

Common Myths About al-Qaida Terrorism

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The following research by Dr. Sageman has been published as Understanding Terror Networks (University of Pennsylvania Press 2004). The sample used in this study included al-Qaida members from the Middle East, Southeast Asia, Northern Africa, and Europe. Dr. Sageman presented his findings in testimony before the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (also known as the 9/11 Commission) and now consults on terrorism with various government agencies.

The present wave of suicide terrorism associated with al-Qaida defies easy explanation. As a result, many myths govern the conventional wisdom about this form of terrorism. The following remarks are based on biographical material from more than 400 al-Qaida-affiliated terrorists and test this conventional wisdom.

Myth: Terrorism comes from poverty.

Actuality: The vast majority of terrorists in the sample came from solid middle class backgrounds, and its leadership came from the upper class. This has been true for most political movements, including terrorist movements, and al-Qaida is no different. Although al-Qaida justifies its operations by claiming to act on behalf of its poor brothers, its links to poverty are at best vicarious.

Myth: Terrorists are naïve young men.

Actuality: The average age of those joining terrorist organizations was about 26. They are young adult males, fully responsible for their actions. However, possibly due to the increasing importance of the Internet, which appeals to younger people, the average age is dropping. On the Internet, they encounter al-Qaida myths, which inspire some to perform operations on its behalf, even though they have never met or been directed by al-Qaida proper. In the past two years, the average age of arrested al-Qaida-affiliated terrorists has decreased to about 22.

Myth: Madrassahs, Islamist boarding schools which preach hatred of the West, brainwash young Muslims into becoming terrorists.

Actuality: In my sample, only 13 percent of terrorists went to madrassahs, and this practice was specific to Southeast Asia, where two school masters, Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Baasyir, recruited their best students to form the backbone of the Jamaah Islamiyah, the Indonesian al-Qaida affiliate. This means that 87 percent of terrorists in the sample had a secular education.

Myth: Islam radicalized young Muslims into becoming terrorists and exported violence to the West from their home countries.

Actuality: The vast majority of al-Qaida terrorists in the sample came from families with very moderate religious beliefs or a completely secular outlook. Indeed, 84 percent were radicalized in the West, rather than in their countries of origin. Most had come to the West to study, and at the time they had no intention of ever becoming terrorists. Another 8 percent consisted of Christian converts to Islam, who could not have been brainwashed into violence by their culture.

Myth: Al-Qaida terrorists are poorly educated, joining al-Qaida out of ignorance.

Actuality: About two-thirds of the sample had attended college, a sharp contrast with the less than 10 percent of their original communities who did so. Despite their education, they did not know much about religion; however, many had studied engineering, which made them doubly dangerous. Their relative lack of religious education made them especially vulnerable to an extreme version of Islam, and they had the skills to build bombs.

Myth: Al-Qaida suicide terrorists are single males, without any family responsibility.

Actuality: Some argue that lack of sexual opportunity for young Muslim men transforms their sexual frustration into suicide terrorism to reap the rewards of heaven, especially access to the 72 virgins. In fact, three-fourths of al-Qaida terrorists are married, and two-thirds of them have children (and many children at that). This apparent paradox is explained by the fact that they want many children to pursue the jihad, while they sacrifice themselves for their cause and comrades.

Myth: Al-Qaida terrorists join their organization out of desperation, because they don't have any marketable occupational skills.

Actuality: About 60 percent of al-Qaida terrorists in the sample have professional or semi-professional occupations. This is changing, as the new generation of terrorists is getting younger, with fewer skills than those of the previous generation.

Myth: Al-Qaida terrorists are simply criminals.

Actuality: Very few al-Qaida terrorists had any criminal history. None of the 19 perpetrators of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States had a criminal record in any country. This is changing, especially in Western Europe, where new al-Qaida recruits come from the "excluded" generation and turned to petty crime or drug dealing to make ends meet.

Myth: Al-Qaida terrorists, especially those who kill themselves, are simply mad or suffer from a personality disorder.

Actuality: There was a near total lack of mental disorders in the sample. This makes sense, as individuals with mental disorders are usually weeded out early from any clandestine organization for security reasons.

Myth: Al-Qaida terrorists are recruited by charismatic leaders, who prey on lonely, vulnerable victims.

Actuality: Recruitment into al-Qaida was through friendship and kinship rather than dedicated recruiters. About two-thirds of the sample were friends before ever thinking of joining a terrorist organization. They radicalized themselves in a group and collectively decided to join al-Qaida. The best example of this is the Hamburg group, which led the 9/11 operation. Eight friends collectively decided to join and traveled together to Afghanistan in two waves. The first wave became the pilots and the second wave the support group. Another fifth joined out of kinship. They had close relatives, fathers, brothers, or first cousins, who were already members of al-Qaida. They simply joined their families. ■

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