INTER-UNIVERSITY CENTER
FOR
TERRORISM
STUDIES

Terrorism: An Electronic Journal and Knowledge Base

Volume I, Issue 1

A Narrative of Heroes
In the Head of the Contemporary Jihadist

Author:
Michael Fredholm
South and Central Asian Studies, Stockholm University

August 2012

A Narrative of Heroes

In the Head of the Contemporary Jihadist

Michael Fredholm

South and Central Asian Studies, Stockholm University

Why? Well, I suppose it was simply the need I was feeling to fill that void I had created for myself.

American convert to Islam and Al-Qaida spokesman, Adam Gadahn (b. 1978)[1]

False words are not only evil in themselves, but they infect the soul with evil.

Phaedo, by Plato (c.428-348 BC)

Abstract

The contemporary jihadist often lives in the West, perhaps as a second-generation immigrant or convert, or in another fairly secular environment such as post-Soviet Central Asia. He likely knows little or no Arabic, and is not an Islamic scholar. For him, religion and ideology are primarily used as an after-the-fact justification and legitimization for violent acts and could more accurately be referred to as the effect rather than cause of jihadism. For those who wish to take action, indignation over perceived injustice and the decision to engage in armed jihad often precede both ideological awareness and religious justification. Far more important is the narrative: a conviction that a worldwide struggle between good and evil, between justice and injustice, and between true Muslims and enemies of Islam is taking place. The world is hanging in the balance, and heroes are needed. Two conclusions can be drawn. First, it seems unlikely that young jihadists can be deradicalised through religious deradicalisation programmes. Second, an understanding of the importance of the narrative as a cause for jihadist terrorism may suggest a more constructive way of dealing with the problem. It is difficult or impossible to argue against a religion or ideology without alienating its followers. To fight a narrative is easier. If young extremists crave an inspiring narrative; then a suitably positive one should be provided that enables action and heroism but does not involve terrorism.

* * *

There is no single root cause for terrorism, and more than one path may lead an individual into the life of a terrorist. Some of those who turn to terrorism do so because they have been traumatised by life in a war zone and seek revenge, or because joining a terrorist group offers better economic and social incentives than might be available elsewhere; although such individuals tend to end up in guerrilla-like insurgent movements instead of pure terrorist groups. A few unique individuals might choose to engage in terror for ideological reasons or to achieve limited political gains, but if so, these seem to be a distinct minority. This paper will not deal with any of those reasons why people turn to terrorism.

Our purpose here is to examine the mind and soul of that other, increasingly common type of terrorist. He, or sometimes she, often lives in the West, perhaps as a second-generation immigrant or a convert to Sunni Islam, or in another fairly secular environment such as post-Soviet Central Asia. He

[1] Yahiye Adam Gadahn, *Yahiye Adam Gadahn's Conversion Story* (Islamic Network, www.islamicnetwork.com, 7 March 2010).

most likely knows little or no Arabic, and is not an Islamic scholar. He has not lived through wars or armed conflicts, has not been traumatised by life in a war zone, does not suffer from any particular economic or social deprivation, and has little interest in ideology, at least before he decides to commit to the cause of terrorism. In short, our purpose is to examine the mind and soul of the contemporary Sunni Islamic extremist who turns to terrorism. The last is a necessary qualifier. Extremist religious views are not always translated into political actions—and even if they are, engaging in terrorism is not necessarily the automatic response. As long as somebody with religious inclinations sits at home thinking of the divine, his opinions, however extreme they might be, are a matter of theology, not political acts that affect the society in which he lives and the life of his fellow man.[2]

However, if the extremist turns to preaching hatred, incites others into taking up arms, or himself grabs a gun or a suicide vest with the intention to kill, then his beliefs have been translated into political acts. His then becomes the cause of Islamist terrorism, that is, jihadism.[3]

Even so, neither religion nor ideology forms the key to understand this particular type of terrorism. Ideology is seldom sufficient in itself to inspire Islamic extremists into acts of terrorism.[4] It is among this type of terrorists neither a cause nor a precondition of terrorism. Its function is secondary or even virtually none. Ideology is primarily used as an after-the-fact justification and legitimization for violent acts.

However, when the individual has already taken a decision to engage in terrorism, there is plenty of ideological inspiration. Globalisation plays a role to the effect that inspiration has become available throughout the world. Since 2010, the primary aim of the English-language online publication *Inspire* of Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula was to justify and inspire individuals in the West to carry out acts of terrorism, often as lone actors—that is, to become jihadists.

Religion, Ideology, and the Infallibility of the Terrorist's Mind

To the jihadist, there is no difference between religion and ideology. As one Guantanamo prisoner explained it: "To me religion and politics is the same. They do not differ from each other. You could say that religion is also sort of a political ideology."[5]

The same indifference between religion and ideology could be concluded from the 1999 declaration of jihad by the Uzbek terrorist group, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Although written in Arabic and signed by Zubayr ibn Abdur Raheem, a somewhat mysterious individual who appears to have been a Saudi Wahhabi of Uzbek origin and whom the IMU subsequently claimed was a

---

[2] The definition of Islamic extremism adopted here is the one proposed by the Council of the Muftis (Islamic religious leaders) of Russia on 30 June 2000. The Council then singled out as extremist those movements that (1) rejected the basic Islamic traditions, (2) claimed the right to brand as "non-Muslims" traditional believers who happened to disagree with their interpretation of Islamic law, and (3) claimed the right to kill "infidels" including traditional Muslims who had failed to side with them. Michael Fredholm, *Islamic Extremism as a Political Force in Central Asia: A Comparative Study of Central Asian Extremist Movements* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, Asian Cultures and Modernity 12, 2006), 5.

[3] Islamist terrorism is here defined as terrorism derived from radical political ideology based on a belief that Islam is the only solution to society's shortcomings. This ideology, Islamism, is closely linked with Sunni Islamic extremism. Needless to say, not all Islamists turn to violence. However, many do choose to engage in what they refer to as armed jihad. When jihad is in support of Islamism, it will here be referred to as jihadism in order to distinguish the activity from the Islamic theological concept of *jihad*.

[4] Christianne J. de Poot; Anne Sonnenschein; et al., *Jihadi Terrorism in the Netherlands: A Description Based on Closed Criminal Investigations* (The Hague: WODC, 2011), 16.

[5] The cited Guantanamo prisoner was Slimane Hadj Abderrahmane, a Danish citizen of Algerian origin who took part in jihad in Algeria and Afghanistan. Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen, *The Attractions of Jihadism: An Identity Approach to Three Danish Terrorism Cases and the Gallery of Characters around Them* (Dissertation, University of Copenhagen, 2008), 158; citing and translating Hans Davidsen-Nielsen and Matias Seidelin, *Danskeren på Guantánamo: Den personlige beretning* (Copenhagen: Politiken, 2004), 27.

descendant of the Mangit family which once ruled Bukhara in today's Uzbekistan, it contained but little religious content. In fact, there were only four references to the Koran, and of these, only three were properly referenced. Besides, the only Koran reference that seemed to have a bearing on the reasons for the declaration of jihad was the first, which headed the text: "And fight them until there is no more *fitnah* (strife; diversity of belief) and the religion is all for Allah" (*Al Anfaal* 39). Furthermore, while the declaration of jihad was signed by Zubayr ibn Abdur Raheem, the text stated that the jihad was declared by Tohir Yo'ldosh (1967-2009), in his capacity as *amir* (leader) of the group, and that the decision had been taken following agreement by the religious leadership of the IMU. The text was far more political than religious in nature. The declaration of jihad concluded that there was "clear evidence" on the obligation of jihad against the infidels as well as on the obligation to liberate the lands and the people of the Muslim community. However, the declaration never properly explained why this was so, or what the "clear evidence" was.[6]

In 2002, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), founded by Najmiddin Jalolov (1972-2009), split from the IMU. The IJU wanted an emphasis on global jihad and increased cooperation with Al-Qaida. In 2004, the IJU claimed responsibility for a series of co-ordinated suicide bombing attacks in Tashkent against the American and Israeli embassies and the office of the Uzbekistani Prosecutor General. The statement also formed the group's declaration of jihad. The beginning of the statement mirrored the 1999 declaration of jihad by the IMU in that it repeated the quote from the Koran: "And fight them until there is no more *fitnah* and the religion is all for Allah" (*Al Anfaal* 39). Yet the declaration contained no other religious references.[7]

The indifference between religion and political ideology was significant, because Uzbek extremist and terrorist groups soon formed a key destination for jihadist recruits from Europe, Turkey, and the former Soviet Union. Some came to stay and die in the struggle for Afghanistan and Pakistan, while others were no more than jihad tourists who after a while returned to their native countries. Mere faith in the righteousness of the cause, and statements sprinkled with Islamic vocabulary but with little religious content, proved sufficient to inspire willing recruits from several, widely different cultural backgrounds. Characterised by little knowledge of Arabic and a background in regions that were predominantly secular, the jihadist recruits at first had little in common. Group dynamics enabled potential recruits first to radicalize, then to prepare themselves psychologically for battle and death for each other and the cause. The armed struggle seemingly became a goal in itself and may no longer have been regarded as a means to build an Islamic society. Religious reflection and motivation was exchanged for faith in the righteousness of one's comrades, the group, and its cause, and participation in armed jihad became not one among several religious activities, but the one religious act that was believed to lead to salvation. Indeed, the influence of the IMU and IJU have resulted in the dissemination of common ideas, ideology, and most importantly, narrative among jihadists in Central Asia and Europe.

For the jihadists, ideology—and thus religion—could more accurately be referred to as an effect rather than a cause of violent jihadism. For those who wished to take action, indignation over perceived injustice and the decision to engage in armed jihad often preceded both ideological awareness and ideological or religious justification.[8] As will be shown, few jihadists felt individual deprivation or humiliation because of their faith, yet they wished to take action on behalf of their deprived and humiliated brothers and sisters—no doubt more of an after-the-fact justification for terrorism than a before-the-fact motivating factor.[9] Armed jihad also served as justification for the smuggling of narcotics out of Afghanistan, from which the Uzbek groups profited.[10]

---

[6] Michael Fredholm, "From the Ferghana Valley to Waziristan and Beyond," *Islam, Islamism and Politics in Eurasia Report* 22 (Monterey Institute for International Studies, 2010), which also reproduces the declaration of jihad.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Hemmingsen, *Attractions of Jihadism*, 170. Hemmingsen notes three such cases: Slimane Hadj Abderrahmane, Hammad Khurshid, and a convert, Eric Breininger. All three, on separate occasions, went in search for a group that could take them into armed jihad. The geographical location of the jihad (Algeria, Chechnya, Afghanistan) mattered not, only the access to combat mattered.

[9] Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 73.

[10] Michael Fredholm, "From the Ferghana Valley."

In fact, ideology was something that was used rather than followed. It did not cause actions or decisions, it was merely drawn upon when convenient. If one Islamic scholar refused a *fatwa* (religious verdict, a formal legal opinion or decision of traditional religious scholars (*ulama*) on a matter of Islamic law) to justify a desired action, the jihadist would merely go to another, until he received the desired justification. So did, for instance, jihadists in the North Caucasus when they did not get the desired *fatwa* from traditional *ulama* in the Caucasus instead turn to extremist *ulama* in the Middle East.[11]

The jihadist has the tools for the job. For centuries, a key concept in the Islamic vocabulary of modernism was the right to independent analysis (*ijtihad*) of the Koran and *Sunnah* (custom or norm of conduct, the normative custom of the Prophet or the early Islamic community) instead of having to rely on the opinions of preceding generations of *ulama*. Although most *ulama* indeed regard the door of *ijtihad* to have closed after the formulation of the four common legal schools of Islam, the *mujtahid* (rightful practitioner of *ijtihad*) refuses to be bound by earlier views and rulings and former interpreters of Islam. The *mujtahid* indeed sees a need to undermine their authority so that Islam can be restored to what he believes it was, and always should be.[12]

For the modern jihadist, whether or not he is aware of the Islamic scholarship involved, *ijtihad* is a key to how he understands the world. It is not, in actual fact, the Koran, Prophetic Tradition, *Sunnah*, or any other idea or ideology which guides him or her. What is significant is the *individual's* reading and interpretation of these various sources of knowledge. This implies "that the sources do not determine the individual's analyses of them neither do they influence how the individual acts on the sources. The individual's reading and the analyses of the sources are what guide the individual's actions. . . . The attribution of credibility to oneself is a substantial attraction because of the circular line of reasoning which appears from it: what feels right to the individual is right because the individual is right and has Allah on his or her side."[13]

In the words of the American convert to Islam and Al-Qaida member, Adam Gadahn (b. 1978), when he in his 2010 English-language video *A Call to Arms* urged jihadists to strike targets that were close to them and praised the November 2009 attack on his fellow soldiers by the United States Army Muslim officer Nidal Malik Hasan: "Brother Nidal . . . knew that on the day of Judgment, all the Ulama, Mullas, Muftis and Imams of this world put together would be incapable of saving him from divine retribution were he to have blindly followed their permissions and prohibitions in contravention of what he knew—in his heart of hearts and through honest research and careful study—to be Allah's ruling and decree."[14]

This logic of applied *ijtihad* even determines why modern tools and weapons such as the Internet and the assault rifle are permissible, despite the general need felt by Islamic extremists to discard innovation. The jihadists do not need to feel that they are compromising, since they "saw themselves as being fully capable of judging how to use such innovations in a good way—because of the circular line of reasoning."[15] Or, to put it in Islamic terms, because of the individual's right to *ijtihad*.

---

[11] So did, e.g., the Caucasus Emirate web site, www.islamdin.com, on 9 January 2010 publish the May 2003 *fatwa* by the Saudi sheikh Nasir al-Fahd (b. 1968) on legal justifications for the use of weapons of mass destruction against infidels. As far as is known, no Islamic scholar in the Caucasus ever justified the use of weapons of mass destruction. The use of the *fatwa* in justification of such weapons is all the more interesting since Nasir al-Fahd by then had rejected this and other *fatawi* in support of violence. *Islam, Islamism and Politics in Eurasia Report* 23 (Monterey Institute for International Studies, 2010). Besides, and despite the long tradition of Islamic scholarship particularly in Daghestan, the *amir* of the Caucasus Emirate, Doku Umarov (b. 1964), has tended to seek support from Middle Eastern religious scholars such as the Jordanian sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and the Syrian sheikh Abu Baseer at-Tartusi instead of local ones. See, e.g., *Islam, Islamism and Politics in Eurasia Report* 24 (Monterey Institute for International Studies, 2010).

[12] Michael Fredholm, *Islam and Modernity in Contemporary Central Asia: Religious Faith versus Way of Life* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, Asian Cultures and Modernity 14, 2007), 23-4.

[13] Hemmingsen, *Attractions of Jihadism*, 230.

[14] Adam Gadahn, *A Call to Arms* (As-Sahab, 7 March 2010), transcript, Public Intelligence web site (http://publicintelligence.net), 17 March 2010; with link to video.

[15] Hemmingsen, *Attractions of Jihadism*, 230.

Jihadists with some level of religious training know and refer to the term *ijtihad*. Those without such training may be unfamiliar with the Arabic term but have been taught how the concept works. To the terrorist, his or her mind is infallible. The terrorist considers his or her actions right because the terrorist considers him- or herself righteous and therefore right.

Empirical Data on the Life Trajectories of Islamic Extremists in Western Societies

What do we really know about the contemporary Islamic extremist in Western societies? There are few evidence-based studies and empirical data remain scarce.[16] However, some exist. Marc Sageman has shown that the stereotype that terrorists who justify their actions through Islamic extremist thought are poor, angry, and fanatically religious is a myth. The terrorists in his sample of 172 individuals were generally middle-class, educated young men from caring and religious families.[17] They were young but not particularly young. Their average age upon joining the jihad was 25 to 26 years. Most were expatriates away from home and family, such as students, workers, or refugees. Another major group consisted of second-generation citizens in France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.[18] Most did not suffer from long-term relative deprivation.[19] The majority were married and had children. Neither fact made them unwilling to sacrifice themselves and others for the cause.[20] They also did not suffer from any psychiatric pathology. There was no pattern of emotional trauma in their past, nor any evidence of pathological hatred or paranoia.[21] Most had strong occupational skills, yet few were employed full-time upon joining the jihad.[22] The fact that they were temporarily out of work may have contributed to the pattern of social and spiritual alienation just before they joined the jihad.[23] Yet, the key factor appears to have been friendship bonds between individuals, who then joined the jihad in small clusters of friends or relatives, the homegrown "bunch of guys" in Sageman's terminology. In Sageman's sample, about 75 per cent had preexisting social bonds to members already involved in the global jihad or decided to join the jihad as a group with relatives and friends.[24]

A follow-up study by Edwin Bakker with a sample of 242 jihadist terrorists in Europe confirmed most of Sageman's conclusions.[25] The average age of joining the jihad was similar to the sample used by Sageman, the average age at the time of arrest being 27 years.[26] Within each terrorist network, most members were of about the same age and many were related through kinship or friendship.[27] However,

---

[16] Such studies are based on actual evidence from interviews with extremists, police files, and court transcripts. Examples include Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Edwin Bakker, *Jihadi Terrorists in Europe: Their Characteristics and the Circumstances in Which They Joined the Jihad-An Explanatory Study* (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2006); Hemmingsen, *Attractions of Jihadism;* and de Poot and Sonnenschein, *Jihadi Terrorism in the Netherlands*.

[17] Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks,* 96.

[18] Ibid., 92.

[19] Ibid., 95, 97.

[20] Ibid., 78-80, 97.

[21] Ibid., 80-91, 97.

[22] Ibid., 94.

[23] Ibid., 94, 95, 98.

[24] Ibid., 112-13, 115, 133, 135; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad,* 66-9, 138. Sageman noted that the expression BOG ("bunch of guys") was used by the Canadian police for a small group of Islamists who lived on welfare or petty crime, shared a small apartment, and lacked employment and girlfriends. Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks,* 101. For many young people, welfare payments removed the need to find regular work and allowed time to become full-time wannabe jihadists. They thus spent their time in idleness and boredom hanging out with their friends, praising jihadists, surfing the Internet, and dreaming of jihad. Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad,* 103.

[25] Bakker, *Jihadi Terrorists in Europe*.

[26] Ibid., 41.

[27] Ibid., 42, 52.

some networks included many different nationalities.[28] In Europe, unlike in the global sample used by Sageman, few terrorists came from higher socioeconomic classes. This was presumably a reflection of the general socioeconomic character of Muslim immigrant communities in Europe.[29] The relative number of unskilled workers and unemployed was very high compared to national averages. Again, this reflected the occupational situation of Muslim immigrant communities in Europe.[30] In fact, a further study by Christianne de Poot and Anne Sonnenschein, this time on jihadists in the Netherlands and based on twelve criminal investigations, concluded that only a few actors had developed a stable professional existence. Most regularly changed employment, worked at the market place, traded informally, or lived on welfare benefits, sometimes with the assistance of forged documents. Furthermore, even those who worked often had jobs that did not require much, if any, education.[31] Even so, a majority of the sample of 242 jihadist terrorists in Europe had concluded secondary education.[32] Far from all came from religious families. Many were born-again Muslims, those formerly irreligious who suddenly had rediscovered their faith at a later stage in life, some after a history of drinking and drug abuse.[33] Almost a quarter of the sample had previous criminal records, before their arrest for terrorist offences.[34] Compared to the sample of global terrorists used by Sageman, the percentage of European jihadist terrorists who suffered from psychiatric pathology was higher, yet the absolute number remained very low.[35]

In the study of jihadists in the Netherlands, based on twelve criminal investigations into Dutch jihadist groups, religion was not in itself the key factor. Nor was ideology a significant unifying factor. Indeed, the majority of the terrorists were attracted mainly by one or several *aspects* of the jihadist ideology. Such aspects included the theme of worldwide injustice against Muslims, the wish for a revolt against existing social systems, and the need for rigid guidelines for a pure existence.[36] The study again confirmed that any injustice perceived by the jihadists was based more on perception than on direct personal experiences. Most actors did not necessarily feel wronged as individuals. They did, however, identify with the idea that the group to which they belonged was being wronged. As in other types of protest behaviour and collective militant actions, the readiness to take action was accordingly not associated with relative individual deprivation but a narrative of perceived, relative group deprivation. By blaming the West or Western democracy as the common enemy of all Muslims, the actors felt that they had something in common which brought them together and intensified their feelings of solidarity.[37]

Narrative and Counterculture

Ideologies were thus not everything. The glue that held the jihadists together was the narrative: a conviction that a worldwide struggle between good and evil, between justice and injustice, between truth and lies, and between true Muslims and enemies of Islam was taking place. The world was hanging in the balance, and heroes were needed to upheld the doctrine of God. The struggle was more important than any political-religious goals they pretended to want to achieve. The details of the proposed, ideal Islamic state were unimportant. The struggle was the key, since it united individuals who came from different and sometimes difficult to reconcile ideological and cultural backgrounds or even, in some cases, an incoherent (copy-paste) ideology. The fight was the idea from which the participants derived a collective identity. They all perceived themselves as being part of a grand narrative of a cataclysmic struggle against a common enemy. To belong to the prohibited out-group was the key, and in the end, it was the struggle in the name of God that counted, since God would

---

[28] Ibid., 33, 34.
[29] Ibid., 38.
[30] Ibid., 39, 42.
[31] de Poot and Sonnenschein, *Jihadi Terrorism in the Netherlands*, 122.
[32] Bakker, *Jihadi Terrorists in Europe*, 38.
[33] Ibid., 39.
[34] Ibid., 40.
[35] Ibid., 47.
[36] de Poot and Sonnenschein, *Jihadi Terrorism in the Netherlands*, 16.
[37] Ibid., 63-4, 154 with notes.

approve of everything that served this struggle.[38] The feeling of belonging to the struggling, righteous out-group—a counterculture—was a powerful one. In the words of a British Islamist: "Now I was not a mere *Muslim,* like all the others I knew; I was better, superior."[39]

The concept of counterculture implies that the individuals involved defined themselves as being counter to what the majority of society regarded as normality and culture. The supporters of the counterculture also defined themselves as an alternative to majority society. They constructed their own group-think, norms, and normality, thereby forming their own shared culture in the form of a distinct language (shared terminology, shared ways of using particular words, shared ways of greeting each other), dress code, and code of conduct. The counterculture provided a framework which transformed individual motivations into a greater cause. It also provided a network where individuals could find financial, intellectual, social, and material resources. Counterculture was an enabler. It enabled individuals, many of whom had previously belonged to left-wing, right-wing, or criminal countercultures, to find social belonging and to be recognised as being against society, in effect and due to media attention and political responses to terrorism to be recognised as a security threat that had to be taken seriously.[40] For idealists and political activists, the counterculture presented a desired alternative. To overthrow the democratic constitutional order in society and exchange it for an utopian state in which only the power of God was accepted was an attractive choice on the marketplace of utopian ideals.[41] To overthrow the system was their key interest; only a few actors seemed to have concrete opinions about the new order to be established and the Caliphate remained an abstract idea, useful as an ultimate goal but unimportant with regard to details.[42] In addition, the group-think became a force multiplier for further radicalisation: "As action becomes a group objective, each member of the cluster is challenged to accept jihad as an individual obligation."[43] Islamic extremists used the two weapons of *dawa* (preaching) and *jihad* (battle). However, the narrative became the *dawa*, not the other way round.

The narrative was thus the key. The narrative was what gave life meaning. The narrative enabled a life on a heroic scale. In the words of Adam Gadahn: "We must always remember that we are different than the Zionists and Crusaders with whom we are locked in combat: We are not outlaws. We are not gangsters. We are not hypocrites. We are not barbarians. We are not opportunists and mercenaries. We are not enemies of freedom and civilization. We are not cowards who wage wars from behind the controls of pilotless aircraft. In other words, everything our enemies are, we are not, and everything we are, they are not. We are people of courage, honor, decency, chivalry, and ethics who selflessly sacrifice themselves for the noblest cause on earth, and that is why every Muslim and every Mujahid must continue to take the high road and protect the moral high ground which we have fought so long and hard to secure."[44]

Anger and Injustice

While the narrative and its associated counterculture formed the glue that held groups together, righteous anger constituted the key that would push a group into action. The anger was often fuelled by a sense of injustice. The *dawa* caused anger, not enlightenment. The German convert and IJU recruit Eric Breininger explained in his memoirs that through listening to *dawa*, "hate" against the infidels was growing in him.[45]

---

[38] Ibid., 64, 152-3. See also Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, 32-33.
[39] Ed Husain, *The Islamist: Why I Joined Radical Islam in Britain, What I Saw Inside and Why I Left* (London: Penguin, 2007), 36.
[40] Hemmingsen, *Attractions of Jihadism,* 14, 78, 106-7, 123.
[41] de Poot and Sonnenschein, *Jihadi Terrorism in the Netherlands*, 22.
[42] Ibid., 64.
[43] Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat* (New York: New York City Police Department, 2007), 43.
[44] Adam Gadahn, *A Call to Arms* (As-Sahab, 7 March 2010).
[45] Abdul Ghaffar El Almani [Eric Breininger], *Mein Weg nach Jannah* (ElifMedya, posted online on 5 May 2010), 56.

Such sentiments can be found in quite different secular countries. So was, for instance, in Russia in February 2011 an "Appeal to the Youth of Idel'-Ural" by one Yagafar Tangauri posted on the Kavkazcenter web site, calling Bashkir and Tatar youth to jihad.[46] By then, the Kavkazcenter web site had already published several statements on the southern Ural mountains region, with particular emphasis on Bashkortostan and Tatarstan where an Idel'-Ural Vilaiyat of the Caucasus Emirate had been proclaimed, encompassing both Tatars and Bashkirs.[47] After a few mandatory statements about God and the Prophet Muhammad, Tangauri told his audience that the region's "factories produce nothing but stink and radiation and belong to Moscow Jewish oligarchs" and that "you are forced to travel to Russia to work as slaves."[48]

Tangauri continued with a call for action: "Therefore it is up to you. Will you humiliatingly accept facts or will you yourself humiliate the non-believers and put truth in its place. Return the stolen. Undermine their economy in our territory. Do not let them remove oil and gas, do not let them refine it here and poison our villages, do not let them conduct underground nuclear explosions, and do not let tax collectors move undisturbed on our roads. . . . Burn down their drinking halls and bordellos, in which they pervert our children. Shoot the traitors from our people, the occupation officials, corrupt cops, street prostitutes, criminals and sinners, murderers, and maniacs who do not let peaceful people be. There is no longer any thought that the police protect us. No, they are watching us! Guarding against another revolt against Moscow and its satraps. . . . They need managed chaos. They need the people to be drunk and direct its anger in other directions. They are making out of us a stupid herd whose God is its own passions. Today a group of Muslims will take the initiative to go out to fight against these non-people. It is your choice."[49]

Tangauri ended his call thus: "It is said in the hadiths [Prophetic Tradition]: The best life is that of him who holds firmly on to the reins of the horse and hurries to where he hears the cry for help. Bursting into the thick of the enemy hoping to meet one's Ruler: And remember, no matter how much you may want to, you will never become a Russian, as long as you still remember the name of Allah. And in conclusion, Glory of our Ruler of the worlds! Peace and Blessing upon the Prophet and upon all those who follow him until the Day of Resurrection![50]

Tangauri thus combined Islamic zeal and separatist sentiments with a call for action against the financial system and polluting industries. He invoked religion, nationalism, environmentalism, and anti-capitalism all in one go.

In fact, de Poot and Sonnenschein's survey of jihadists in the Netherlands concluded that many actors within the jihadist groups did not have any coherent extremist views yet remained receptive to such sentiments. Virtually all these receptive actors were converts without Islamic backgrounds, second-generation Muslims, or Muslims who had recently immigrated and in their countries of birth had not had much, or any, contact with extremist influences.[51]

The importance of the narrative was further emphasised by Olivier Roy, who in a study on individual biographies and trajectories of jihadist terrorists in and from the West noted that the achievement of Al-Qaida was not the establishment of an organisation but "to have invented a narrative that could allow rebels without a cause to connect with a cause." Indeed, ideology played little role in the radicalisation of the jihadist internationalist youth, since they were "attracted by a narrative not an ideology."[52] The narrative was based on, first, the suffering of Muslims worldwide. The stories of suffering were never contextualised. Whether the suffering took place in Norway, Kashmir, or Palestine, Muslims were presented as persistent victims and an undifferentiated whole. In effect, all Muslims were victims, always and everywhere. Second, the narrative included the hero who avenged the sufferings of Muslims. Religious terminology was invoked to emphasise that taking action was a personal responsibility. The hero, upon sacrificing his or life for the community, redeemed all previous

---

[46] Kavkazcenter web site, 12 February 2011 (www.kavkazcenter.com).

[47] Kavkazcenter web site, 26 January 2011, 1 February 2011 (www.kavkazcenter.com).

[48] Kavkazcenter web site, 12 February 2011 (www.kavkazcenter.com).

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] de Poot and Sonnenschein, *Jihadi Terrorism in the Netherlands*, 57.

[52] Olivier Roy, "Al-Qaeda in the West as a Youth Movement: The Power of a Narrative," Michael Emerson (ed.), *Ethno-Religious Conflict in Europe: Typologies of Radicalisation in Europe's Muslim Communities* (Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2009), 11-26, on 12, 14.

shortcomings. The hero's death, which was invariably carefully staged with video, declaration, will, and so on, irrevocably turned him or her into a permanent icon and resulted in ultimate fame and star-quality. It mattered not what the hero did before the act, and it mattered even less if the act of martyrdom actually achieved anything. Third, and this may be the key contribution to the narrative by formerly irreligious Western Muslims and others not specifically motivated by religion, the struggle was a fight to the death against the global order.[53] This struggle was based, or so it was claimed, upon the need for courageous rebels to combat the evil West's domination of the world's poor and therefore ultimately more righteous inhabitants.

Indeed, Roy found it more productive to understand jihadism in Europe as a youth movement which shared many factors with other forms of dissent. The fascination for sudden suicidal violence could be compared to the paradigm of random shootings in schools (the Columbine syndrome, that is, the random killing by a student of schoolmates and teachers in his or her school, before shooting himself or being shot). School shooters and jihadists indeed share many traits, including a possible history of drug addiction, a lack of social life, the fabrication of a narrative through the Internet, the recording of a video before taking action, search for fame, and so on.[54] The violence of young jihadists in Europe did not depend on any notions of Islamic intellectual legacy but instead could be connected to "the general phenomena of radical violence among youth." First, Roy noted that most jihadists were young men who had broken with their families. Second, they deliberately chose to define for themselves what should be the guiding principles of their lives. They rejected traditional Islam and never referred to *fatawi* from traditional clerics. Third, modern jihadist discourse in Europe was the recasting of already deep-rooted, ultra-leftist anti-imperialism into Islamic terminology. Indeed, jihadists and left-wing extremists shared a hatred for the United States, imperialism, and globalisation. Fourth, jihadist radicalisation was closely connected with petty crime.[55]

The importance of the narrative was also emphasised by Ann-Sophie Hemmingsen's study of Islamic extremists and terrorists in Denmark, based on three terrorism cases that were tried in five trials and interviews with both those prosecuted and their supporters who participated at the trials as spectators.[56] The narrative certainly attracted one type of wannabe jihadist: those who were driven by a wish for action. For them, action was the key. Hemmingsen cited several jihadists who while interested in religious justification, claimed not to be very interested in ideological and religious discussions. For them, the decision to engage in combat appeared to have come before any subsequent interest in the religious justification for doing so.[57] Many were quite determined, and it could be argued that individuals who made it as far as Afghanistan or similar conflict zones were driven by an urge which could only be satisfied by action.

Action-oriented jihadists were often radicalised in gyms and martial arts clubs. The young Belgian citizen of Chechen origin, Lors Doukaiev (Dukayev), who in 2010 in a Copenhagen hotel accidentally detonated a bomb believed to have been intended for the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper offices, was believed to have been radicalised in martial arts or boxing clubs.[58] So did, at least to some extent, the perpetrators of the July 2005 London Transport bombings. In particular, they attended karate lessons and went to a gym together.[59] Martial arts and sports have a long association with the radicalisation process. The Central Asian extremists of the late 1980s and early 1990s who would become the early members of the IMU in Uzbekistan practiced martial arts together.[60] For them, neither religion nor

---

[53] Ibid., 24-5.
[54] Ibid., 24.
[55] Ibid., 21-23.
[56] Hemmingsen, *Attractions of Jihadism*.
[57] Ibid., 107, 108-9, 233.
[58] *BT*, 15 September 2010, 21 September 2010 (www.bt.dk).
[59] Rachel Briggs, Jennifer Cole, Margaret Gilmore, and Valentina Soria, *Anatomy of a Terrorist Attack: What the Coroner's Inquests Revealed about the London Bombings* (London: Royal United Services Institute, Occasional Paper, 2011), 10.
[60] Fredholm, *Islamic Extremism as a Political Force in Central Asia: A Comparative Study*, 12. Interestingly, radical Uzbek preachers such as Obidkhon Qori Nazarov (b. 1958) have in videos available on YouTube suggested that kick-boxing is not permitted to Muslims unless it is to further the cause of Islam. Nazarov is wanted in Uzbekistan for crimes relating to terrorism. Interpol web site, www.interpol.int.

ideology seemed to be required, only a wish for action. Religious arguments and religious education bored many participants in the jihadist struggle.[61]

Women too became jihadists. They often served as a motivational inspiration for their men, talking them into becoming more active. Some became ideologues and preached armed jihad in various Internet forums.[62]

Heartland-oriented Actors and Receptive Actors

Terrorists have different life stories, backgrounds, and motives. There is no clear terrorist profile when it comes to Islamic extremists. Yet, based on the research by de Poot and Sonnenschein, jihadist terrorists in Western secular societies can be divided into two main categories: heartland-oriented actors and what could be termed receptive actors: locally born Muslims, born-again Muslims with limited religious training, or converts who unlike the former group base their understanding of the world on local events and influences. Heartland-oriented actors were generally immigrants from Islamic regions such as North Africa, the Middle East, East Africa, and South and Central Asia. They usually had a history of Islamic activism and contacts with extremist organisations. Some had a history of armed jihad. These characteristics gave them added prestige and credibility when dealing with wannabe jihadists. So did the ability to speak Arabic, the language of God as understood by Muslims, yet unknown to the vast majority of Muslims outside the Arab North Africa and Middle East.[63] Among some Muslims in other regions, the knowledge of Arabic was like having a direct link to God. As one Islamist expressed it, about the London-based extremist leader Omar Bakri: "It was mostly second-generation British Muslims and converts who were seduced by the 'Tottenham Ayatollah'. His mastery of the Arabic language, his ready and seemingly relevant quotes from the Koran and other sources, silenced us impressionable Muslims of Britain."[64] Many were all too willing, in their eagerness to demonstrate commitment, to accept the words of any Arabic speaker who claimed to be a legitimate voice for Islam.[65] More importantly, Muslims without Arabic language skills could not themselves check Koran citations when extremist preachers used them to justify armed jihad, so were more likely to be swayed by such arguments.

The arrival of a charismatic heartland-oriented actor could rapidly radicalise a non-committed group of receptive wannabe jihadists. The new leader acted as a catalyst, stimulating the others into action.[66] The availability of key jihadist leaders of recognised religious and ideological expertise (by some referred to as "spiritual sanctioners"[67]) or experience in combat was also important for the establishment of terrorist cells. Those jihadists who were not particularly religious did not need the sanction of a religious authority to take action, yet somebody who claimed, rightly or wrongly, close links to global jihad always served as an inspirational role model.[68] The jihadist leaders were not necessarily operational terrorists; ideologues and preachers played important roles through their ability to justify actions taken. Existing leaders and meeting places were essential since through them, new recruits on the jihad scene could get access to housing, documents, and willing followers. At the same time, some joined the groups primarily because these groups contained people who could provide daily necessities or social advantages.[69] Jihadism was for some not only a way of life, it was also a business. Forged documents were vital to the budding terrorist. Travel movements in and out of safe havens such as Pakistan and hospitable but naive asylum countries in Western Europe took special skills and became a highly specialised business. Wannabe terrorists paid their facilitators for the privilege, and

---

[61] Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad,* 157.
[62] Ibid., 112.
[63] de Poot and Sonnenschein, *Jihadi Terrorism in the Netherlands,* 43-45, 81.
[64] Husain, *The Islamist,* 82.
[65] Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad,* 80.
[66] de Poot and Sonnenschein, *Jihadi Terrorism in the Netherlands,* 82-3.
[67] Silber and Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West,* 38.
[68] Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad,* 79.
[69] de Poot and Sonnenschein, *Jihadi Terrorism in the Netherlands,* 16, 152.

the facilitators operated in effect as clandestine travel agents, arranging everything from airline tickets to safe houses.[70]

Categories of Receptivity

Based on the samples, it was possible to identify four broad yet conspicuous categories of people in Western secular societies out of which jihadist terrorists typically emerged. These were illegal immigrants, former or current drug addicts and individuals with criminal records, seekers with existential or identity questions, and idealists and political activists.[71]

Not all or, we can assume, even very many illegal immigrants wished to become terrorists or were susceptible to terrorist propaganda. Even so, they all needed certain essential necessities of daily life such as a place to stay (whether in somebody's home or in a mosque or other common area), employment, forged or genuine look-alike documents to legalize their stay in the chosen country, and citizen service social assistance. From a psychological point of view, they also needed respect and a sense of self-worth, social status, and a purpose in life. If prosecuted, they needed the support of their fellows in the courtroom.[72] Terrorist facilitators could arrange all of this.

Former or current drug addicts and individuals with criminal records occasionally found a point in time when they realised that they needed a new direction in life and that they needed to clean up their act and quit a life of sin. If so, Islamic extremism provided an attractive ideology of being a pure believer on the side of God.[73] In addition, former criminals had skills that terrorist facilitators found useful. The bargain worked for both sides. Extremist groups have a long history of recruiting in prisons and, in the West, detention centres and even centres for asylum seekers.[74]

Seekers sought social ties and a sense of structure in life. They might find both in a terrorist group. In effect, what they searched for was a means to escape perceived problems and reach a sense of security. Islamic extremism was a prop that could reduce their uncertainty and to which they could cling, intellectually and socially.[75]

Idealists and political activists thrived on counterculture and social discontent. Their main drive seemed to be a sense of intense and genuine indignation over external factors, such as political, geopolitical, economic, cultural, and military inequality and injustice in the world. For them, the world was inhabited only by perpetrators and victims. This view, however, as noted was based on indirect perception rather than personal experiences.[76] Terrorism could easily become the ideal for which they searched.

The Special Situation of Converts

In Europe and much of the Western world, Islam is a fast-growing religion. Growth is driven by immigration and higher birth rates but also by the conversion of non-Muslims. While converts form a small share of the total Muslim population, they often play a quite active role in propagating Islamic issues, as do the born-again Muslims, those formerly irreligious who suddenly find religion. Converts and born-again Muslims in the first decade of the twenty-first century began to play a prominent role in

---

[70] See, e.g., Ibid., 18.

[71] Ibid., 18-19.

[72] Ibid., 18-19, 136-7; Hemmingsen, *Attractions of Jihadism*, 75, 93.

[73] de Poot and Sonnenschein, *Jihadi Terrorism in the Netherlands*, 19, 137-9.

[74] Silber and Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West*, 39; Peter R. Neumann and Brooke Rogers, *Recruitment and Mobilisation for the Islamist Militant Movement in Europe* (London: King's College, 2007), 39-44; de Poot and Sonnenschein, *Jihadi Terrorism in the Netherlands*, 96, 124-5; Fredholm, *Islamic Extremism as a Political Force in Central Asia: A Comparative Study*, 38.

[75] de Poot and Sonnenschein, *Jihadi Terrorism in the Netherlands*, 19, 139-40.

[76] Ibid., 19, 22, 140-42.

religiously motivated terrorism. They also tended to be the most zealous of their groups, since many felt a need to prove their religious convictions to themselves and especially their companions.[77]

West Europeans began to convert to Islam from the 1960s onwards. This was the time when Muslims began to migrate to Western Europe. It was also the time of the rise of new protest and counterculture movements in the West. Intermarriage often led to the conversion of the non-Muslim partner. Yet more importantly, individuals involved in the counterculture began to embrace Islam as an alternative to what they regarded as the materialistic Western culture.

The trend became accentuated in the period following the Cold War. With Marxism discredited by its failures in countries such as the Soviet Union and Cambodia, Islam became the new ideology of rebels. Many former leftists turned to Islam to find a new truth. What they found was a new identity, and they took to the new faith, often as preached by extremists, as new converts everywhere—with much enthusiasm and sect-like devotion and obedience to their new leaders.[78]

Many converts saw little difference between ideological and religious faith. In the words of one radical: "I witnessed at least four new converts to Islam at different university campuses, convinced of the superiority of the 'Islamic political ideology' as an alternative to capitalism but lacking basic knowledge of worship. Within three weeks of their conversion they were lecturing others about the need for a *khilafah* [Islamic Caliphate], the role of the future Muslim army, and the duties of citizens in the future Islamic state."[79]

Signs and Prophesies

Other converts became convinced of the righteousness of their new faith by a so-far little studied phenomenon: the oral tradition of signs and prophesies among modern Islamic extremists.

So did, for instance, the German convert Eric Breininger explain the superiority of the Koran (and thereby Islam) through evidence of supernatural knowledge displayed therein: three verses in which the book allegedly predicted scientific advances. Breininger, and presumably his preacher as well, found this evidence compellingly persuasive.[80]

The narrative of signs and prophesies also included a widespread belief that Judgment Day was approaching, and that signs were visible to the initiated. As the former Guantanamo prisoner Slimane Hadj Abderrahmane explained it: "The Prophet said that some of the signs are caretakers of cows without any taste who build tall buildings. We see that from cowboys in USA—they have built skyscrapers. Most Europeans sort of agree that they have no taste—the Americans."[81]

---

[77] Silber and Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West*, 29. See also Emmanuel Karagiannis, "Islamic Activism in Europe: The Role of Converts," *CTC Sentinel* 4: 8 (August 2011), 16-19; Sajjan M. Gohel, "Germany Increasingly a Center for Terrorism in Europe," *CTC Sentinel* 4: 8 (August 2011), 12-15.

[78] Not all of these former leftists became extremists although many did. Former leftist converts included the French philosopher Roger Garaudy, who converted to Islam already in 1982 and in 1995/1996 published a book on Israel which saw him sentenced for Holocaust denial (*Le Figaro*, 28 February 1998); American journalist Stephen Schwartz, who promoted moderate Islam and staunchly opposed Wahhabism and extremism; British journalist and human rights activist Yvonne Ridley, who repeatedly condemned the Western world and its wars in Afghanistan and other Muslim countries (her personal web site, http://yvonneridley.org); Venezuelan communist and terrorist Ilich Ramírez Sánchez (a. k. a. Carlos the Jackal), who by 2001 had converted to Islam and voiced support for Usamah bin Ladin and what he termed revolutionary Islam; and numerous young Europeans who prior to their conversion held leftist views. On the latter, see, e.g., Malene Grøndahl; Torben Rugberg Rasmussen; and Kirstine Sinclair, *Hizb ut-Tahrir i Danmark: Farlig fundamentalisme eller uskyldigt ungdomsoprør?* ("Hizb ut-Tahrir in Denmark: Dangerous fundamentalism or innocent youth revolt?;" Aarhus, Jutland: Aarhus universitetsforlag, 2003), 31-2.

[79] Husain, *The Islamist*, 146.

[80] Abdul Ghaffar El Almani [Eric Breininger], *Mein Weg nach Jannah*, 36-37.

[81] Hemmingsen, *Attractions of Jihadism*, 158; citing and translating Davidsen-Nielsen and Seidelin, *Danskeren på Guantánamo*, 49-50.

The belief in mystic signs of this kind was widespread among jihadists. Although not often remarked upon because information on the phenomenon was in most cases transmitted only orally, and limited to the extremist counterculture, it was a key feature of the powerful narrative of jihadism. Being able to see, hear, and understand what others did not created a sense of being one of the chosen, of being better than the others. It was a patent of nobility, and an obligation to spread the faith, through *dawa*, that is, inviting others to the faith. The jihadists were not only the chosen ones who had a special mission, they were the few chosen ones who would be saved on Judgment Day and held the power to save others as well.[82] Jihadists regarded themselves as a chosen brotherhood, in the words of Zawahiri even a select knighthood.[83] We can again refer to the words of a British Islamist: "Now I was not a mere *Muslim*, like all the others I knew; I was better, superior."[84] Legends and Koranic verses were constantly being re-interpreted, through *ijtihad*, so as to prove that the Koran's predictions were true. One jihadist noted that "every time there is an earthquake you can take the number on the Richter scale and look up the Surah and verse which have these numbers and you will find that they predict earthquakes."[85]

Another jihadist noted that in the events leading up to Judgment Day, only one infidel would survive and he would then inform the entire world of what had happened. The jihadist explained that "it is obvious that at the point in time when this was predicted it was not possible for one individual to tell the whole world anything but at present it is actually possible because we have the Internet," thus, the prediction was true because no human being living at the time of the prediction could possibly have imagined what was being predicted. Signs and predictions were not even exclusively of Islamic origin. Another jihadist interviewed by Hemmingsen always carried a book with Nostradamus' prophesies with him, since he regarded this book as proof that there would be a huge conflict between unbelievers in East and West, after which the Muslims would conquer the world.[86]

The use of non-Islamic sources of prophesy and enlightenment was not a problem for the jihadists, since they knew, through *ijtihad*, that whatever felt right to them was the will of God. So did, for instance, the well-known Chechen jihadist leader Shamil Basayev (1965-2006) in his *Book of a Mujahiddeen* describe his writings in the following way: "In late March of last year I had two weeks of free time, when I got a hold of "Mujahid of the Light: A Manual" by Paulo Coelho and a computer. I wanted to derive benefits for the Mujahiddeen (Resistance Fighters) from this book and I this is why I rewrote most of it, removed some excesses and strengthened all of it with verses (ayats), hadiths and stories from the lives of the disciples."[87] However, Paulo Coelho was not a Muslim but a Brazilian bestseller novelist and the title of his 1997 book was not Mujahid but Warrior of Light. Coelho thus did not hesitate to quote popular Eastern traditions of prophesy and philosophy such as the Chinese *I Ching*.[88] Naturally, so did Shamil Basayev when he copied the chapters that he liked in Coelho's book—including the reference to the *I Ching*.[89]

The narrative of being a chosen brotherhood on a special mission in preparation for Judgment Day, although unlike the narrative of Muslim worldwide suffering fundamentally of an oral nature, was apparently remarkably widespread among jihadists, regardless of geographical origin and life trajectory. Slimane Hadj Abderrahmane, the Danish jihadist of Algerian origin, subscribed to this narrative. So did apparently Eric Breininger, the German convert who ended up in Pakistan with the Uzbek-led IJU.[90] Others have offered similar hints in their speeches or videos but incompletely, without being outspoken on the subject.[91]

The narrative of signs and prophesies also included an interest in dreams, and the interpretation of and reliance on dreams among jihadists. Islamic extremists often interpreted dreams as justification for

---

[82] Hemmingsen, *Attractions of Jihadism*, 187, 199.

[83] Ayman al-Zawahiri, *Knights under the Prophet's Banner* (excerpts published in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), 2-12 December 2001).

[84] Husain, *The Islamist*, 36.

[85] Hemmingsen, *Attractions of Jihadism*, 187.

[86] Ibid., 179-80.

[87] Abdallah Shamil Abu Idris (Shamil Basaev), *Book of a Mujahiddeen* (np: Kavkazcenter, 2004), 1.

[88] Paulo Coelho, *Manual of the Warrior of Light* (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2010), 19.

[89] Abdallah Shamil Abu Idris (Shamil Basaev), *Book of a Mujahiddeen*, ch. 9.

[90] Hemmingsen, *Attractions of Jihadism*, 205-6 with references.

[91] See, e.g., al-Zawahiri, *Knights under the Prophet's Banner;* which in its very title proclaims the narrative of the chosen brotherhood.

jihad, or sanction for their planned actions. Having such dreams, in particular involving the Prophet Muhammad, was regarded as a mandatory command to take action. Faced with such an imperative, a believer would then not lightly abandon the cause.[92]

A Narrative of Heroes

Perhaps two conclusions can be drawn from this investigation into the mind of the contemporary jihadist. First, on the issue of whether young jihadists can be deradicalised through participation in a deradicalisation programme, our conclusion may be somewhat pessimistic. If neither ideology nor religion was the prime cause that pushed them into action, it would appear unlikely that programmes involving discussions on these topics would be very helpful. Besides, it has been pointed out that it is never easy to prevent young people who have previously shown an inclination for violent activities from suddenly again turning to violence.[93] The best option may perhaps instead be to prosecute them for any crimes committed, treat them as criminals, not heroes, and ignore their professed ideologies. To give jihadists the fame they crave by endorsing their actions through referring to them as terrorists in the public media and adopt increasingly harsh legislation to deal with the problem is not the solution. Instead, in the words of a once popular tune, let them "pass, and be forgotten with the rest."[94]

However, an understanding of the importance of the narrative as a cause for jihadist terrorism may well suggest a more constructive way of dealing with the problem. The issue of jihadist terrorism should not be labelled as a struggle between religions, nor indeed civilisations. So far, considerable efforts have been made to counter jihadist terrorism through religious arguments. This has produced few if any concrete results, since it is difficult or impossible to argue against a religious faith or, for that matter, an ideology—or any similar system of personal faith—without alienating its followers. To fight a narrative is easier. Advertisers and spin doctors do it all the time. If young extremists crave an inspiring narrative and action; then a suitably positive one should be provided that enables action and heroism but does not involve terrorism. Perhaps a new and more action-oriented, international peacekeeping and rapid reaction emergency response force, tasked to save lives in the face of natural disasters and environmental emergencies? If provided with a proper mandate for action, such an organisation could indeed become a home for heroes.

---

[92] On dreams, see, e.g., Abdul Ghaffar El Almani [Eric Breininger], *Mein Weg nach Jannah*, 98, 101-102. Usamah bin Ladin in a video in late 2001 noted that he had banned the reporting of dreams of aircraft flying into buildings for fear of revealing the forthcoming 11 September 2001 attacks (video transcript and annotations prepared by George Michael, translator, Diplomatic Language Services; and Dr. Kassem M. Wahba, Arabic language program co-ordinator, School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, 13 December 2001). Zacarias Moussaoui (who planned to take part in the attacks) in 2000 spoke of having had a dream of crashing an aircraft into the White House (UPI, 9 March 2006). British shoebomber Richard Reid also experienced significant dreams of armed jihad, as did several other jihadists. Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), *The Role of Dreams in the Justification of Jihad* (CSIS Intelligence Assessment IA 2009-10/83, 22 March 2010); released under the provisions of the Privacy Act and/or Access to Information Act and published by the *National Post* (Canada; www.nationalpost.com).

[93] Roy, "Al-Qaeda in the West as a Youth Movement," 25.

[94] Thomas "Tom" Lehrer (b. 1928), "Bright College Days."