, Salim al-Alwan, met with bin Laden before his departure but was merely asked why he was leaving and whether he needed his passport “cleaned” of stamps that might indicate he was in Afghanistan.⁴⁴

Of course, these cases are not intended to suggest that terrorist and extremist groups never pressure members who are considering leaving or who have departed. Kamal ElHelbawy, the former Muslim Brotherhood spokesman, notes that while organizations may sometimes threaten members to keep them in the field, the major pressures they use are “moral or *fiqh*” (jurisprudence based).⁴⁵

Some groups have offered inducements to persuade their members to stay. Ed Husain says that when he spoke about leaving HT, group leaders initially told him to take some time off and informed him that he would no longer be required to attend the twice-weekly study group. Later, HT leaders said he could stop doing *dawa*, or outreach, if he chose to stay. Eventually, the leaders gave up, and Husain followed through on his threat to leave. Similarly, when Maajid Nawaz was considering leaving the group, he was offered other leadership positions if he would remain.⁴⁶

According to former Islamist activist Kamran Bokhari, extremist groups “try their utmost to prevent an individual from leaving,” often by intensifying targeted ideological preaching. If, however, a member becomes “a liability for the group in the sense of setting a bad example for the rest of the body,” he often will be expelled and denounced as a deviant.⁴⁷

40. GlobalSecurity.org, “Military: Algerian Insurgency,” <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/algeria-90s.htm>.

41. Evan Kohlmann, *Two Decades of Jihad in Algeria: The GLA, the GSPC, and Al-Qaida*, NEFA Foundation, pp. 13–14, <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/nefagspc0507.pdf>.

42. *9-11 Commission Report*, pp. 526–27.

43. Fadl testimony in *United States v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, February 7, 2001.

44. Dina Temple-Raston, *The Jihad Next Door: The Lackawanna Six and Rough Justice in an Age of Terror* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007).

45. Written responses from Kamal ElHelbawy to questions from author, October 14, 2009.

46. Interview with Ed Husain, September 16, 2009.

47. Written responses from Kamran Bokhari to questions from author, October 30, 2009.

Ghaffar Hussain had such an experience in HT. By Hussain's own admission, he was a "bad follower" who vocally criticized and questioned the leadership and the group's ideology, and this caused the leaders to decide he was no longer welcome.⁴⁸

Often, the process for being expelled from a terrorist network or encouraged to leave is not quite so formal. As discussed earlier, this process may be growing even less formal as the terrorist threat and terrorist networks evolve from the pre-September 11 hierarchical model to a more decentralized one. The July 7, 2005, attacks in London provide a good example. Mohammed Siddiqi Khan, the ringleader of the network that carried out this devastating plot against transportation targets, had a falling out with his best friend and fellow cell member and cut off contact with him. When Khan later suspected that this friend was speaking ill of him, he tracked him down and beat him up, effectively kicking him out of the network.⁴⁹ As terrorist groups grow increasingly fluid and decentralized, more people may be expelled from their organizations. People will likely move in and out with greater frequency and ease, both of their own volition and due to pressure from those still in the networks.⁵⁰

Recommendations

A close study of the cases presented here shows that the U.S. government can encourage, and even accelerate, the dropout phenomenon in several ways. Recommendations can be divided into three broad categories: improving public messages, partnering with nongovernmental actors, and improving counterradicalization coordination and program development.⁵¹

Improving Public Messages

Undermine leadership: "Naming and shaming," or the undermining of terrorist and extremist leadership, should be one part of the U.S. government's counter-radicalization approach. It is vital to craft messages that significantly detract from the leaders' authority and credibility and call into question their strategic direction. Pointing out how little these leaders have accomplished with their actions and statements would also be worthwhile, since a lack of respect for a group's leaders has often encouraged members to drop out. Essam al-Ridi's description of how bin Laden's incompetence as a military leader turned him against the group stands out as a prime example of this scenario. Ziad Jarrah's contemplated abandonment of the September 11 plot in summer 2001, in part due to his anger at operational commander Muhammad Atta, is another.

From this perspective, U.S. efforts to undermine al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi with a video showing clearly that he did not know how to handle a gun were potentially effective.⁵² Taking steps to avoid enhancing the reputations of terrorist leaders also likely has merit—this seems to have been President Clinton's public approach toward bin Laden in the pre-September 11 era.

For the same reason, the United States should try to avoid overhyping the seriousness of the terrorist threat. As Dell Dailey, then State Department counterterrorism coordinator, noted in 2008, one of al-Qaeda's goals is to "create a perception of a worldwide movement more powerful than it actually is."⁵³ A continued focus

48. Interview with Ghaffar Hussain, August 24, 2009.

49. Interview with Marc Sageman, September 10, 2009.

50. Interestingly, other non-Islamist extremist organizations have a nonviolent approach to dealing with "troublesome" members as well. A number of groups, including white supremacist prison gangs such as the Aryan Circle and Aryan Brotherhood, have official "blood in, blood out" policies. This means that to join, a person must kill someone, and the only way out is through death. In reality, these groups do not always enforce this harsh no-exit policy. These extremist organizations, like their Islamist counterparts, would often prefer that a member who is causing problems depart instead of staying and negatively influencing others. In fact, the Aryan Circle will even give members one chance to rejoin after they leave—a surprisingly gentle and welcoming policy for such an extreme organization (telephone interview with Mark Pitcavage, director of investigative research, Anti-Defamation League, September 8, 2009).

51. Several of the recommendations that follow are drawn from the report of The Washington Institute's Presidential Task Force on Confronting the Ideology of Radical Extremism, titled *Rewriting the Narrative: An Integrated Strategy for Counterradicalization*, March 2009, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PTF2-Counterradicalization.pdf>. The author was one of the three convenors of the task force and one of the primary drafters of the final report.

52. Associated Press, "U.S. Military Releases Video Showing Zarqawi Unable to Work Gun," Fox News, May 4, 2006, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,194260,00.html>.

53. Dell Dailey press conference on the release of the State Department's *Country Reports on Terrorism 2007*, April 30, 2008.

on al-Qaeda and its leaders certainly seems to help keep the group's members and followers motivated.

Publicize that leaving is possible: It is not well known that frequently, members of terrorist and extremist groups can leave without being harmed. Undoubtedly, many members of such groups have serious doubts about their involvement but are afraid of the possible consequences if they defect. The United States and its allies should do a better job of publicizing the cases of those who have successfully left so that others will realize that withdrawing is an option.

Demonstrate the hypocrisy of terrorist groups: Since dropouts have expressed concern over targeting of civilians, a focus on al-Qaeda's civilian victims, particularly Muslims, would be a helpful way to highlight the hypocrisy of terrorist ideologies. The United States has recently undertaken such a strategy, emphasizing the extent to which Muslims are victims of the group's attacks, to demonstrate that "it is al-Qaeda, and not the West, that is truly at war with Islam," in the words of National Counterterrorism Center director Michael Leiter.⁵⁴ A recent study by West Point's Combating Terrorism Center found that 85 percent of al-Qaeda's victims from 2004 to 2008 were from Muslim-majority countries, and that from 2006 to 2008, a person of non-Western origin was "54 times more likely to die in an al-Qaeda attack than an individual from the west."⁵⁵ These statistics undermine al-Qaeda's contention that it is at war with the West.

Similarly, painting terrorists as common criminals may help demonstrate the impurity of their ideology. Terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda, are increasingly involved in all types of criminal activity, including drug trafficking, and the United States can use this to its advantage by portraying the groups as ideologically hypocritical.

Challenge al-Qaeda's ideology: The United States should continue to exploit and amplify existing ideological divisions within terrorist and extremist organizations and widen the gap between radical extremists and their followers and potential recruits. The U.S. narrative should highlight voices critical of al-Qaeda, particularly former members and ideologues, even if it still takes issue with some of their views. Defections by leaders appear to have a real impact, as the examples of LIFG, IG, and EIJ illustrate. It is the voices of former jihadists that al-Qaeda appears to fear most, as demonstrated by Ayman al-Zawahiri's defensiveness in a lengthy summer 2008 internet question-and-answer session following Dr. Fadl's public recantations.

Focus on the reality of life as a terrorist: Another key way to encourage defections is to focus on the reality of life as a terrorist. If people are joining because the lifestyle seems glamorous or they believe they are fulfilling some larger purpose, demonstrating the reality will help dispel those myths. Terrorist organizations often treat recruits badly, and promulgating this message would help strengthen the counternarrative. A platform should be provided for dropouts where they can speak about their unsatisfying lives in terrorist organizations and emphasize that the lifestyle does not live up to the hype and that the reality has often driven people out of these groups.

A counternarrative should also focus on fear, including why people should be afraid to be suicide bombers. Ahmed al-Shayea, the young Saudi left permanently injured after carrying out a truck-bomb attack in Iraq, would be a powerful messenger on this front. Given that potential bombers have sometimes abandoned an attack at the last minute, a fear-awareness approach could have an impact.

54. Michael Leiter, "Looming Challenges in the War on Terror" (speech, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 13, 2008), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/20080213leiter.pdf>. See also Matthew Levitt and Michael Jacobson, "Highlighting al-Qaeda's Bankrupt Ideology," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch #1373, May 7, 2008, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2836>.

55. Peter Goodspeed, "Al-Qaeda Killing Mostly Muslims: 85 Percent of Casualties Non-Westerners, Report Says," *National Post*, December 16, 2009, <http://www.nationalpost.com/news/story.html?id=2340654>.

Find the most effective messenger: Governments are seldom the most effective messengers for encouraging terrorists and extremists to turn their backs on the cause. While there is certainly a role for the U.S. government and other governments to play, in many cases, actors such as former terrorists and extremists would make more effective messengers. Their words, backed by first-hand experience, would resonate particularly strongly, and they could deliver especially convincing messages.

Identifying and Building Strong Partnerships

Involve families in the process: The families of terrorists—in particular, wives and parents—can also have an important role to play. Family contact and family ties can influence people to reconsider membership in terrorist or extremist organizations. In a number of cases, recruits who left their families to join terrorist groups returned home before carrying out their planned attacks, and after renewed contact with their families, decided to abandon the attack.

Develop additional non-law-enforcement mechanisms to address radicalization: Currently, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is the main government institution handling cases involving radicalization. Since its mission is to investigate and prosecute terrorists, not rehabilitate them, this can contribute to the perception among Muslim and Arab American communities that the U.S. government sees them primarily as potential suspects. The revised Attorney General Guidelines, issued in late 2008, expand the FBI’s ability to conduct terrorist threat assessments, and may have exacerbated this situation.⁵⁶ To address this issue, the government should work with communities to develop alternative, non-law-enforcement mechanisms at the local level, both governmental and nongovernmental, to deal with radicalization. At least

one nongovernmental organization, the Freedom and Justice Foundation (F&J) in Texas, fits this model. F&J has close ties to the local Muslim and Arab American community and a good relationship with the FBI and federal government.⁵⁷ In this area, a number of European countries, particularly the Netherlands, have programs that the United States should look to as it develops its own mechanisms.⁵⁸

Improving Coordination and Program Development

Create a counterradicalization forum: Government leaders should establish a “counterradicalization forum” so that policymakers and practitioners from around the world can compare notes and best practices. The programs currently springing up are operating too independently of one another. A prospective forum should conduct comprehensive assessments of all aspects of the radicalization process to determine the extent to which “deradicalization” is achievable. Can a hardened terrorist’s worldview change so greatly that he would oppose everything he once stood for, or are there limits to what such government programs can accomplish? Sheikh Gomaa, Egypt’s grand mufti, insists that there are limits to deradicalization. Overall, governments have had success pushing disengagement, in which they persuade people to change their behavior, more than in changing people’s worldviews. The Saudi rehabilitation program, for example, focuses on behavior modification more than a change in belief systems. The answers to this basic question should be used to decide what these programs seek to achieve: complete deradicalization or mere disengagement.

Tailor counterradicalization programs: An effective counterradicalization program clearly cannot take a “one-size-fits-all” approach. The more a program can be personalized, the better its chance of success.

56. Michael Rolince, “New FBI Powers: A Necessary Step for Counterterrorism,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch #1418, October 28, 2008, <http://washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2951>.

57. Interview with Mohamed Elibiary, September 18, 2009.

58. The “Information House” model developed by the city of Amsterdam is a good example. It is described at greater length in the previously cited Washington Institute task force report *Rewriting the Narrative: An Integrated Strategy for Counterradicalization*, March 2009, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PTF2-Counterradicalization.pdf>.

It is essential to understand in each case why a person was attracted to the terrorist or extremist cause, since a link often exists between why a person joins and why he chooses to leave. Identifying the need—psychological or otherwise—that drove the person to join is critical in finding something else to keep him fulfilled. Additionally, in former FBI investigator Ali Soufan's view, a person working to deradicalize or disengage extremists should be as similar in type and personality to the extremist as possible.⁵⁹

Focus on prisons: Prisons are often seen as incubators for radicalization, but the reality is more nuanced. The U.S. government, in fact, should view prisons as incubators of opportunity: many people have gone into prison as extremists and come out with far more moderate views. The United States should develop and strengthen comprehensive counterradicalization programs for those serving time and encourage its allies to do the same. It is also critical to establish programs—such as those in the UK—to ensure that former extremists are successfully reintegrated into society once they leave prison.

Target vulnerable cell members: Not all members of terrorist or extremist networks are equally committed to the cause. Those who are wavering could be extremely helpful to U.S. law enforcement and intelligence officials as they attempt to determine which terrorists might be induced to switch sides. The U.S. government should take advantage of these potentially vulnerable group members.

Usually, terrorist and extremist networks have a number of different levels of participation. There are often several very committed operational leaders who hold hardline views and would be difficult to persuade to leave. Frequently, however, others at the fringes of these networks—the followers—are less devoted and

have submissive personalities.⁶⁰ Mohammed Robert Heft, the Canadian former radical, agrees, noting that the leaders' credibility in these cells depends on their following through on their promises. Those on the outskirts, in Heft's view, do not have the same degree of dedication and can more easily be peeled away.⁶¹

The September 11 plot offers some interesting examples in regard to leaders and outliers, and appears to confirm Heft's observations. While Ziad Jarrah is the most obvious example of someone who might have been willing to turn on his coconspirators, Said Bahaji, another member of the "Hamburg cell," may have been even more vulnerable. Bahaji, the only German citizen in the group, was described by associates after September 11 as insecure, a follower, and not knowledgeable about Islam.⁶² This description was not surprising, given his own acknowledgment that he became a "strong Muslim in a very short period of time."⁶³ One observer said that Bahaji did not fit in with the rest of the group because he was "too German, too pedantic, too Western."⁶⁴ In Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks, he questioned their purpose and complained about the physical challenges he faced. (He had left the German army after a brief stint because of physical weakness.)⁶⁵

The so-called Toronto 18, who were allegedly plotting to attack a variety of targets in their home country, offer a similar example. According to Heft, who knew some of them, between three and six were hardcore cell members who would have been very difficult to remove from the group. But the other members, in Heft's view, did not bring the same kind of intensity, commitment, and dedication and would have been far more realistic targets for government intervention.⁶⁶

Of course, people can be more vulnerable at different times and in different places; this should be part of the calculation as well. Abdelghani Mzoudi, another

59. Telephone interview with Ali Soufan, September 22, 2009.

60. Interview with Marc Sageman, September 10, 2009.

61. Telephone interview with Mohammed Robert Heft, October 1, 2009.

62. *9-11 Commission Report*, <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.

63. Cam Simpson, Stevenson Swanson, and John Crewdson, "9/11 Suspect Cut Unlikely Figure in Terror Plot," *Chicago Tribune*, February 23, 2003.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*

66. Telephone interview with Mohammed Robert Heft, October 1, 2009.

Hamburg cell member, described himself as a strong Muslim when he was in Germany with his extremist friends, but a weak Muslim when he was at home in Morocco, away from their influence.⁶⁷ Since potential shoe-bomber Sajid Badat and two of the prospective September 11 plotters abandoned their involvement in the attacks when they were home, it appears that terrorists' resolve may weaken when they are away

from the insular, fanatical environment in which they trained. In fact, Jarrah was on his own for much of his time in the United States, away from Atta and the other members of the Hamburg cell, which may help explain his second thoughts.⁶⁸ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross's views on radical Islam shifted after he left his job at al-Haramain and went to law school across the country at New York University.⁶⁹

67. *9-11 Commission Report*, <http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>, p. 165.

68. *Ibid.*

69. Interview with Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, July 30, 2009.

4 | Conclusion

AS GOVERNMENTS HAVE BEGUN to shift away from a militarily dominated approach to combating terrorism, they are increasingly looking for other ways to deal with the threat. One area of recent focus has been preventing people from going down the path toward radicalization and terrorism, or pulling them away if they are already there.

It is clear that the radicalization process is complex: reasons for joining terrorist and extremist groups vary widely, and a recruit's trajectory rarely follows a linear path toward full integration into a group; doubt, questioning, and ideological setbacks often mark the road to extremism. Similarly, as this study has demonstrated, motivations for leaving terrorist and extremist groups take many different forms: discontent over the group's ideological direction, petty grievances with leaders, family interventions, a discrepancy between expectations and the reality of life as a terrorist, and even the rigors of training camp. Given the distinct radicalization—and, increasingly, deradicalization and

disengagement—cycles that people undergo, it is not surprising that a “one-size-fits-all” approach is unlikely to succeed. Governments must be flexible and creative as they seek to encourage terrorists and extremists to leave their organizations or abandon their support for these dangerous causes.

Encouraging terrorists and extremists to defect—as well as preventing radicalization in the first place—is a challenging task. Programs now springing up around the world have already begun to chip away at the terrorist and extremist narrative. Nevertheless, broadly speaking, it will be difficult for the United States and its allies to counter extremist ideology effectively without understanding all aspects of the radicalization process. This includes why and how people are drawn to terrorist and extremist organizations and why they walk away. The cases discussed in this report should offer valuable lessons for governments as they continue to improve existing programs and develop new ones to counter the extremist narrative and stem the tide of radicalization.

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