

Recruitment and Radicalization: Terrorist Profiles 2

Terrorists, in fact, come from every walk of life. From marginalized people working in menial jobs, some of whom have long criminal records or histories of juvenile delinquency, to people with very solid middle and even upper-class backgrounds with advanced degrees, university educations, even masters and PhDs. Some of these people, too, come from a variety of diverse backgrounds. Again, sometimes very orthodox, devout ones, but also enormously secular backgrounds. Individuals who once had a passion for cars, sports, rock music, and had other completely secular material interests are suddenly transformed into the religious devoted, and to the committed and determined terrorists. The spectrum of British terrorists over the past 10 years, I think, really illustrates the panoply of persons attracted to terrorism.

On the one hand you have one of the most famous post-September 11 examples, and that's the famous shoe bomber, Richard Reid, who in December, 2001 boarded an American Airlines Flight from Paris bound for Miami, and in the middle of the flight attempted to set fire to his sneaker. What he was actually trying to do was set fire to some detonating cord popping out of his sneaker that was connected to some plastic explosive, and hopefully to blow the plane out of the sky. Richard Reid was a high school dropout, was a juvenile delinquent, someone who had been in and out of juvenile detention centers. And, in fact, while serving a prison term in an adult facility, had converted to Islam, had been recruited to Al-Qaeda and had been dispatched on this mission. He was someone who was not terribly intelligent, who certainly was not well-educated; cannon fodder for Al-Qaeda.

On the other hand, you have someone like Ahmed Saeed Sheikh. This was an individual, also grew up in Britain in London, just like Richard Reid. Came, in fact, not from a poor family like Richard Reid, but rather from a very comfortable upper middle class family.

Saeed Sheikh was educated at some of the poshest and best private schools in London. He had won a coveted place at the London School of Economics, one of the world's top universities. At university, he was no slouch. His major was advanced mathematics and applied physics. He was an enormously intelligent young man. In fact, he was so accomplished and so intelligent that his parents dreamed of the day that they would go to Buckingham Palace to see their son knighted by Queen Elizabeth and invested as a knight of the British Order.

Instead, Saeed Sheikh gravitated to radical politics while he was a student, eventually left the United Kingdom, went to Pakistan where he joined Al-Qaeda, where he met up with the infamous Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. KSM, the architect of the September 11, 2001 attacks. And then the following year, in 2002, it was Saeed Sheikh who lured the Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl to a fateful meeting in which Pearl was kidnapped and then subsequently brutally executed and beheaded.

So we have, on the one hand, a career criminal, a jailbird like Richard Reid; poor, uneducated. But on the other hand, we have someone like Saeed Sheikh. Every possible advantage in the world was given to him by his parents. The best schools in England, attending one of the best universities, yet both of them end up in the same place, serving exceedingly long prison terms for acts of terrorism.

The reasons why persons become terrorists, in some case, is remarkably prosaic. It's basically what their friends are doing. It's what their social group or their peers are involved in. So, in other words, relationships formed at work, school, on sports teams, or from recreational or religious activities often act as a recruiting base, attracting not just one individual, but often collections of individuals, friends, or teammates into the ranks of terrorism. Certainly the Internet can prey upon those already susceptible to violence. People who find, in the vastness of the Internet, individuals and even large numbers of people who have very similar ideas, very shared frustrations and anger, and a common commitment to act on those frustrations and anger to change whatever they feel wrong in their societies or in their systems.

In some instances, the first generation, the sons and daughters of immigrants, are grist for the terrorist recruitment mill. These are individuals who have drifted away from their heritage, whether it's religious or ethnic, who feel themselves culturally unmoored, caught between two societies. The society of their parents and their traditional homelands, and the society of their new and adopted homelands where they don't feel that they belong or quite fit in. And that they themselves are drawn to terrorism, and drawn to radicalization as a means to express their frustrations. Indeed, what becomes their hatred of their adopted home and to also demonstrate their belonging to and their commitment to their traditional home, to the home of their parents.

Also, too, admiration of terrorist movements or leading terrorist figures can become a very important magnet, or draw, or inspiration to persons becoming terrorists. Who seek to carry on that struggle. Who see these individuals or these organizations as having struck a cathartic blow against a common enemy. And, therefore, these individuals want to be part of that struggle, want to follow in the footsteps of previous terrorists or established terrorist leaders and carry forward this struggle. Often, very personal motivations such as hatred of their adopted homes, especially if it's in the United States or the United Kingdom or other Western countries, plays a role, as does a profoundly shared sense of alienation from their host countries. That, therefore, drives these people in their frustration, in their apartness, to embrace violence as a solution to their problems.