RADICAL ISLAMISM AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR MUSLIM COMMUNITIES AND THE WAR ON TERRORISM

ANALYSIS FROM AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF RADICAL ISLAMISTS

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PREFACE

This paper resulted from four years of study into the background of the individuals and movement responsible for the attacks on the US homeland on September 11, 2001. While that date has been seared into the memories of Americans, it was not the first time that deadly attacks were carried out against Americans on American and foreign soils, by members of this movement. The first attack on the World Trade Center, the embassy bombings in Africa, the USS Cole incident in Yemen and the attack on the Khobar Tower in Saudi Arabia are all reflective of this implacable enemy, whose ideology we have come to know as Radical Islamism.

Since the researchers involved in the study have primarily business, science and engineering backgrounds, the approach taken was to gather data and allow it to lead the analysis to its logical conclusions. History, philosophy, religion and other factors provided background and context to the data and resultant analysis, but the data itself served to drive the analysis. We trust that this paper and others based on this continuing study of radical Islamists and their movement will contribute to the on-going efforts to understand and ultimately defeat this virulent ideology.

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Ozzie Paez
SE/CISSP

Loveland, Colorado
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INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to overlook the impact of the radical Islamist movement on modern, non-Muslim societies. The United States and its Western allies have spent hundreds of billions of dollars maintaining global pressure on violent radical Islamist organizations, while prosecuting multiple wars overseas. These efforts provide ample evidence of how the radical Islamist movement continues to affect Western secular democracies; what may not be fully understood is its influence on Islamic societies in general and Muslim communities in the West in particular. This paper presents an analysis based in part on the results of an on-going exploratory study of Muslims who have joined radical Islamist organizations, their backgrounds and the decision process, which ultimately led to their acceptance of the underlying ideology. The analysis considers the implications of the findings for Muslim communities in the West and the US led War on Terror.

DATA SOURCE

Simplicity Data Systems developed the data set through a two-year exploratory study of radical Islamists that captured information on their exposure to western culture, education and economic performance. To date, researchers have studied over three hundred known Islamists (candidates), from which 133 detailed profiles were developed. The selection process is based in part on each candidate's involvement in various aspects of the movement and how much individual historical-biographical information was available from open sources. Thus, generally speaking, the more significant and better-known individuals within the movement were included in the study's population.

This on-going study is different in several areas. First, it does not focus exclusively on terrorists, but on radical Islamists, whose ranks include, but are not limited to individuals who have participated or directly sponsored acts of violence. Second, it includes members of Islamist organizations dating back to the 1920s, providing a historical perspective on those who helped define the movement. Third, it focuses on Islamists and Islamist organizations throughout the world, not just the Middle East and the West, taking into account the movement's worldwide reach; and, fourth, it generally excludes those strictly involved in direct insurgencies against specific Western nations, including Palestinian (Israel) and Iraqi resistance/terrorist groups.

Thus, the study focuses on the Islamist ideology and its radical adherents, i.e. those who have shaped radical Islamism, fighting, promoting or supporting it philosophically, theologically, financially and politically. The results of the research are revealing in terms of what has and continues to attract some Muslims to these organizations and the value system through which the benefits and costs of membership are assessed.

Table one describes database membership, whose members are referred to as the Persons of Interest or POIs. The table is sorted in decreasing order by number of POIs per country. Thus Egypt is listed first because there are more Egyptian born Islamists in the data set than from any other country.

Table 1 - Number of POIs by Country of Birth – Descending Order

PLACE OF BIRTH	POIs	PLACE OF BIRTH	POIs
Egypt	20	Yemen	2
Saudi Arabia	17	India	2
United States	14	Lebanon	2
Palestine/Palestinian Territories	10	Malaysia	2
United Kingdom	7	Mauritania	1
Russia	5	Libya	1
Syria	5	Iran	1
Algeria	5	Jamaica	1
Indonesia	5	Australia	1
Kuwait	4	Belgium	1
Jordan	3	Comoros	1
Somalia	3	Ethiopia	1
Morocco	3	France	1
Pakistan	3	Germany	1
Philippines	2	Guyana	1
Sudan	2	United Arab Emirates	1
Tunisia	2	Tanzania	1
Turkey	2	**TOTAL**	**133**

Table two breaks down the sample population by religious affiliation. In this regard, no effort was made to find members of any particular affiliation, i.e. to find equal numbers of Sunni and Shia candidates. Candidate POIs were chosen in terms of their activities, without regard to which particular religious community they belonged. Members of the Wahabbi movement were separated due to their role in the attacks of 9/11, bin Laden's affiliation and their role funding radical activities and institutions, such as madrassas (religious schools), where radical Islamism is often preached.

Table 2 - Number of POIs by Religious Affiliation

AFFILIATION	POIs
Sunni	104
Wahabbi	22
Shia	4
Sufi	3

RESEARCH SCOPE AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The research, which preceded the development of the POI database, encompassed several years of investigations into Islamic history, jurisprudence, governance and culture. The research included Islamic and non-Islamic sources from academia, government, military and law enforcement. In parallel, policy questions were identified in order to define the scope of the POI profiles, which would guide the search through available open sources. These investigative profiles were then tested and fine tuned into detailed templates, which were in turn used by those searching for information on known activists. A number of fields in the templates required the development of standards for assessing a variety of factors, including education and living standards. Twice during the investigations the templates and standards were revised, resulting in the re-visiting of POI

information already in the database and edits to derived content in order to align all records with the revised standards.

The initial POI data set consisted of 100 entries extracted from approximately 300 candidate POIs. Reviews by several external experts resulted in additional research and the expansion of the database from 100 to the present 133 entries. These were intended to address concerns over the quantity, as opposed to the quality, of the information used in previous analysis. The additional entries did not markedly change the statistical distribution of the data set and did not change the basis or results from previous analysis. More entries are expected over the next year.

In addition to generating raw data for analysis, the research resulted in greater understanding of key aspects of Islamic history, culture, governance and other factors. It also contributed to the contextual assessment of the evolution of radical Islamist organizations in the 20th Century and their political implications for the Islamic world. Without that information, no judgment could have been made on the implication of disengagement and conflict resolution in places like Israel/Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan.

POLICY ON THE RELEASE OF POI INFORMATION

While some of the analysis resulting from the database have been and are being released, information on individual POIs has not been released into the public domain. The reason for this decision rests with the scope of the database, radical Islamists. Of necessity, conferring on an individual the classification of radical Islamist involves a measure of subjectivity. This is different from someone who has been convicted of terrorism or has been formally charged with involvement in terrorist activities by a formal government. Thus, names have been withheld since many POIs have not been convicted of engaging in criminal violent activities. In addition, the study did not focus on any individual but on the general decision-making process and factors employed by those who ultimately joined radical Islamist organizations.

DEFINITIONS

To guide the research, definitions of radical Islamism and radical Islamists were developed based on the work of various scholars, including Bernard Lewis and Paul Marshall, of Freedom House. The specific definitions used were ultimately derived from Mr. Marshall's Radical Islam's Rules, page xi. Radical Islamism is based on the Islamist ideology, which is a *"program for the restoration of a unified ummah, ruled by a new Caliphate, governed by reactionary shari'a law, and organized to wage jihad on the rest of the world"*. Radical Islamists are Muslims who support this program and are directly and actively involved in activities to support and carry it out.

MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN THE WEST
BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES TO INTEGRATION

Historical barriers to Muslim integration into Western secular societies have been documented by a variety of scholars, including Bernard Lewis[1] and Oliver Roy[2]. These barriers, which included religious edicts by Islamic scholars opposing Muslim residence in non-Muslim lands and Christian Europe's objections against the establishment of Islamic communities in their midst, effectively limited the migration of Muslims to traditionally Christian Europe. It was only after the Second World War that the combination of European need for cheap reconstruction labor and the dissolution of colonial rule opened the door to Muslim immigration through what were intended as temporary guest worker programs. As it often happens in history, two groups of people viewed the same reality through different eyes; one saw the guest program as a short term solution to short term

labor needs; the other saw it, or eventually came to see it, as a long term opportunity to improve their standard of living through permanent residence on European soil.

While the migration of poor and poorly uneducated Muslims was playing an important part in post-World War II European reconstruction, a different type of social exchange gained momentum as greater numbers of middle and upper class Arab, North African, Persian and Central Asian Muslims traveled to Europe and North America in pursuit of higher education. In practice, this meant a large increase in social interactions within secular Western nations between Muslims and non-Muslims across previous economic, political and educational barriers. In the six decades following the end of the great world war, a large cadre of Western educated political, military and business leaders matured into positions of power throughout much of the Arab world. At the same time, poor immigrant Muslim communities in Western Europe grew in numbers within an environment of separation and alienation from the nations that harbored them. Over time, however, many European born/raised Muslims managed to transcend the limitations of these communities and gain access to mainstream education, economic opportunity and secular-political power.

In the US, the history of Muslim communities has been much more successful, generally following traditional patterns of social acculturation and economic progress. The reasons offered for this disparity are many including the effects of the American Civil Rights Movement, anti-discrimination laws and a centuries long tradition of immigration. This perspective is shared by some activist European Muslims, including Arab European League founder Abou Jahjah, a Belgian citizen, who professed admiration for American integration and anti-discrimination laws: "America's race laws are more advanced than here… I have relatives in Detroit and they are Arab-Americans but they feel American. I don't feel European. Europe needs to make its concept of citizenship inclusive to all cultures and religions. I'm a practicing Muslim but I'm not a freak. I'm not a fundamentalist.[3]" Nevertheless, as the analysis will show, radical Islamism did find its way to North America and its members established cells intent on carrying violent jihad to the United States.

EFFICACY OF INTEGRATION AS A STRATEGY FOR MARGINALIZING ISLAMISM

Effective integration of Western Muslim communities into the greater Western secular tradition/societies has been promoted as an effective approach for constraining and limiting the spread of Islamism and its philosophy of radical political and often violent confrontation with Western democracies. An extension of this argument holds that the failure of democracy in predominantly Muslim countries of the Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia has denied many Muslims the opportunity to experience the benefits of elected government. Finally, poverty and limited economic opportunities have also been promoted as contributors to the growth of radical Islamism. Thus, effective, Western styled economic reform abroad and greater social, political and economic integration in the West are generally seen as direct contributors to improved living standards for Muslims and effective barriers to the adoption of radical Islamist ideology, particularly among the young.

TESTING THE INTEGRATION HYPOTHESES

To test the hypothesis of improved integration, education and living standards as barriers to the adoption of radical Islamist ideology, a number of topics were proposed for testing against the research population (database). Specifically, the following research questions were used to craft the necessary database queries:

- Is there a correlation between exposure to Western Culture and secular democracy and membership in radical Islamist organizations?

- Is there a correlation between educational achievement in general and education obtained in the West in particular, and membership in radical Islamist organizations?
- Is there a correlation between poverty and participation in radical Islamist organizations?

A contextual issue raised during the formulation of the research and analysis was the timeline of exposure and adoption of radical Islamist ideology by those who eventually joined radical Islamist groups. The question raised was whether radical Islamists are generally 'born' into the movement, through their families own involvement or are alternatively recruited much later in life. To explore this question, researchers explored the background of POIs profiled in the database to establish whether their involvement stemmed from early childhood. Ultimately, for most POIs, it became possible for researchers to effectively estimate the timeframe during which these individuals became actively involved with the radical Islamist movement. Once that information was obtained, the following questions were used to formulate the necessary database queries:

- Is there a positive correlation in the study population of radical Islamists with membership in families with direct ties to radical Islamist organizations? Were members of the study population essentially 'born' into the movement?

RESULTS

Of the sample population, 67% had been born in the West or had lived in the West for a minimum of nine months and were classified as having exposure to Western culture and secular democracy. Thus, the data suggests that exposure to Western culture and secular societies did not serve as effective barriers for Muslims who adopted radical Islamism and joined radical Islamist organizations. Instead, a positive correlation was found among Muslims who were members of radical Islamist organizations and exposure to the West and western secular societies.

Similarly, of the sample population, 64% had at least some College/University level academic training and 52% had received at least some of their education and training in Western countries. Thus, the data suggests that university level educational achievement did not serve as an effective barrier for Muslims who adopted radical Islamism and joined radical Islamist organizations, even when the education/training was obtained in the West. Instead, a positive correlation was found among Muslims who were members of radical Islamist organizations and higher educational achievement, including Western education/training.

With respect to economic achievement, of the sample population, 94% were members of the Upper Class (6.2%) or Middle Class (87.5%) measured with reference to their country of residence. Thus, the data suggests that higher economic performance did not serve as an effective barrier for Muslims who adopted radical Islamism and joined radical Islamist organizations. Instead, a positive correlation was found between membership in radical Islamist organizations and moderate to high economic achievement.

Taking into account the results described above, the issue of whether radical Islamists are born into the movement or recruited at some point in their lives was considered important because a strong positive correlation between being born into a radical family and membership in a radical Islamist organization would help explain why a negative correlation was not found between exposure to the West, high educational achievement and moderate to high economic performance and the adoption of radical Islamist ideology. Once again, the data failed to support the explanation that these individuals had essentially been born into radical families. Instead, the analysis found that 82 of the 133 members of the sample population (81.6%) had not been 'born' into the movement and had

instead become radicalized within 7 years of when their radical activities were first noticed and reported; similarly, 67 of 133 (50%) became radicalized within 5 years of when their radical activities were first noticed and reported.

ANALYSIS

The results of the analysis described above have implications for analyzing the motivation of Muslims who join radical Islamist organizations. Specifically, exposure to Western secular democracy, culture and education did not prove to be effective barriers to Muslims who adopted radical Islamism and joined radical Islamist organization. The analysis supports the conclusion that significant numbers of radical Islamists have precisely the background in exposure to secular democracy, education and economic performance, which is often assumed to mitigate membership in the movement. For the population studied as part of this research, the benefits offered by Western culture, secular democracy, modern education and economics were ultimately rejected in favor of an ideological program intent on destroying the very system that made many of the members economically and socially successful in the first place. This point becomes particularly salient, when one considers that over 37% of radical Islamists in the data set had been born in the US or the West.

Just as important to evaluating the motivation and decision making of Muslims who join radical Islamist organizations is the percentage of those who were not born into radical families. For the data set, 80% of the POIs were radicalized later in life and had not been born into families, who were members of such organizations. This number and the short time frames over which radicalization took place suggest that these individuals could not find a meaningful existence within the liberal confines of Western secularism, democracy and some version of moderate Islam. This correlation is reflective of the self-imposed segregation that is common among many traditional Muslim communities in Western Europe. The Turkish journalist Mustafa Akyol discussed this social conundrum in the article *European Muslims and the Quest for the Soul of Islam*:

> *Many immigrants tend to accept this separation. Older people try to maintain their traditional lifestyles in a foreign land. Many of their children adopt Western ways, but even they live with a peculiar sense of double alienation: neither the lands of their fathers nor the new countries of residence seem a true home to them[4]...*

The self-imposed isolation and lack of integration of Muslims in Western Europe is consistent with the doctrinal positions of many Muslim clerics and imams, who constantly frame Western civilization in natural opposition to Islam. This conclusion was validated during the research, which populated the database. Essentially, many clerics and imams held views, which consistently defined the relationship between the West and Islam in zero-sum terms, where continued prosperity and technological leadership by the West was portrayed as a direct threat to Islam's proper historical role as the religion with the one complete and full revelation of God's word. The analysis of the study population supports this conclusion since approximately 20% was composed of clerics and of these, 52% are or had been active jihadists. Mustafa Ayol's conclusions closely aligned with the findings of the research:

> *Another reason for this sense of homelessness is that these young European Muslims lack an interpretation of Islam that would be compatible with modern life. Many of them find a middle ground between Islamic traditions and Western lifestyles, but since those attempts do not have a doctrinal basis, they create a sense of guilt in people living at cultural crossroads. This guilt leads some of them to embrace the most radical interpretations — or rather misinterpretations — of Islam peddled by itinerant imams from Saudi-funded*

madrassas. Most of the 9/11 conspirators in Europe were just such born-again "neo-fundamentalists," to use the term introduced by Oliver Roy.[5]

IMPLICATIONS ON MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

The data set used in the analysis was not limited to Muslims living in Western Europe. The radical Islamists in the study came from many countries, yet shared remarkably similar backgrounds in exposure to secular societies, education and economic achievement. Their shared strategy at this point can be described as consisting of two objectives: (1) attacking and weakening the West and (2) concurrently working within traditionally Islamic societies to impose what Paul Marshall[6] defines as 'Radical Sharia Law'. Their efforts in traditionally Islamic countries have been framed by political activism combined with intimidation and often violence.

At the governance level, Radical Islamists insist on imposing social and economic policies, which would severely undermine technological and economic progress, particularly at a time of growing international economic integration. Many Islamist leaders and clerics do not view open cooperation and collaboration with non-Muslims as desirable. Given the high levels of education achieved by many radical Islamists, the data suggests that these individuals embrace the radical Islamist ideology with knowledge of the likely scientific and economic costs, which they are willing to endure. In other words, their decisions are not being guided by poor information and lack of exposure to the benefits of secular democracy, modernity and international cooperation. Theirs is an informed decision, even if warped by the blinding effects of radical ideology.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE IRAQ WAR, ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT AND WESTERN POLICIES

The analysis of the dataset suggests that success in Iraq and a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will not necessarily translate into the elimination of the radical Islamist movement. Nor would they guarantee stability and the election of pro-Western governments in the Islamic world in general and Arab world in particular. The research does suggest that even an apparent victory by the radicals against the West would raise their profile among new generations of Muslims and potentially fuel decades of continued violence and instability against Western democracies and friendly Islamic governments.

The basis for these implications may be found in the origins and growth of the international Islamist movement in the 1990s, which expanded its operational focus from predominantly Islamic countries to target the West, following the Soviet departure from Afghanistan. The perceived critical role played by the Arab-Afghans during the jihad against the Soviets continues to inspire young Muslims to the new jihad against the West. The research found that members of Islamist organizations perceive this struggle as an effective strategy for redressing Islam's comparatively weak position in the world. Finally, the failure of the jihadists to win a decisive victory in Central Europe during the Bosnian civil war and the mixed results achieved to date in the Caucasus have made winning against coalition forces in Iraq and Palestinian victory over Israel critically important to the long term vitality of the movement.

In summary, coalition success in Iraq, defined as the establishment of a generally stable and democratic Iraqi government, would deny the Islamists a much-needed repetition of their much-vaunted success against the Soviets in the Afghan war. Similarly, a negotiated solution between Israel and the Palestinian Authority would demonstrate that what the radicals have not won through violence, political leaders may at least partially achieve through negotiations. The trick is to define acceptable outcomes that are clearly beneficial to the West and the Muslim populations in those

areas. Alternatively, failure by the West in either theater is likely to translate into additional momentum for the radical Islamist movement, serving as powerful symbols for the radicalization of new generations of Muslims throughout the Arab world and beyond. Thus, from the perspective of US policy, it is not enough for Israel and the Palestinian Authority to find common ground and for the US to exit Iraq. Any agreement or resolution must clearly negate claims by radical Islamists that (1) it was their violence, which made Muslim victory possible and (2) that through additional violence both Israel and the West can be effectively defeated.

CONCLUSION

The exploratory empirical study of radical Islamists discussed above suggests that the secular democracies in the West are facing an ideological foe with significant appeal among Muslims who are well-educated, economically successful and highly familiar with western ideas of freedom and democracy. In practice, the results of the study support the conclusion that radical Islamists have rationally assessed the relationship between their value system and western secular values, and logically concluded that they cannot co-exist. While military and law enforcement efforts to defeat the most violent exponents of radical Islamism will continue for many years, defeating radicals in the field of battle should not be confused with winning the ideological struggle with their movement. To a large extent, that struggle will be fought within the larger Muslim community as it grapples with the influence and effects of the radical Islamist ideology, particularly among the young. Non-Muslims can provide indirect support to moderates, prosecute the most dangerous among the radicals and avoid unnecessary conflict with Islam, but they are unlikely to definitively settle the issue.

While radical Islamists have enjoyed some successes since September 11, 2001, those have been relatively few and far between. In many ways, the radical Islamist ideology, combined with conservative traditions, is having its greatest effects on Muslims and their communities by trapping them between modernity and a perceived necessity for doctrinal purity. Many moderate Muslims are fond of saying that Islamism is not based on recognized traditions and is thus inherently un-Islamic. It isn't so simple. The decentralized nature of Islam and lack of institutions with the power and influence to marginalize radical Islamism will make the task of defeating this virulent ideology even more formidable. Abdelwahab Meddeb captured the essence of the current quagmire in his description of the struggle at the heart of Islam:

> *…If fanaticism was the sickness in Catholicism, if Nazism was the sickness in Germany, then surely fundamentalism is the sickness in Islam. This is my thesis. That said, I do not, however intend to claim that there is a good and an evil Islam, that one has to honor the one and denounce the other. Nor do I insinuate that fundamentalism is a deformation of Islam. In Islam, there is no institution that legitimates absolute doctrinal magisterium[7]…*

For the West in general and America in particular, the research conducted and the data obtained as part of this study suggests that the current struggles with radical Islamist groups are likely to continue through generations to come. The War on Terrorism, Afghanistan and Iraq may not even be the end of the beginning, to paraphrase Churchill. The frontlines will continue shift as they have over the past two decades, from Afghanistan to Bosnia, then Chechnya, America, Bali, Iraq, Spain, London, India and Israel. Through it all, the research suggests that the West and its allies will have to remain always alert, sometimes aggressive, consistently supportive of moderates and generally patient, while helping to create a space where Islam can come to terms with the radical forces in its midst, without embroiling much of the world in a zero-sum War of Civilizations.

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