



Activists carry signs and shout anti-Taliban slogans during a protest in Lahore, Pakistan, in April 2009.

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Unmasking Terrorism

Religious and government leaders put a damper on al-Qaida and Taliban recruitment

After more than a decade of using religion to justify terrorist attacks, al-Qaida is facing a growing number of Muslims who consider its philosophy, motivations and membership to be disreputable. Many Islamic experts argue that these extremists represent a movement that tarnishes what they consider to be a virtuous religion. Scholars contend that al-Qaida and Taliban recruiters play not just on religious naiveté and faulty religious convictions, but on basic desires among young men for rough camaraderie and financial gain. In the case of the Taliban, raw financial calculation has come increasingly into play, as radical Muslim leaders entice recruits with pay far in excess of that offered by the Afghan Army. For opponents of al-Qaida and the Taliban, drawing attention to these less-than-pious motivations could be just as important as conventional counterterrorism.

Islamic leaders can provide much of the material needed to toxify the al-Qaida brand. Sheikh Muhammad Sayed Tantawi, grand sheikh of Al-Azhar University in Cairo for 14 years before his death in March 2010, was one of the most prominent and respected moderate voices in the Sunni Muslim world. He denounced attacks on civilian targets and called extremism anti-Islamic. As head of Sunni Islam's most prestigious theological institute, Tantawi's opinions and fatwa wield tremendous moral influence and are widely respected. Tantawi called suicide bombers "enemies of Islam" and spoke out against the use of the word "jihad" by extremist groups, noting vast differences in its interpretation. "It is not appropriate to link Islam to terrorism and destruction," Tantawi told Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Tajik Service in October 2009. "Terrorism

means destroying lives of peaceful people, and all religions and humanity condemn it."

Terrorist recruitment

Understanding why one joins an extremist group is an important step in counter-recruitment. According to an international report by the Rand Corporation titled "Al-Qaida: Terrorist Selection and Recruitment," psychological vulnerabilities conducive to terrorist recruitment include a high level of distress or dissatisfaction, cultural disillusionment, lack of inner belief or a value system, a dysfunctional family system, and dependent personality tendencies.

Recognizing extremist group recruitment methods and countering them with effective communication strategies may also hinder al-Qaida's growth. An August 2008 Centre for European Policy Studies article, "Al Qaeda in the

An Indian Muslim prays at the start of an Islamic peace conference in Mumbai in 2009. The conference focused on presenting Islam as a peaceful religion.



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Taliban fighters in western Herat province turn in weapons to Afghan police in November 2009 after President Hamid Karzai offered amnesty to Islamic militants willing to lay down their arms.

West as a Youth Movement: The Power of a Narrative,” described al-Qaida’s use of a powerful narrative. It can be broken into four parts: an appeal to the [Ummah], the worldwide Muslim community; a call to individuals to become heroes; enlistment of religion; and initiating recruits to fight against the global order. “With respect to these four dimensions of the narrative, it is clear that Al Qaeda would not have such an impact without the amplification effect of the media,” the report stated.

The CEPS report also recommended downplaying al-Qaida as a religious organization, magnifying the group’s failures and exposing the radicals as losers with no future rather than all-powerful freedom fighters. Additionally, efforts to advance democracy, promote freedom of speech, and reduce poverty and corruption could help reduce the number of recruits.

In July 2010, al-Qaida attempted to expand recruiting beyond its traditional borders with an online magazine called Inspire. “Make a Bomb in your Kitchen of Your Mom” and “Sending and Receiving Encrypted Messages” were two articles that appeared. The online publication initially had technical troubles, and only three pages of the 67-page magazine were readable, with the remainder showing only garbled text, the United Kingdom’s *Guardian* reported. “This new magazine is clearly intended for the aspiring jihadist in the U.S. or U.K. who may be the next Fort Hood murderer or Times Square bomber,” said Brian Riedel, current scholar at the Brookings Institute. Internet propaganda has worked in the past with at least two Americans, Bryant Neal Vinas and Najibullah Zazi. Both are admitted al-Qaida terrorists who connected with the group while in New York and then traveled to Pakistan for terrorist training.

Encouraging defections

Economics also can play a part in one’s decision to join violent Islamic extremists. Taliban fighters are paid \$10 a day, according to Britain’s *Telegraph* newspaper, compared with \$4 a day for Afghan police officers. “The



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– Sheikh Muhammad Sayed Tantawi

so-called ‘\$10 Taliban’ are said to fight for a day rate because they need the money and have ‘nothing else to do,’” the *Telegraph* reported. The article suggested some Taliban militants aren’t hard-core Islamic militants but unemployed men with few opportunities.

“Reconcilable” Taliban commanders are being approached in hopes that they will take the offer, according to the *Guardian*. Gen. Richard Barrons, head of the NATO team working to reintegrate former insurgents, said in a *Telegraph* article in January 2010 that he expected to see Taliban commanders take senior positions within President Hamid Karzai’s administration in the future. Most jobs for former Taliban fighters, the *Telegraph* says, are expected to be in security services, as part of local militias.

In addition to this initiative, Heinz Fromm of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Germany’s domestic intelligence agency, announced in June 2010 the launch of a telephone hot line for militant Islamists who want to leave extremist groups, according to *Der Spiegel* magazine. Multilingual specialists will be available to counsel in Turkish, Arabic or German, Fromm said. Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere described the program as a “valuable preventative effort.”

In 2009, Germany saw a 5 percent rise in radical Islamist group supporters and members from the previous year. Some of these recruits were young Germans newly converted to Islam. De Maiziere attributed this phenomenon to feelings of loss, insecurity and inferiority during puberty, which can make young converts susceptible to radical Islamic groups.

New anti-terror voices

A growing trend of young Islamic televangelists in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East may help this demographic escape the grasp of extremists. Young imams such as

Ahmad al-Shugairi, Amr Khaled and Moez Masoud appeal to a young audience, estranged from politics and traditional religion, yet eager for religious identity. Shugairi mixes deep religious commitment with trendy, playful humor. Conveying a moderate message, they say, is the best way to fight Islamic extremism.

Masoud, a 29-year-old Egyptian Muslim televangelist preacher purports that Islam does not justify terrorism. “There is nothing inherent in Islam that would justify terrorism, and that it is completely anti-ethical to the teachings of its tradition...,” Masoud said in a March 2008 debate hosted by The Doha Debates, a public forum for dialogue and freedom of speech in Qatar. Masoud’s mission has taken on great importance as terrorists misinterpret what he considers to be a peaceful faith. “It scares me,” the *Telegraph* reported Masoud saying in February 2008. “It scares me because you can build so much and they just tear it down so quickly. But we can get over it. I really believe that.”

Khaled, another Egyptian Muslim televangelist, takes on Osama bin Laden. “Bin Laden is saying he is talking on behalf of Muslims,” Khaled said in an Islamonline article. “Who asked him to talk on behalf of us? Nobody. But now I’m talking on behalf of millions. They asked me to carry their voice to the world. So please, please listen to these people. Right now the extremists are a minority, but if you don’t do anything, they will be a majority.”

In the end, extremism is fought on many grounds. An article titled “Letter from Afghanistan: Al-Qaeda is a corruption of Islam,” published by the Middle Eastern Kabul Press in February 2010 says: “Despite the hard facts of al-Qaida and the Taliban’s criminal actions in Islamic countries and elsewhere, some people are ignoring that these are terrorist organizations — corruptions of Islam — and should not be seen as representative of the Muslim faith.” □