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Holy Avengers

From American anti-abortion activists to Islamic suicide bombers certain traits are common among those who dedicate their lives to religious terrorism. While researching her book, a Harvard academic tries to find out why they believe they have a moral mandate to murder. *continued* ▶

by Jessica Stern



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Events in Iraq have shown that a war cannot be prosecuted against terrorists without giving some thought to what motivates new recruits to the terror cause. In interviews with religious terrorists over the past six years I have been trying to discover what makes someone join a holy-war organisation and what makes them stay. I started by talking to an American: a repentant leader of an Identity Christian cult in a trailer park in Texas. From there I went to Pakistan, India, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, and Indonesia. I talked to Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Sikh and Hindu radicals. I visited extremist seminaries in Indonesia and Pakistan that recruit the cannon fodder for global jihad. I toured refugee camps in Lebanon and Kashmir. A Pakistani charity arranged for me to see the new homes it provided to families of “martyrs,” and to meet the martyrs’ mothers, not all of whom were able to keep up a facade of pride. Since September 11, I do not feel safe interviewing terrorists in the field. Now I talk only to “retired” or jailed terrorists and arrange for local interviewers to administer detailed questionnaires, querying terrorists about their motivations.

Some of the operatives I spoke to have since been killed. I met two Hamas leaders in Gaza who were assassinated this year by the Israeli government— Ismail Abu Shanab and Abdel-Aziz al-Rantissi. And two operatives I met on death row in the US have since been executed. One of them—Mir Aimal Kansi—had murdered two employees of the CIA; the other—Paul Hill—had killed two abortion clinic staff. There were many differences among the various holy warriors. Some were intellectuals. Some appeared to be on a spiritual high; others seemed pumped up on adrenalin or the adventure of living at least partly on the run. A Sikh terrorist I met in Lahore said he never stayed two nights in the same place. Some clearly enjoyed their status and power. Sheikh Fadlallah, the spiritual leader of Hezbollah who was said to have survived an alleged CIA-led attempt on his life in 1985, exuded the air of a man who feels he has the best possible job in the world.

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Some were obviously angry. I sensed in many that their commitment to the cause was a thin veneer covering some deeper, more personal need. For some, jihad had become a high-paying job; a few admitted they would like to quit but couldn't afford to. Some were unexpectedly rich, while others lived in slums.

A leader of Harkat-ul-Mujahideen, a group known for beheading foreigners and for its close alliance with Osama bin Laden, took me to meet his second wife, a startlingly beautiful young woman from Saudi Arabia, a country he visited regularly on fund-raising missions. He had ensconced his new wife in an outsized white mansion, leaving the first one at his parents' farm.

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Despite these differences, it is possible, after this long journey, to identify some common themes that might help to explain how violent Islamic nihilism continues to spread beyond the lawless pockets and failed states where terrorists tend to thrive, and into the cities of the west.

My interviews suggest that people join religious terrorist groups partly to transform themselves and to simplify life. They start out feeling humiliated, enraged that they are viewed by some "other" as second class. They take on new identities as martyrs on behalf of a purported spiritual cause. The spiritually perplexed learn to focus on action. The weak become strong. The selfish become altruists, ready to make the ultimate sacrifice of their lives in the belief that their death will serve a supposed public good. Rage turns to conviction. They seem to enter a kind of trance, where the world is divided neatly between good and evil, victim and oppressor. Uncertainty and am-

bivalence, always painful to experience, are banished. There is no room for the other side's point of view. Because they believe their cause is just and that God is on their side, they persuade themselves that any action—no matter how heinous—is justified. They know they are right, not just politically, but morally.

The notion that **perceived humiliation** could be an important factor in explaining **terrorism** has struck some **academics** as **far-fetched**.

In their view, arrogant one-worlders, humanists and promoters of human rights have created an engine of modernity that is stealing their identity. The greatest rage—and the greatest danger—stems from those who feel they can't keep up, even as they claim to be superior to those who set the pace. Over time, in some cases, cynicism takes hold. Terrorism becomes a career as much as a passion. What starts out as moral fervour about humiliation and deprivation becomes a sophisticated organisation. Grievance can end up as greed—for status, attention, political power or money. The rest of the world needs to understand this dynamic, and exploit it in every possible way, by sowing discord, confusion, and rivalry among terrorists and between terrorists and their sponsors.

While the terrorists I met described a variety of grievances, almost every one talked about humiliation. The Identity Christian cultist told me he suffered from chronic bronchitis as a child and his mother discouraged him from exerting himself. He had

been forced to attend the girls' physical education classes because he couldn't keep up with the boys. "I don't know if I ever got over the shame and humiliation of not being able to keep up with the other boys—or even with some of the girls," he said. The first time he felt strong was when he was living on an armed compound, surrounded by armed men.

Leaders cynically **take advantage** of their **zealous recruits**...ultimately using these true believers as **their weapons**.

A man involved in the violent wing of the anti-abortion movement told me he was "vaginally defeated", but now he is "free", by which he meant celibate and beyond the influence of women.

A Kashmiri militant founded his group because he wanted to recreate the golden period of Islam, "to recover what we lost... Muslims have been overpowered by the west. Our ego hurts... we are not able to live up to our own standards for ourselves."

The notion that perceived humiliation could be an important factor in explaining terrorism has struck some academics as far-fetched. But my argument is not that humiliation and relative deprivation alone are sufficient to create a terrorist. Terrorist leaders offer a "basket" of emotional, spiritual and financial rewards to potential recruits, designed to appeal to a variety of followers whose needs and desires are understood

to change over time. The leader has to understand his followers' psychology, to have a feel for what they want, "what they are thinking, what is missing", the repentant Identity Christian cultist told me.

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Leaders cynically take advantage of their zealous recruits, manipulating them with an enticing mission, ultimately using these true believers as their weapons.

For the broad-based dystopian movement inspired by al-Qaeda, the new world order—al-Qaeda's term for globalisation—is a perfect foil. It is better for the youth of Islam to carry arms and defend their religion with pride and dignity than to submit to the humiliation of globalisation, bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri wrote in his putative autobiography. He refers to global institutions such as the United Nations and international relief agencies as tools in the new crusaders' arsenal. "In the face of this alliance, a fundamentalist coalition is taking shape," Zawahiri writes, warning that its growth will continue to accelerate. "It is anxious to seek retribution for the blood of the martyrs, the grief of the mothers, the suffering of the detainees, and the sores of the tortured people throughout the land of Islam."

The purpose of fighting the new world order, in Zawahiri's view, is to restore the dignity of humiliated youth. Violence is a "cleansing force" that frees the oppressed youth from his inferiority complex, despair and inaction, making him fearless and restoring his self-respect.

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It is in this context that the war in Iraq and, in particular, the heart-wounding images of American soldiers humiliating, torturing and killing Iraqi prisoners, becomes so important. If bin Laden were writing a script for George Bush and Tony Blair to follow, would he not command them to attack and occupy a Muslim country in defiance of the international community and in violation of international law? And would it not be his fondest wish to see "the new crusaders" humiliate those Muslims, and themselves, in the most graphic possible way? Having those soldiers then photograph their crimes might have seemed too much to hope for.

In assuming itself to be above the law in many instances, but especially in regard to detaining and interrogating supposed terrorists, the Bush Administration has made a serious moral error. It is the human condition to be imperfect; to seek to understand the mind of God, but also, tragically and frustratingly, to fail. Talking to religious terrorists has taught me this: when we become moral swaggarts, when we are so certain that

God is on our side that we believe ourselves to be beyond the reach of normal moral inquiry or law, we make ourselves vulnerable to the basest aspects of our nature.

The first step in the direction of a perilous righteousness was when Bush announced on September 20, 2001: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” Jim Wallis, an evangelical Christian activist and editor of *Sojourners Magazine*, responds: “To say that they are evil and we are good, and that if you’re not with us, you’re with the terrorists—that’s bad theology.” He points to Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: “Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, your adversary’s eye, your enemy’s eye, and not see the log in your own eye? Why do you see the evil in them but not in yourself?”

While the war has **increased tensions** within the western alliance, it has **united** the **terrorist groups**.

A year after 9/11, Bush continued in a similar vein, referring to America as the hope of all mankind. He referred to a light shining in the darkness, which the darkness will not overcome. That line is from the Gospel of John, Wallis explains. “But it’s about the light of Christ and the word of God. Now, all of a sudden, it’s meant to be America as a beacon of light to the world. (Bush) changed the meaning of the text. It’s no longer about the word of God, the light of Christ, it’s about us.”

Omar Bakri Muhammad, the leader of the London-based radical Islamist movement, al-Muhajiroun, asks potential followers: “When will people see this war in Iraq and

Afghanistan for what it really is—a Christian Crusade, full of the indiscriminate murder, rape and carnage just like, if not worse, than the Christian Crusades of ‘Richard the Lionheart’ and his own band of thugs in the past. Surely this is a wake-up call for all Muslims around the world who have any dignity left. Anyone... where our land, war, peace and honour is one, must do all he or she can to protect the men, women and children being tortured and humiliated in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is too late to stop the atrocities which have already taken place but it is not too late to drive these nasty infidels out of Muslim land once and for all.”

Violence is a “cleansing force” that frees the oppressed youth from his inferiority complex.

Even before the revelations about the torture of Iraqi prisoners, al-Qaeda used the war in Iraq as a recruitment tool for their global battle against the “crusader alliance”. They have long been aware that tension within the alliance over the Iraq war is a vulnerability. A number of polls show that support for that war is diminishing and antipathy to America is increasing. In a wide-ranging poll conducted a year after the Iraq war, the Pew Foundation found that the majority of Americans still believe that Bush made the right decision in going to war in Iraq and that the US will ultimately achieve its mission there. But since the publication of photos of prisoners being tortured, a USA Today/Gallup poll showed 58 per cent of Americans disapprove of Bush’s handling of the situation in Iraq, and 54 per cent said going to war “was not worth it”.

Elsewhere around the world, a majority of those polled said that the war in Iraq has diminished their trust in the US. A growing percentage of Europeans would like to see Europe's foreign policy and security arrangements made independently of the US.

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British respondents—a majority of whom had supported the war in a poll taken a year earlier—are now significantly more critical, with only 43 per cent (down from 61 per cent) now saying it was right to go to war. The March 11 attacks in Madrid precipitated the surprise victory of Spain's new prime minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, elected partly because he promised to remove Spanish troops from Iraq. Polish president Aleksander Kwasniewski has suggested that he was deceived when his country agreed to participate in the coalition. As the Iranian cleric Rafsanjani noted gleefully in a sermon on the first anniversary of the war, “They are drifting apart. A gap has appeared in this group which they call a coalition.”

But while the war has increased tensions within the western alliance but it has united the terrorist groups. On a website described by the US government as “jihadist,” Hani al-Sibai, the director of the London-based Al-Maqrizi Centre for Historical Studies, says: “Iraq is currently a battlefield and fertile soil for every Islamic movement that views jihad as a priority.” He notes that “the continuation of the anti-occupation resis-

tance will produce several groups that might later merge into one large group.” Very few of the participants in the Iraqi “jihad” are members of al-Qaeda, he says. “Even if the US forces capture all leaders of al-Qaeda or kill them all, the idea of expelling the occupiers and non-believers from the Arabian Peninsula and all the countries of Islam will not die.”

A totalitarian **Islamic revivalism** has become the **dystopian ideology** of the new world order.

Outside Iraq, a surprising array of groups has joined al-Qaeda in targeting the new world order and its instruments. Albert Huber, a Swiss neo-Nazi who converted to Islam and who is popular with both Aryan youth and radical Muslims, is calling for neo-Nazis and Islamists to join forces. Huber was on the board of directors of the Al-Taqwa Foundation, which the US government says was a major donor to al-Qaeda. Matt Hale, leader of The World Church of the Creator, an American white supremacist organisation, is disseminating a book that exposes the “sinister machinations” that led to September 11, including the involvement of Jews and Israelis.

A totalitarian Islamic revivalism has become the dystopian ideology of the new world order. In an earlier era, its converts might have described their grievances through other ideological lenses, perhaps communism, perhaps Nazism. In Europe a radical transnational Islam, divorced from its countries of origin, is appealing to youth in depressed or high unemployment areas, says Olivier Roy, research director at the French

National Centre for Scientific Research. Leaders of the radical groups are often from the middle classes, many of them trained in technical fields, while followers are more likely to be working-class dropouts, he says.

The ultimate objective is to “purify” the world—replacing the new world order with a caliphate of terror.

Members of the London-based al-Muhajiroun openly support al-Qaeda. Several men arrested on suspicion of organising a terrorist attack in London in March had been followers of this movement, according to Omar Bakri Muhammad, the group’s leader. Al-Qaeda used to be a group but has become a phenomenon, Muhammad told the Lisbon Publico newspaper. “The September 11 attacks made Muslims realise they have power, that the rebirth of Islam is inevitable and we are entering a new chapter in history. That is why we started a new calendar then. We are now in year three of the age of al-Qaeda.” It makes no difference whether bin Laden is dead or alive, he said, the movement has taken off.

We must not romanticise al-Qaeda and its networks of nihilist minions by assuming that they have clear objectives that they could ultimately achieve, or that we could, if we chose, appease them. The groups that subscribe to al-Qaeda’s ideology have a grandiose vision but no set goals. The purpose of lethal attacks is to rally the followers at least as much as it is to horrify and frighten the victims. The goals continue to shift—from forcing US troops out of Saudi Arabia or coalition troops out of Iraq to sowing discord in the west to setting Iraq aflame with sectarian tensions. To achieve these

shifting goals, the movement aims to create a clash not only among civilisations but also within civilisations. The ultimate objective is to “purify” the world—replacing the new world order with a caliphate of terror based on a fantasised simpler, purer, past.

In thinking about how to respond to terrorism, it is important to realise that we are unlikely to persuade terrorists to change their approach. Terrorists, I have found, become professionals and, after some time on the job, it can be hard for them to imagine another life. But terrorists and guerrillas rely on the broader population for support. Mao Zedong described insurgents as fish swimming in a sea of ordinary people, whose occasional support they require. We are competing with the terrorists for the hearts and minds of the ordinary people who make up that sea.

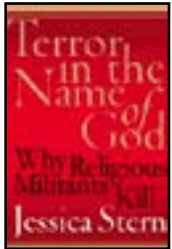
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
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