Colloquium Brief Strategic Studies Institute

U.S. Army War College and
Women in International Security, Georgetown University

ROOTS OF TERROR

Compiled by
Corina Johnson
Women in International Security
Georgetown University Center for Peace & Security Studies
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service

KEY INSIGHTS:

- Environments that Enable Terrorism. While social factors alone do not "make" a terrorist, extremists' ultimate aim is to use social factors to appeal to people and create community support for extremist goals. The problem is complex because different agendas exist in different regions and groups; thus, no single policy prescription is sufficient to eliminate supportive environments.

- Recruitment and Support of Terrorists. The more that is learned through empirical data, the more difficult it becomes to create a profile of likely terrorists and to delineate their motivations. Self-identity with an oppressed community is often a key underlying factor in predicting who is likely to become a terrorist; additionally, most extremists express a desire to remake the world in a particular fashion. Finally, personal connections are of ultimate importance in recruitment regardless of region or ideology.

- The Future of Counterterrorism. Framing the counterterrorism issue is key to creating policy decisions and guidelines. Counterterrorism profiling has become nearly impossible due to terrorists' varied backgrounds and resilience in restructuring cells and command structures. Government agencies must implement strong leadership and management of counterterrorism policies and guidelines, and do so in a way that does not infringe on the legal rights of the individual.

The Women in International Studies (WIIS), Georgetown University, in cooperation with the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI), U.S. Army War College, conducted a colloquium, "The Roots of Terror: Understanding the Evolving Threat of Global Terrorism," on February 12, 2007. This colloquium brought together over 150 U.S. and international government officials, academic experts, think tank members,

and college faculty. The moderators and speakers were outstanding scholars and practitioners from an impressive array of universities, think tanks, and government and private agencies. The speakers' goals were to examine (1) recruitment and support strategies used by terrorist organizations, (2) the environments that enable terrorism, and (3) implications for the future of counterterrorism. A panel was devoted to each of these goals. Media coverage included C-SPAN live broadcast and rebroadcast and a talk-radio interview with an SSI participant. The colloquium addressed timely strategic issues, supported the research and publication missions of both the U.S. Army War College and Georgetown University, and promoted mutually beneficial relationships with universities, national security research institutes, and government agencies.

Environments that Enable Terrorism.

The three colloquium speakers detailed specific environments thought to be supportive of extremists. Extremists take advantage of existing environments of social oppression by addressing perceived social needs, thus creating sympathy for their cause. Since different environments (of social oppression) support different types of extremists, no single counterterrorism policy prescription exists. Only diverse counterterrorism policies can address such varying terrorism-supporting environments. The speakers examined three such environments: the North African region, the Pakistani madrassas environment, and the Hamas' da'wa system.

The North African environment has distinct characteristics. There is no widespread belief among North Africans that the West and the United States are anti-Islam; however, populations tend to be pro-Palestinian and to view U.S. policy in Iraq as misguided. African terrorist groups are polymorphous ideologically, of many secular and religious creeds. Terrorists in North Africa are primarily domestic actors. They take advantage of an environment of poor governance—opaque, noninclusive, and corrupt political processes—that contributes to poverty; instability; and the economic, social, and political alienation of citizens. Although the exact links between poverty and insecurity are unclear, extremists in North Africa do tend to operate in impoverished and politically insecure environments, suggesting that the poor are more receptive to extremist ideas.

Hamas, like its North African counterparts, takes advantage of environments with poor governance. Its extensive da'wa system–including summer camps, schools, proto-military training, mosques, and use of the Internet—is a conduit for propaganda campaigns directed at every level of society, targeting all ages. Receivers of charity show gratitude; the da'wa system buys support and goodwill. Hamas targets da'wa operations in areas that show the greatest "return" in terms of support. The ultimate goal is to create grass roots support for the Hamas agenda, which has included (before Hamas itself became a part of the government) undermining the secular authority.

Some see Pakistani madrassas playing a similar role and having a similar goal. They argue that madrassas, like Hamas' da'wa, create an environment that supports extremism. Research suggests that the background of most militants does not include madrassa training, although the schools provide an environment conducive to extremist operations. In Pakistan, a greater supply of people are willing to become militants than are needed, so recruiters choose the best candidates and are not restricted to selecting those with a specific background characteristic, such as a madrassa education.

Students at both public and private schools appear to profess the same level of support for jihad. Madrassa attendance is not a reliable indicator of future extremism. A much more reliable indicator includes those with a family member expressing grievances against the government. While there may not be a direct connection to terrorist activity, madrassas often offer passive support.

Recruitment and Support of Terrorists.

The three members of this panel used various research tools, qualitative and quantitative, to reveal insights into the recruitment process. Previous explanations categorized terrorists as poverty stricken religious radicals who hated

democracy; these notions have been superseded by research indicating common background factors that provide predictors of individuals successfully recruited. Despite numerous theories on how individuals are recruited by terrorist networks, the ultimate decision to use violence is a personal one, impossible to predict with complete accuracy.

Muslims across the world express a sense of humiliation. They believe that the West, and the United States in particular, considers Muslims to be inferior. Among those likely to become violent extremists, there is a heightened sense of humiliation and subjugation and self-identification with the larger community of the oppressed.

Identification with a larger community is a key background factor. Extremists hope to be viewed as leaders working to rectify wrongs and correct perceived humiliations. They often depend on government overreaction, which is portrayed as a crime against the identified group as a whole, legitimizing the extremists' claims. To target future recruits, extremists often publish manifestos, detailing complaints and demanding specific changes from the government.

Terrorists share a common belief that the world must be remolded in a particular image—this holds true for many radical Maoists, Christians, Muslims, and domestic groups such as Neo-Nazis. Individuals often first attempt to bring about change through legitimate means, after identifying an internal or external government that must be transformed. Eventually, these individuals become frustrated and express pessimism that relations with the government will improve through nonviolent means and decide compromise is impossible.

Of special importance through the recruitment process is the role of physical connections, which can occur anywhere—mosques, prisons, political organizations, or charities. Advancing through the radicalization process requires physical contact; even those recruited through the Internet must eventually physically meet with someone in order to advance through the network, sometimes across national boundaries.

Often, violent extremists are educated and middle class. Some argue that these individuals look for self-expression but live within oppressed societies. These persons do not hold unique viewpoints, but instead feel viewpoints more acutely than others—who must first focus on fulfilling basic needs. Likewise, some individuals may not be attracted to terrorism through radical religion. Instead, as they progress through the radicalization process, other areas of their life such as social and religious practices assume extremes.

Future of Counterterrorism.

Many common background factors that enable recruitment and support of violent extremists provide a focus for formulating counterterrorism policies. Successful policies will depend on active leadership and a sustained focus that utilizes all aspects of government, not just the military. Finally, government agencies must recognize the tension between counterterrorism and individual liberties and avoid violating civil rights.

Internationally, weak and corrupt governments present opportunities for the United States to strengthen and legitimize indigenous government capabilities. This also eliminates the need for charitable organizations such as Hamas' da'wa, which provides services the present government cannot. The 2006 *National Security Strategy* recognizes that improved democracy can reduce the influence of terrorists by bringing ungoverned areas under control, promoting economic development and reducing corruption.

Although the U.S. Government has recognized the necessity of increasing support to mainstream Muslims attempting to reject extremism, the government has neglected to do much about it. The United States should focus on marginalizing terrorists from the rest of the Muslim world—discrediting the jihadi narrative and publicizing terrorist excesses. The ultimate goal is lessening the appeal terrorism holds by offering Muslims other options. Efforts should also be made to prevent the emergence of safe havens.

A comprehensive approach by the U.S. Government would combine financial aid with dialogue and development assistance. Yet, money alone would not reduce the factors leading to extremist behavior, and it might fail to increase broad support for the state. Lastly, the military should be used as a supporting element of full government engagement rather than as the primary tool of counterterrorism.

Domestically, tensions between enacting counterterrorism policies and protecting the rights of individuals must be recognized and defined, including the scope of Internet freedoms. Violating the rights of individuals often results in radicalization, especially if the individual is incarcerated. Incarceration creates grievances against the government and provides an opportunity for important physical contacts.

New counterterrorist policies focus on *the active prevention of* terrorism rather than *the reaction to* terrorist events. Many of the traditional processes used to identify and prosecute terrorists operate at a pace too slow to keep up with terrorists' ability to change and reorganize. Terrorists have adopted structurally independent modes of organization in diverse environments; counterterrorism policies must adopt methods to track terrorists within independent cells. More effort is needed in the area of border controls, such as shipping container security and identification of false documents. Terrorists now actively seek weapons of mass destruction; counterterrorism policies must safeguard nuclear materials. In short, counterterrorism policymakers must actively anticipate new threats.

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