Why Terrorists Quit: Gaining From Al-Qa`ida's Losses

By Michael Jacobson

IN RECENT MONTHS, there has been a spate of seemingly good news in the counter-terrorism arena, as former terrorist leaders and clerics have renounced their previous beliefs. Former Egyptian Islamic Jihad head Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (also known as Dr. Fadl), whose treatises al-Qa`ida often cited to justify its actions, has written a new book rejecting al-Qa`ida's message and tactics.[1] Shaykh Salman bin Fahd al-Awda, an extremist cleric whose incarceration in the 1990s by the Saudis reportedly helped inspire Usama bin Ladin to action, went on television to decry al-Qa`ida's operations, asking Bin Ladin, "How much blood has been spilt? How many innocent people, children, elderly, and women have been killed…in the name of al Qaeda?"[2] In the United Kingdom, former members of the radical group Hizb al-Tahrir[3] (also spelled Hizb-ut-Tahrir) established the Quilliam Foundation, which describes itself as "Britain's first Muslim counter-extremism think tank."[4]

While these are clearly positive developments and may have a real impact on preventing the next generation from going down the path of extremism, what effect will these renunciations have on al-Qa`ida's current members, and on others who are well on their way to becoming terrorists? What are the factors that can turn a would-be terrorist away from this dangerous path? Do former terrorists' and extremists' messages carry particular weight with this group? Unfortunately, at this point there are too few answers to these important questions. What can be examined, however, are cases of individuals who have decided to quit

involvement in a terrorist organization. There are a number of cases of terrorist "drop-outs," and studying their motivations for turning their backs on their former compatriots is highly useful for creating an effective counter-terrorism strategy.

Many Candidates to Study

Despite al-Qa`ida's reputation for ferocity and secrecy and its purported esprit de corps, many individuals have quit the organization, making this a productive area of study. In fact, al-Qa`ida has seen its share of key members turn against the group from its earliest days. These include:

- Jamal al-Fadl, a Sudanese national, who was one of the first members of al-Qa`ida and was involved in the unsuccessful efforts in the early 1990s to procure uranium for the organization;[5]
- 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-Qa`ida;[6]
- L'Houssaine Khertchou, a Moroccan who joined the organization in 1991 and trained to serve as Bin Ladin's personal pilot.[7]

Even in the 9/11 plot—where attention has focused on al-Qa`ida's ability to convince 19 people to kill themselves as part of the attack—Bin Ladin was not entirely successful. Two Saudis who were selected for the plot—Mushabib al-Hamlan and Sa`ud al-Rashid—decided after leaving the training camps in Afghanistan not to participate in the attacks. In the summer of 2001, al-Qa`ida nearly faced an even bigger obstacle when Ziad Jarrah, the pilot of Flight 93, was deliberating about whether to withdraw from the operation. In an emotional conversation, Ramzi bin al-Shibh—the Hamburg-based liaison between the cell and the al-Qa`ida leadership—was able to persuade Jarrah to stay the course.[8] Defections from al-Qa`ida have continued since 9/11. For example, Sajid Badat, a young Muslim from Gloucester,

England, was trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan to use shoe bombs to destroy aircraft. His assignment was to target airliners bound from Europe to the United States. While his associate Richard Reid—now better known as "The Shoe Bomber"—attempted to blow up an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami, Badat simply bailed on the plot, leaving his dismantled bomb in his parents' house.[9]

Al-Qa`ida is hardly alone in suffering from defections. Some of its affiliates have had important losses as well, ranging from foot soldiers to key leadership personnel. Al-Qa`ida's Indonesian-based affiliate Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) was dealt a blow when Nasir Abas—one of JI's four regional commanders—left the organization.[10] Noman Benotman, the former leader of the al-Qa`ida-affiliated Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), also abandoned the terrorist cause, turning not only on the LIFG but on al-Qa`ida as well.[11] In June 2008, Abu Hadhifa, a long-time veteran of the Algerian jihad, who had risen to become the commander of al-Qa`ida in the Islamic Maghreb's (AQIM) forces in eastern Algeria, dropped out of AQIM and turned himself in to Algerian authorities.[12]

Factors Causing Operatives to Quit

In these various cases, patterns are evident in why they made the decision to leave the terrorist or extremist organization. Not surprisingly, some have departed after becoming disillusioned with the group's tactics and strategy. Former EIJ leader Dr. Fadl, Saudi cleric Shaykh al-Awda, and the founding members of the Quilliam Foundation all seem to fit this profile.

JI commander Abas began to turn on his organization and to cooperate with Indonesian counter-terrorism authorities after JI adopted a Bin Ladin *fatwa* that called for attacks on civilians. Abas believed that jihad was

1 Lawrence Wright, "The Rebellion Within," *New Yorker*, June 2, 2008.

2 Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, "The Unraveling," *The New Republic*, June 11, 2008.

3 Although Hizb al-Tahrir is banned in some countries, it is not banned in the United Kingdom.

4 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).

5 *U.S.A. v. Usama bin Laden et al.*, Southern District of New York, 2001.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 9/11 Commission, "9/11 Commission Final Report," July 2004.

9 Daniel McGrory and Zahid Hussain, "New Wave of British Terrorists are Taught at Schools, Not in the Mountains," *Times Online*, July 14, 2005.

10 Bob Simon, "Switching Sides: Inside the Enemy Camp," 60 Minutes, May 6, 2007.

11 Bergen and Cruickshank, "The Unraveling."

12 "Report: Al-Qaeda Maghreb Commander Turns Self In," Middle East Media Research Institute, June 8, 2008.

only to be fought on the battlefield in the defense of Islam. Abas later said that he felt "sinful" after the 2002 Bali bombings, since he had helped train the bombers in the attacks.[13] AQIM commander Hadhifa turned himself in, according to his family, after reaching the conclusion that the jihad in Algeria was not legitimate.[14] Far more shocking was the decision of Bin Ladin's son `Umar to quit al-Qa`ida in the wake of 9/11, calling the attacks "craziness" and saying that "those guys are dummies. They have destroyed everything, and for nothing. What did we get from September 11?"[15]

A lack of respect for the group's leadership has also been a factor. Former LIFG head Benotman had real differences with Bin Ladin over the direction of the global jihadist movement, and he claims to have asked the al-Qa`ida *amir* to get out of the terrorism business at a 2000 summit, realizing that they were fighting a losing battle. After 9/11, Benotman resigned from his position in the LIFG, concerned that the United States would likely respond to the attack by not only targeting al-Qa`ida, but his organization as well.[16]

More tactical and operational differences with the leadership have also played a role in terrorists' disillusionment. For example, Essam al-Ridi said that during the battles against the Soviets in Afghanistan he resented taking battlefield orders from Bin Ladin and other leaders who lacked military experience. Al-Ridi later testified that the final straw from his perspective was a battle in which many jihadists died—in his view due to the leadership's incompetence—but where al-Qa`ida declared victory nonetheless.[17] For 9/11 hijacker Jarrah, one of the causes of his unhappiness was Muhammad `Atta's leadership style, in particular Jarrah's feelings that he was excluded from the broader decision-making process.[18]

While strategic differences appear to be an important factor, more petty grievances have also played a role in al-Qa`ida members deciding to turn their backs on the organization. Issues relating to money have frequently caused problems, as some terrorists have viewed inadequate compensation as a sign that they are being treated unfairly. For example, Jamal al-Fadl began embezzling funds from al-Qa`ida during their years in Sudan based on his displeasure with his salary—stealing approximately $100,000 total. When Bin Ladin learned of al-Fadl's actions, he ordered him to repay the money. After repaying about $30,000, al-Fadl fled, fearing retribution if he did not return the full amount.[19]

Khertchou, on the other hand, became bitter after one of Bin Ladin's aides turned down his request for $500 to cover the costs of his wife's cesarean section. His anger level increased when al-Qa`ida paid the expenses of a group of Egyptians who were sent to Yemen to renew their passports. "If I had a gun," Khertchou later testified, "I would shoot [Bin Ladin] at that time."[20]

It appears that terrorist cell members who maintain contact with friends and family outside the organization are more likely to withdraw. Perhaps in part in recognition of this, `Atta forbade the 18 hijackers in the United States from contacting their families to say goodbye. Jarrah's unwillingness to cut ties with his fiancé in Germany and his family in Lebanon was one of the causes of strife in his relationship with `Atta.[21] In fact, potential 9/11 plotters al-Rashid and al-Hamlan abandoned the plot when they left Afghanistan and returned to their home country of Saudi Arabia. After getting his U.S. visa, al-Hamlan contacted his family despite clear instructions to the contrary. When he discovered that his mother was ill, he decided not to return to Afghanistan despite repeated pressure from al-Qa`ida. He subsequently moved back in with his parents and returned to his college studies.[22] Badat, the reluctant shoe bomber, likewise appears to have made the decision to abandon the plot

once he returned to his home country and resumed contact with his family.[23]

Lessons for the Government

Developing a better grasp of this phenomenon is critical for the United States and its allies' counter-terrorism efforts. Broadly speaking, it will be difficult for the United States to effectively counter radical ideology without understanding all aspects of the radicalization cycle—including both why and how people are drawn in to terrorist and extremist organizations and why people have walked away.

A comprehensive study exploring the drop-out phenomenon could have great practical benefits for the United States and its allies. Governments could use the knowledge gleaned to shape their counter-radicalization programs, which are growing in popularity throughout the world. Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Egypt, Indonesia and Singapore, as well as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, are among the countries that have put these types of programs into place in recent years. It is clear from a preliminary review of individuals who have quit or defected that there are many different factors at play— ranging from strategic disagreements to financial disputes—that drive seemingly committed terrorists to change course. This seems to suggest that a "one size fits all" approach is likely to produce only marginal results and that more flexible and tailored programs are necessary.

Figuring out why people have left terrorist and extremist organizations can help governments and non-governmental entities craft messages designed to pull people already engaged in terrorism. This is an area in which Western governments have struggled since 9/11, and where a new approach is needed. As Department of Homeland Security Undersecretary Charles Allen noted in a May 2008 speech, at this point "no Western state has effectively countered the al-Qaeda narrative."[24] Without knowing why people have become disillusioned with terrorist and extremist organizations, it is difficult to determine what type of message

13 Simon, "Switching Sides: Inside the Enemy Camp."

14 "Report: Al-Qaeda Maghreb Commander Turns Self In."

15 Peter Bergen, "War of Error," *The New Republic*, October 22, 2007.

16 Bergen and Cruickshank, "The Unraveling."

17 *U.S.A. v. Usama bin Laden et al.*

18 "9/11 Commission Final Report."

19 *U.S.A. v. Usama bin Laden et al.*

20 Ibid.

21 "9/11 Commission Final Report."

22 Ibid.

23 McGrory and Hussain, "New Wave of British Terrorists are Taught at Schools, Not in the Mountains."

24 Charles Allen, speech at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 6, 2008.

would be most effective and who should deliver it.[25]

A preliminary review reveals some interesting potential opportunities in this area. For example, since disagreement with the leaders seems to be a major factor for a number of drop-outs, the messages could focus, in part, on undermining the stature of the terrorist leadership. This suggests,

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for example, that perhaps the U.S. effort to discredit former al-Qa`ida in Iraq chief Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi by publicizing a video demonstrating that he was uncomfortable handling a firearm—and therefore hardly a worthy military leader—may have had some merit.[26] In addition, it appears that the United States should also try to avoid further enhancing Bin Ladin's stature by continually emphasizing the seriousness of the terrorist threat. As State Department Counter-Terrorism Coordinator Dell Dailey recently stated, one of al-Qa`ida's goals is to "create a perception of a worldwide movement more powerful than it actually is."[27]

Since targeting civilians is also a source of concern among those who have quit militant groups, focusing on al-Qa`ida's victims—particularly Muslims—also appears to be a worthwhile approach. The United States has recently started

to focus on this, trying to demonstrate, as National Counter-Terrorism Center Director Michael Leiter has explained, that "it is al-Qaeda, and not the West, that is truly at war with Islam" by highlighting the extent to which Muslims are victims of the organization's attacks.[28]

This type of study could also have a number of benefits for law enforcement and intelligence agencies' counter-terrorism efforts. Figuring out why individuals have walked away from terrorist groups may enable governments to better predict whether an individual, or even a cell, is likely to follow through with an attack. Understanding the dropouts should also make it easier for law enforcement and intelligence to determine which terrorists might be induced to switch sides, and how the government should proceed.[29]

Conclusion
There is no obvious silver bullet. Yet, the stories of the "drop-outs" are of more than academic interest. Counter-terrorism officials have spent a great deal of effort trying to understand the process of radicalization, but strikingly little work has been done on the flip side of the coin: the factors that can turn a fanatical would-be killer into a somewhat chastened citizen. While the recent statements of the clerics and

leaders who have rejected al-Qa`ida and its ideology are certainly promising developments, the reality is that counter-terrorism authorities do not have a full grasp on what type of impact these kinds of pronouncements will have. Until all aspects of the radicalization cycle are better understood, including those who have left the terrorists' fold, it will be difficult to develop an effective strategy to defeat the al-Qa`ida movement and its ideology.

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25 Governments, and particularly the U.S. government, are not always the right messenger when it comes to delivering counter-radicalization messages.

26 Again, however, it is not clear whether the U.S. government is the best messenger for these efforts.

27 Press conference on the release of the State Department's Country Reports on Terrorism 2007, April 30, 2008.

28 Michael Leiter, speech at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 13, 2008; see also Matthew Levitt and Michael Jacobson, "Highlighting al Qaeda's Bankrupt Ideology," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 7, 2008.

29 The 9/11 plot offers some interesting examples in this regard. While Ziad Jarrah is the most obvious example of someone who might have been willing to turn on his co-conspirators, Said Bahaji—another member of the group in Germany now commonly referred to as the "Hamburg cell"—may have been even more vulnerable. Bahaji, the only German citizen in the group, was described by associates after 9/11 as insecure, a follower, and not knowledgeable about Islam, which was not surprising given his own acknowledgement that he became a "strong Muslim in a very short period of time." One observer said that he did not fit in with the rest of the group because he was "too German, too pedantic, too Western." He was also quite weak, both physically and mentally. He left the German Army after a brief stint, and in Afghanistan after 9/11 he complained about the physical conditions and questioned the purpose of the 9/11 attacks. See Cam Simpson, Stevenson Swanson and John Crewdson, "9/11 Suspect Cut Unlikely Figure in Terror Plot," *Chicago Tribune*, February 23, 2003.