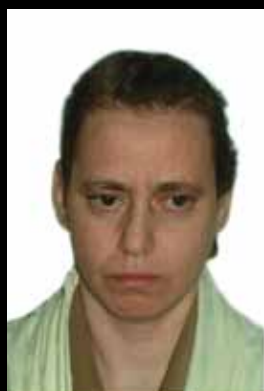


# OBSTACLES



# TO PROFILING

# THOUGH EXTREMISTS SHARE ATTRIBUTES, DEVELOPING A UNIVERSALLY ACCEPTED PROFILE TO PRE-EMPT VIOLENCE IS DIFFICULT

By per Concordiam Staff

**R**ahman and Lamine Adam are two British brothers of Algerian parentage who spent their teen years immersed in an ultra-orthodox mosque in London. Rahman, less political and vociferous than his brother, reportedly enjoyed soccer, smoking and dating, while Lamine adopted the guise of a political firebrand and committed radical. Nevertheless, it was Rahman Adam whom British police arrested in connection with a terrorist plot and sentenced to 20 years in prison in 2007. A series of raids known as Operation Crevice implicated Adam in a conspiracy to explode fertilizer bombs to kill civilians in nightclubs, a shopping center and synagogues.

Some academics who followed the case have recounted the story to illustrate how two closely related individuals steeped in the same radical environment could turn out differently. “Conventional wisdom fails to explain how one brother became a terrorist and the other did not,” wrote Jonathan Githens-Mazer and Robert Lambert in a 2010 *International Affairs* article. “If identity issues and exposure to ‘extremist’ ideas are causal factors in the one case, why wasn’t this combination equally causal for both brothers?” But deeper analysis revealed more to the story. Lamine Adam, while not directly blamed for the fertilizer bomb plot, was likely a key figure in instigating his younger brother to commit violence and had personally inquired about bomb-making. In fact, Lamine shook off the British agents who had been monitoring him and fled the country as a fugitive.

The debate over the Adams brothers’ relative culpability illustrates the tortuous process by which academics, governments, militaries and intelligence agencies have tried to establish a universally accepted profile to predict and prevent violent extremism. Are terrorists mainly romantics with a violent streak who find glamour and purpose in causing death and destruction, or is their extremism more a product of ideological or religious zealotry? Are they underprivileged people from unstable countries lashing out against symbols of power or sons

and daughters of privilege from seemingly normal families? How much of a role – if at all – does mental illness play in shaping violent extremism? And finally, what is the ethical dividing line between a “sayer” – a radical who instigates rather than perpetrates violence – and a “doer” – the foot soldier who maims and kills in the name of the sayer’s cause?

Complicating the profiling process is the fact that the world has yet to agree upon a definition of terrorism itself. The United States, for example, defines terrorism as “the unlawful use of force and violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.” On the other hand, the European Union appears to maintain a higher threshold for declaring an incident terrorism based on its level of seriousness. It says terrorism is an act that “may seriously damage a country or an international organisation where committed with the aim of: seriously intimidating a population; or unduly compelling a Government or international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act; or seriously destabilising or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organisation.” In practice, however, North America and Europe rarely disagree over characterizing an act as “terrorism.”

“It is not only individual agencies within the same governmental apparatus that cannot agree on a single definition of terrorism. Experts and other long-established scholars in the field are equally incapable of reaching a consensus,” wrote terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman, director of the Center for Security Studies at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

## Universal attributes

Dr. Adam Dolnik, professor at the Marshall Center, has drawn upon widespread research, including site visits to some of the world’s most conflict-ridden places, to assemble a list of

Spanish police released this composite of suspects a few days after the March 2004 Madrid train bombings. The different backgrounds of those involved in violent extremism make advance profiling difficult.

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

“universal attributes” he believes define violent extremists. In Dolnik’s view, terrorists are frustrated people nurturing feelings of humiliation armed with an optimistic belief in their power to affect change through violence. In a narrow sense, they share emotional profiles with soldiers and policemen: Both groups are action oriented, idealistic and affiliated with the use of violence for causes they feel are justified. Likewise, violent extremists can attach themselves to causes out of a sense of camaraderie, to be part of a conspiratorial and countercultural heroic enterprise. Late 20th-century left-wing European terrorist movements such as Italy’s Red Brigade and Germany’s Baader Meinhof gang fit that mold. “Terrorists are human,” Dolnik explained. “They are not some machines that are impossible to understand.”

Maajid Nawaz observed that even supposedly Muslim religious movements such as al-Qaida have adopted Marxist and fascist organizing principles. Nawaz, chairman of the United Kingdom’s Quilliam Foundation, a counterextremist group founded by former Muslim radicals, said such groups graft the Marxist concept of a dispossessed international proletariat onto the world’s devout Muslims. The result is the militant belief in the existence of a modern, politicized Ummah (Muslim community of the faithful) that must free itself of foreign and alien influences. Within that ideological framework, Nawaz said, these extremists also exhibit a familiar catalogue of psychological motivations: grievances, identity crises and susceptibility to recruitment from charismatic leaders.

“It’s deeply ironic that Islamist and anti-Islam extremist groups have a symbiotic relationship with each other, feeding off each other’s paranoia and propaganda: far-right extremism, Islamism, more far-right extremism, more Islamism and so on,” Nawaz wrote on his website. “Islamaphobes and Islamists have this much in common: Both groups insist that Islam is a totalitarian political ideology at odds with liberal democracy.”

## Misconceptions

A popular belief persists that economic grievance is a primary cause of violent extremism, a view dating back to the origin of the term “terrorism” during the French Revolution. According to this theory, the underprivileged, particularly those living in undemocratic societies without outlets at the ballot box, resort to violence to force political change. Ironically, the French Revolution ultimately supports the opposite argument since, images of the storming of the Bastille notwithstanding, its leaders emerged mostly from the educated upper middle class.

Dr. Marc Sageman, a former CIA operative and forensic psychiatrist who conducted a landmark study of more than 400 captured militant jihadists, determined that three-quarters came from upper- or middle-class homes in which intact marriages were the rule. Nearly two-thirds had

attended college. Before they turned to violence, many militants had been models of integration, seemingly comfortable with Western culture. The presence of millionaires’ sons and physicians among the leadership of al-Qaida is further evidence minimalizing poverty’s role in radicalization.

Poverty is a pretext for many violent extremists, according to Dr. Karin Von Hippel, an expert on regional conflict, peacekeeping and counterterrorism who has worked for the United Nations, the EU and the U.S. government. But she cautioned against being overly dismissive of terror-poverty links. “Perceived poverty” or “relative deprivation” – the sense that one country or element of society benefits unjustly in the division of spoils – can be real motivators for extremism even if the radical himself isn’t poor. Furthermore, militants such as the Taliban in Afghanistan exploit economic conditions when they lure foot soldiers to their movements with promises of steady paychecks.

Studies appear even more conclusive when it comes to whether violent extremists are mentally ill. Despite the emotionalism inherent in much violent extremism, few adherents are mentally debilitated (brainwashed child soldiers in places such as sub-Saharan Africa being among the prominent exceptions). Within their own oftentimes fanatical world views, terrorists see their violent exploits as reasonable. Experts caution that efforts to treat violent extremism as a mental illness can simply create “well-adjusted terrorists.” Sageman has said he identified fewer than five sociopaths or psychopaths among the 400 terrorists he studied.

Similarly, most violent extremists don’t have a background of criminality that would predict future outbursts of violence. And when they do – as in the case of at least one of the 2004 Madrid train bombers who came to Spain as a drug dealer – their initial secularism may have prevented authorities from recognizing them as religious radicals. “Perhaps no theory could have predicted Jamal Ahmidan, a mastermind of the Madrid bombings,” *The New York Times* wrote after the attacks. “He was a feisty drug dealer with a passion for motorcycles and a weakness for Spanish women. His fellow plotters from the old neighborhood in Morocco included petty criminals.”

None of this means a behavioral examination of violent extremism is irrelevant. A major UK counterextremism project notes that personality changes, intensified religiosity, withdrawal from family life, arguments with friends and increased secrecy can be hallmarks of a budding extremist. (Admittedly, nonviolent adolescents are prone to many of the same phases). A counterextremist approach that addresses psychology and morality – pinpointing the human costs of planted bombs and sprays of gunfire – can alter perceptions. In one British anecdote, a Provisional Irish Republican Army “soldier” renounced violence in disgust after his comrade bragged about murdering a pregnant policeman.



Bulgarian Muslim children recite verses from the Quran in Lazhuitsa in 2012. Bulgarian prosecutors indicted the village's imam and 12 others on charges of setting up a branch of the radical Saudi-based Al Waqf-Al Islami foundation.

AFP/GETTY IMAGES

### Sayers versus doers

In trying to establish a universally adaptable profile of violent extremists, one of the biggest struggles is differentiating between the activists who carry out violence and the ideological spokesmen who inspire them. At what point does a radical cease being an eccentric with nonconformist views and become a physical danger to society? When should a government act to pre-empt violent words from becoming violent deeds? Such questions are vital not just to pinpointing future trouble but to determining how far “upstream” counterradicalization efforts should flow.

Nawaz warned of the harmful effects of societal “mood music” – radical propaganda, clerical exhortations and media imagery – in which some violent extremists immerse themselves. In some Middle Eastern countries, this mood music can fill the vacuum left by failing institutions, and even in the EU such questions are increasingly relevant as organized Christianity loses its ability to produce social and moral cohesion.

Studies have shown that radicalization is usually a social process, not a solitary endeavor. Friends will join violent movements collectively and enlist more friends and relatives. This bonding exercise is fostered by alienation among unintegrated immigrant groups in Europe. Sageman has developed the concept of “social entrepreneurs”: activists and theoreticians who harness moral outrage over perceived injustices and steer it

toward violence. Religious fanatics can provide the appealing narrative impelling followers to act, supplying godly armor to justify the slaughter of innocents normally forbidden in sacred texts. Britain and France have increasingly focused counterradicalization efforts on some of their countries’ more objectionable “sayers,” deporting militant imams whose sermons and writings were blamed for instigating violence.

### The limits of profiling

Critics insist the use of behavioral and cultural stereotypes to identify terrorists before they strike is largely futile. Githens-Mazer and Lambert have dubbed the mood music theory an “existential red herring” with little bearing on what leaves one listener indifferent and another frothing with rage. Many who take up arms against imaginary enemies, particularly in the most recent wave of terrorists, do so more out of a false sense of heroism than out of religious piety. In such cases, looking for violent extremists amongst the pious can become a fool’s errand. When it comes to anticipating and countering violent extremism, there are few substitutes for good intelligence and police work. Profiling shortcuts generally don’t work. Said Sageman: “The inability of specific factors, singly or in combination, to distinguish future mujahedin from nonmujahedin limits our ability to make statements that are specific to terrorists.” □