

Al-Qaeda, the Radical Right and Beyond: The Current Terrorist Threat

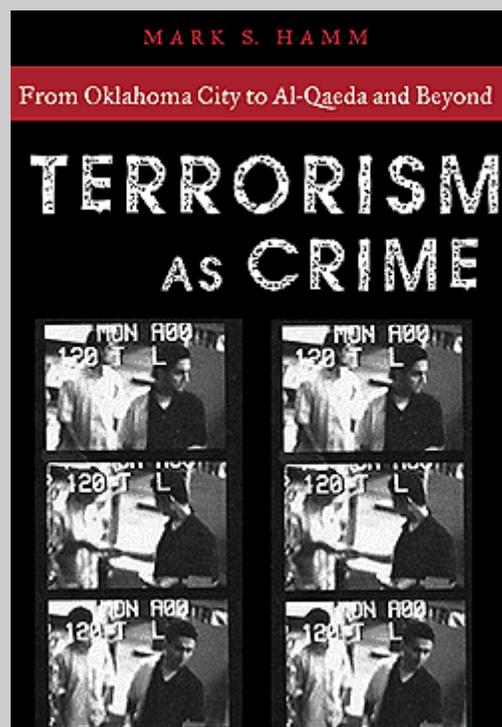
An edited excerpt from *Terrorism as Crime: From Oklahoma City to Al-Qaeda and Beyond* (New York: New York University Press, 2007)

by Mark S. Hamm

Webmaster's note: Mark Hamm started writing on terrorism and hate crimes long before Sept 11, when many scholars took up the call for research and analysis. Back in 1994, Mark published [American Skinheads: The Criminology and Control of Hate Crime](#) and [Hate Crime: International Perspectives on Causes and Control](#). He then turned his attention to McVeigh in his 1997 book, [Apocalypse in Oklahoma: Waco and Ruby Ridge Revenged](#). That led him to further exploration of the American radical right in his 2001 book [In Bad Company: America's Terrorist Underground](#).

This current (2007) work, *Terrorism as Crime: From Oklahoma City to Al-Qaeda and Beyond* introduces new research and provides perspective on both domestic and international terrorism. The original research explores the many everyday crimes terrorists commit to finance their activities, although this excerpt is more of a review and analysis of the current situation as we approach the sixth anniversary of Sept 11 .

This chapter has been edited for brevity and the copious references have been omitted in the transition to an html webpage; the webmaster has added the recommended books and outbound links.



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Today the United States remains just as vulnerable to terrorism as it was prior to 2001, if not more so. Despite President George W. Bush's promise to [capture Osama bin Laden "dead or alive."](#) reports indicate that bin Laden is still living, hiding somewhere along the Pakistan-Afghan border where he appears in videos for the Arabic satellite television station Aljazeera, exhorting his followers to mount new attacks against the United States and its allies in the Iraq war and thereby expand al-Qaeda into a global ideology. As Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon point out in their 2005 book, *The Next Attack*, bin Laden and his top lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, have now eluded capture for a period longer than it took the United States to fight World War II. Although al-Qaeda's organizational capabilities were badly damaged in the U.S.-led coalition's military strikes against Afghanistan, recent reports show that al-Qaeda, along with a resurgent Taliban have regrouped in the border region where they have grown in numbers, ruthlessness, and criminal sophistication, particularly in the area of heroin trafficking. According to CIA estimates, the cultivation of opium poppies in Afghanistan doubled from 2002 to 2003, then the 2002 amount tripled in 2004. Afghanistan now supplies nearly 90 percent of the world's heroin, providing an economic windfall to the Taliban and jihadist warlords who control major smuggling routes out of the country.

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, one of America's most important allies in the war on terrorism, has admitted that the trail for bin Laden has gone cold, and that the Qaeda leader currently has several thousand fighters at his command, including some of the organization's top figures. Purportedly among them is the former operational commander of the 1998 embassy bombings in East African, Ahdullah Ahmed Abdullab (aka "Saleh"), believed to be serving as bin Laden's commander for operations worldwide. A senior Pakistani official recently described the country's rugged South Waziristan province as the hub of al-Qaeda operations. Already an Islamic radical stronghold, the region has taken the brunt of recent U.S. air strikes—strikes that have killed an estimated 9,673 Afghan and Pakistani civilians since the U.S.-led campaign began in 2001. In early 2006, for instance, an unmarked U.S. Predator drone aircraft fired six missiles into a village in the Bajur tribal area, killing at least eighteen people in an attempt to take the life of Ayman al-Zawahiri. Yet the United States acted on bad intelligence, and most of those killed turned out to be women and children; local sympathy for al-Qaeda grew as a result, and the search for bin Laden became even more difficult.

According to officials from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India, guerrilla training camps have again sprung up in the border tribal regions, offering militants instruction in firearms, rocket-propelled grenades, and remote control bombs. Far from being a secret, al-Qaeda-produced videos of these camps are routinely shown throughout the Muslim world by Aljazeera and Al Arabiya. Referring to the camps, a militant leader told the New York Times: "We are better organized [today] and better skilled to fight an enemy that is high-tech and sophisticated."

American intelligence officials have repeatedly warned that al-Qaeda remains determined to transform its training and technological skills into a tightly choreographed operation that will surpass the nearly 3,000 casualties of the September 11 attacks. The next attacks on U.S. soil "are in the planning stages," warned bin Laden in a 2006 videotape released through Aljazeera, "and you will see them in the heart of your land as soon as the planning is complete." In public testimony given in 2005, CIA director Porter J. Goss declared that it "may only be a matter of time before al-Qaeda or another group attempts to use chemical, biological, radiological, and

nuclear weapons.” There has never been any doubt about bin Laden’s intentions in this area. Michael Scheuer (a.k.a., Anonymous, the former CIA agent who created a secret intelligence unit tracking bin Laden) notes that bin Laden has obtained a fatwah justifying a nuclear attack against America on religious grounds. “Muslims argue that the United States is responsible for millions of dead Muslims around the world,” says Scheuer, “so reciprocity would mean you could kill millions of Americans.” But such an attack would be contingent upon al-Qaeda’s criminal skills. As we saw earlier, in 1998 al-Qaeda attempted to buy weapons-grade uranium on the Sudanese black market; yet the Qaeda buyers were not physicists, and the enriched uranium they were offered turned out to be low-grade reactor fuel that was unusable for a weapon.

In [*Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe*](#), Harvard University’s Graham Allison argues that al-Qaeda is most likely to steal a small nuclear weapon from Russia’s arsenal or construct its own rudimentary nuclear bomb made from highly enriched uranium, and then smuggle the device into the United States inside a ship or truck. Bin Laden has admitted that the theft of a nuclear weapon is unnecessary: “It’s not difficult, not if you have contacts in Russia and with other militant groups,” bin Laden said. “They are available for \$10 million to \$20 million.” Today that possibility may be more real than ever before. Intelligence research indicates that the primary threat of nuclear terrorism stems from both the availability of materials and the potential willingness of terrorist groups to use them. Afghan heroin is now entering Russia from the south, aided in part by corrupt military officials. From there the heroin smuggling routes run through the country’s “nuclear belt”—a series of nuclear research and weapons facilities—thus raising concerns about al-Qaeda’s access to the black market in radioactive materials. Twice in 2002, Russian authorities interrupted terrorist plots to conduct surveillance of these weapons storage facilities. Even more troubling, the CIA has conceded that some Russian nuclear stockpiles are believed to be missing, perhaps sold to terrorists. “I can’t account for some of the material,” confessed Goss in his testimony.

Other experts contend that the ultimate security nightmare facing the United States is an attack in which the key factor is neither training nor technology, but commitment—the essential ingredient for suicide bombing. The tactic of suicide bombing—as it has been practiced in places like Jerusalem, Beirut, and Baghdad—requires little more than boarding a subway train or a bus and pulling the switch on a detonating device. A 2005 government security assessment warned that in addition to attacks against mass transit targets, al-Qaeda might use suicide bombers to derail trains or crash a truck carrying flammable material into trains. Still other targets considered vulnerable are shopping malls, high-rise apartment buildings, and, still, the aviation industry.

While hundreds upon hundreds of innocent civilians have died in suicide bombings over the years, three-fourths of all suicide bombings since 1968 have occurred between September 11, 2001, and the middle of 2005. The [research of Robert Pape on suicide bombing](#) indicates that al-Qaeda has been involved in at least seventeen bombings since 2002, most of them suicide missions, which killed approximately 700 people—more attacks and victims for al-Qaeda than in all the years before 9/11 combined. Moreover, intelligence estimates indicate that al-Qaeda remains intent on attacking large targets in the United States and that suicide bombings are clearly “a preferred method of attack.”

Most experts focus primarily on the method of the next attack and speak in generalities about potential targets. But Scheuer reminds us that the symbolism of place matters a great deal to bin Laden. “Bin Laden and his allies have demonstrated that they will attack in countries where their organizations have been hurt,” Scheuer writes, “and against the organizations they hold responsible for inflicting the damage. Al Qaeda operates very much on an eye-for-eye basis.” According to Scheuer, bin Laden once said that his attack in Nairobi was made in part because the U.S. embassy “housed the largest CIA center in the African Continent” and because it “had supervised the killing of at least 13,000 Somali civilians in the treacherous aggression against Muslims in that country.” When bin Laden’s Afghan camp was bombed by U.S. cruise missiles two months after the Nairobi bombing, intelligence sources told Time they had evidence that bin Laden was planning his boldest move yet—a strike on Washington or possibly New York City in an eye-for-eye retaliation; this assessment presaged the 9/11 attacks by nearly three years.

If the past is a prologue for al-Qaeda, then the place of its next attack is not hard to figure out. In a letter written from hiding in the summer of 2005 bin Laden’s top lieutenant, Ayman al-Zawahiri, talked about watching his wife and young daughter die after being crushed by the concrete of a collapsed ceiling in an American bombing of a school in Afghanistan. The U.S. Department of Defense, the government unit responsible for al-Zawahiri’s loss, is located, of course, in Washington—as are the agencies that have sponsored illegal detentions, torture, and secret CIA prisons. By the logic of retaliation, the government agencies that allowed the raping of Muslim men with broom handles at Abu Ghraib prison would be directly in bin Laden’s crosshairs.

How serious is al-Qaeda’s current threat against the United States? Official statements provide little help in answering that question. In his 2003 Congressional testimony, then-Attorney General John Ashcroft declared that “more than 3,000 foot soldiers of terror have been incapacitated. . . and hundreds of suspected terrorists have been identified and tracked throughout the U.S.” Two years later President Bush announced that “federal terrorism investigations have resulted in charges against more than 400 suspects, and more than half of those charged have been convicted.” Independent investigations reveal, however, that only fourteen federal terrorism cases can be linked to al-Qaeda, and most of them involved either the 9/11 conspiracy or plots that occurred around the same time, some of which are highly questionable (such as the cases against the “Lackawanna Six,” Yemeni Americans from Buffalo, New York, convicted of attending an al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan, and the mentally impaired Iyman Fans, who allegedly planned to take down the Brooklyn Bridge with a blowtorch).

HOMEGROWN AL-QAEDA AFFILIATES: THE SELF-STARTERS

Surely the most enduring lesson of September 11 is that the global rise of Islamic extremism threatens Americans at home. Yet the evolving face of terrorism can strike anywhere. Since 9/11, the jihadists have bombed their way from Tunisia to Indonesia, hitting synagogues, embassies, oil tankers, nightclubs, hotels, and airports. Amid the numerous attacks of the period since 2001, a new phenomenon began to appear. This is the trend toward nameless, homegrown terrorist cells whose members tend to seek al-Qaeda’s blessing for a specific attack, or what Benjamin and Simon call “self-starting terrorists.” The jihadist self-starter groups pose a special challenge

for intelligence and law enforcement agencies, argue Benjamin and Simon, because “[t]hey are likely to be smaller, comparatively self-contained and, if well run, more difficult to penetrate than the larger terrorist groups.” An analysis of three examples of the self-starter phenomenon may provide further insights into its potential threat.

Casablanca, 2003

On May 16, 2003, five bombs exploded within thirty minutes of each other in Casablanca, Morocco, killing forty-five people and wounding more than a hundred others in the deadliest terrorist attack in the nation’s history. Police later learned that these were suicide missions carried out by a group known as Salafiya Jihadiya (SA), or the Jihad of the Righteous Ancestors. Inspired by the radical preaching of an imam named Mohamed Fizazi, who belonged to the Qaeda-affiliated Moroccan Islamic Combat Group, the SA was made up of impoverished young men from the Casablanca slums and led by two Sunni extremists named Zakaria Miloudi and Youssef Fikri. Neither was trained by al-Qaeda, yet the Casablanca attack bore all the trademarks of a Qaeda operation (multiple, simultaneous strikes carried out against lightly defended targets). While the SA drew its ideology from a hard-line interpretation of Islamic law, it operated more like a street gang than a jihadist group. Much like a cult leader, Miloudi controlled every aspect of the gang’s life, even providing SA members with employment as street vendors. Miloudi himself was also a hashish dealer, whose trade provided funds for the Casablanca attacks. Fikri was the gang’s henchman. A former prisoner, Fikri and his crew terrorized local neighborhoods, meting out punishment to those who were considered “depraved.” Fikri allegedly committed a number of “Islamic” executions, including the murder of his uncle. Such straight-out thuggery was allowed to go unchecked by city police, and the SA morphed into something far more serious than a street gang.

The Casablanca attacks were intended to kill Jews, hundreds of them, and on that score the bombings were a failure. As Benjamin and Simon write, “This time... the terrorists’ lack of training showed.” Even so, the attacks are significant if for no other reason than the sheer number of jihadists who had volunteered for a martyrdom mission at the same time. Although they were not present themselves, Miloudi and Fikri had assembled a small army of suicide bombers. Shortly after 9:00 p.m., Friday, May 16, fourteen assailants (ages eighteen to twenty-four) strapped on explosive-filled backpacks and approached their targets in and around the city’s bustling tourist district: a Jewish-owned restaurant, a Jewish community center, and a Jewish cemetery, along with a Spanish social club and a five-star Kuwaiti-owned hotel. The bombers planned to simultaneously detonate their explosive devices.

At the restaurant, though, two bombers failed to get past the doorman, so, instead of perpetrating a mass murder, one of the attackers blew himself up, killing one bystander, while the other attacker walked down the street and blew himself up in front of the Belgian consulate, killing two police officers. Since it was Friday evening (the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath), the community center was empty; when the bombers pulled their plungers, they killed only themselves. The cemetery was empty, too (it hadn’t been used in years), so when one of the bombers blew himself up 150 yards away from the graveyard, he killed three Muslim teenagers sitting on a fountain smoking cigarettes. Most of the casualties occurred at the bar and hotel, where the bombers first slit the doorman’s throat to gain entry, then ignited the charges. Inside

the social club, two bombers blew themselves up, killing twenty people who were eating and playing bingo. In all, the SA killed thirty-three people, mostly Moroccans; no Jews were among the victims. Twelve of the bombers perished.

After the arrest and interrogation of Mioudi, Fikri, Mohamed Fizazi, and two of the would-be martyrs, a Spanish investigator told reporters that the Casablanca attack appeared to have been “99 percent local.” The motive behind the bombing was said to have been the United States invasion of Iraq.

Madrid, 2004

Ten months later, on March 11, 2004, another group emerged from the ground up, rather than through an international network, this time waging a series of coordinated bombings against the commuter train system in Madrid, Spain. These killed 201 people and wounded more than a thousand, making this the deadliest assault by a terrorist organization against civilians in Europe since the Lockerbie bombing in 1988 and the worst terrorist assault in modern Spanish history. Although vastly different from the Casablanca attacks, the Madrid bombings involved an important parallel: they, too, were the work of Moroccan criminals. According to the Spanish interior minister, the “brains behind the attack” was a thirty-three-year-old career criminal named Jamal Ahmidan. Among the terrorists to emerge from the nascent self-starter movement of the post-9/11 era, Ahmidan was one of the most sophisticated.

Jamal Ahmidan—nicknamed “El Chino” (or “The Chinese”) because of his narrow eyes—came from the northern Morocco city of Tetuan. In 1990, El Chino and his brother began smuggling large quantities of hashish, eventually establishing themselves as major drug traffickers with a network stretching from Morocco through Spain to Belgium and the Netherlands. Over the next several years, Ahmidan was arrested on drug charges by Spanish authorities and jailed on at least one occasion. In 2000, Ahmidan returned to Tetuan where he allegedly killed a man over a drug deal. El Chino was sentenced to prison where he subsequently converted to radical Islam. Upon his release in 2002, Ahmidan used a fake Belgian passport to enter Spain. He moved to Madrid and resumed his drug-dealing and he continued to shuttle between Madrid and Morocco using fake passports.

In late 2002, Ahmidan met a thirty-seven-year-old Tunisian named Sarhane Fakheth. Fakheth aspired to be a fashion model before becoming a doctoral student in economics but wound up as a successful real estate agent instead. Steeped in extremist ideology, Fakheth was a follower of Imad Yarkas, the Syrian-Spanish leader of a Madrid Qaeda cell dismantled in 2001. After Yarkas was jailed on suspicion that he helped plan the 9/11 attacks, an enraged Fakheth made it his mission to take care of Yarkas’s wife and six children. In 2003, Fakheth and El Chino began meeting at a small barbershop, named Paparazzi, situated in the heart of Madrid, only a ten-minute walk from Atocha station, the major hub of the city’s rail system. The Paparazzi was also an after-hours prayer hall for disciples of Takfir wal Hijra, a secretive Islamic sect active in the criminal underworld of North Africa. One of these disciples was a thirty-year-old Moroccan named Jamal Zougam, who owned a cell phone shop. He, too, was a confederate of Imad Yarkas. So it was here, at the Paparazzi barbershop, that the real estate agent, the drug dealer, and the shop owner became blood brothers bound by the Takfir belief that crime can be

committed in the name of jihad.

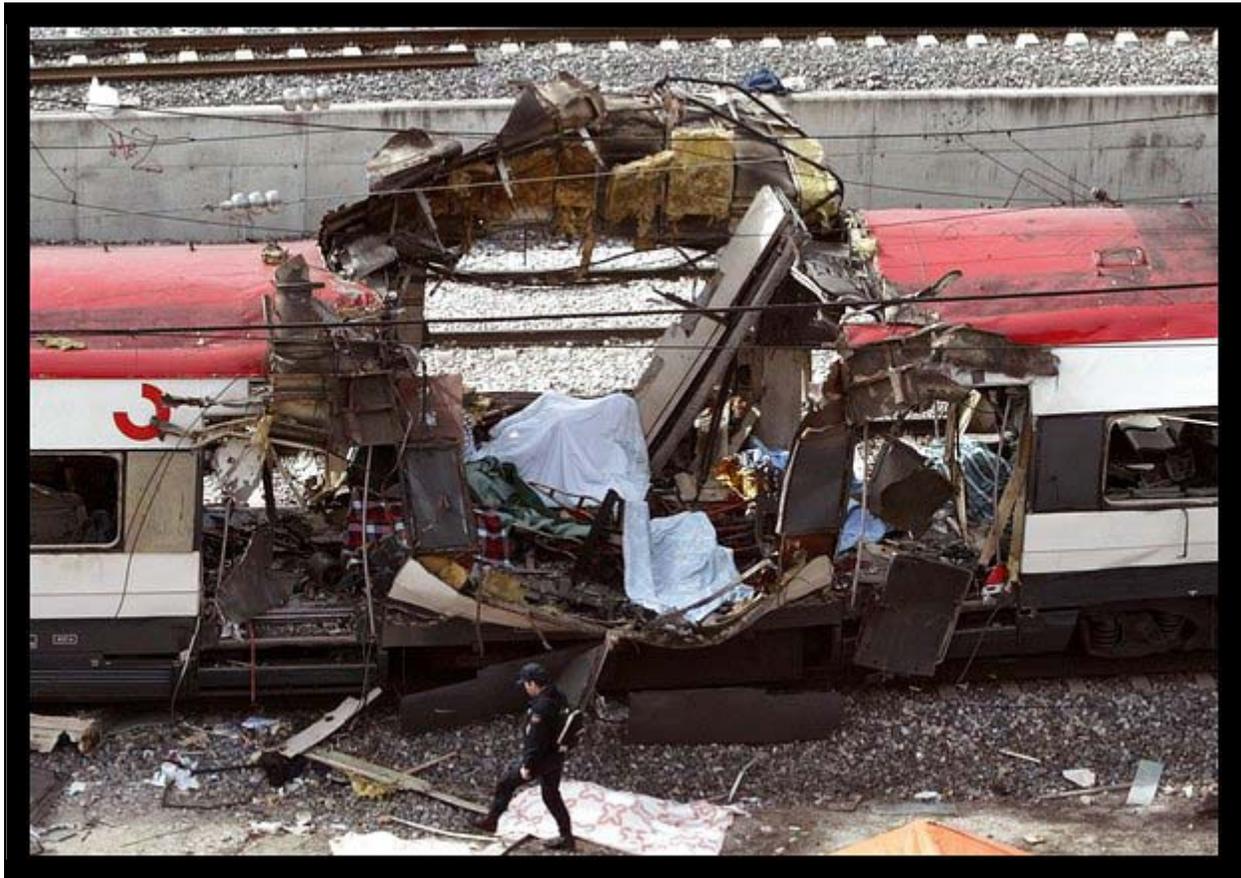
They also had another thing in common: by 2004, Ahmidan, Fakhet, and Zougam were all known to Spanish security forces. Because of his links to the former Madrid Qaeda cell, Fakhet was under surveillance by an anti-terrorist unit. While his phone calls were being recorded, they were not understood because Spanish authorities did not have Arabic translators to interpret the information being gathered. Spanish law enforcement had been aware of Zougam's links to Yarkas since at least 2001, when they searched his apartment. In a phone call monitored by authorities in August 2001, Zougam told Yarkas that he had been in contact with Mohamed Fizazi, who was connected to the terrorist cell that would launch the Casablanca bombings in 2003. Ahmidan was an informant for an anti-drug unit of the Civil Guard. Ironically, Ahmidan's active involvement in drug trafficking concealed his extremism. That became sweepingly apparent in late 2003 when another police informant failed to tell his superiors that El Chino had stated to the informant that he (El Chino) wanted to blow up the famous Santiago Bernabeu soccer stadium because of Spain's support for the United States invasion of Iraq. The threat was not taken seriously; rather it was chalked up to little more than loose talk between El Chino and his fellow drug informant. These local law enforcement lapses would eventually lead to an international crisis.

On October 19, 2003, bin Laden released an audiotape, broadcast over Aljazeera television, calling for attacks against "all the countries that participate in this unjust war [in Iraq—especially Britain, Spain, Australia, Poland, Japan, and Italy]." The next day, Ahmidan and Fakhet went to work planning the Madrid bombings. El Chino enlisted the help of some two dozen Moroccan drug smugglers who took charge of supplying the cell with money, weapons, explosives, cars, and safe houses. None of them had known ties to al-Qaeda. Ahmidan rented a cottage in the countryside near Madrid on January 28, 2004, turning it into a joint operations center and bomb factory. Then, in late February, he joined up with a former jailhouse contact, named Rafa Zuher, to arrange the exchange of 66 pounds of Moroccan hashish for 220 pounds of industrial dynamite and detonators stolen from a quarry in northern Spain. (Like Ahmidan, Rafa Zuher was a drug informant for the Civil Guard.) Upon transferring the ordinances to the bomb factory, Ahmidan was pulled over for speeding. The officer did not check inside the car, however, nor did he notice that Ahmidan's identity documents were forged.

After that, the fifteen-member Madrid cell came together with remarkable speed. Bomb building began on the morning of March 10. Consisting of a blue cloth sports bag, twenty-two pounds of compressed dynamite, and nails attached to a cell phone, provided by Zougam, each device was designed to detonate by use of the phone's alarm function. The entire operation—explosives, phones, prepaid calling cards, vehicles, and rent on the bomb factory—was funded by the drug smugglers at a cost of roughly \$50,000.

Shortly after 7:00 a.m. on Thursday, March 11, thirteen terrorists, dressed in wool caps and scarves, boarded four separate trains. All of the bombs were carefully timed to go off at the exact moment each of the trains pulled into Atocha station; one by one they would be triggered by cell phones. The terrorists exited their trains at about 7:20, leaving the sports bags under their seats. Four bombs (planted at the front, middle, and rear of a single train) exploded at 7:39, just as it pulled into Atocha station. Three bombs planted on another train went off simultaneously a block

away. At 7:41 two more bombs exploded on yet another train at a nearby station, while one last bomb went off on a train at Santa Eugenia station at 7:42. No terrorist organization had ever set off ten bombs at once. A total of 177 people died at the scene, and 24 more died while under medical care; 1,600 people were wounded and 100 of them required extensive hospital treatment. Most of the victims were students and blue-collar workers who could not afford to live in the city and so commuted from outlying neighborhoods.



Sixteen hours after the bombing, a rookie police officer combing through the debris heard a cell phone ringing from inside a blue sports bag. Opening it, he found an unexploded bomb. Through the cell phone memory, investigators were able to connect those involved in the attacks. On April 3, seven of the suspects, including Ahmidan and Fakhel, died in an apparent suicide explosion in a Madrid suburb. When police raided the home of one of the conspirators, they found 125,800 tabs of Ecstasy—one of the largest drug seizures in Spanish history. In all, police recovered nearly \$2 million in drugs and cash left over from the criminal activities coordinated by Ahmidan.

Three days after the bombings, Socialist candidate Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero was elected Spain's new prime minister in a surprise victory. The next day, after criticizing Spain's police agencies for failing to act on available intelligence concerning the bombers, Zapatero announced that he would withdraw Spain's troops from Iraq, saying that the U.S.-led occupation was "turning into a fiasco." Not only did the bombs wreck trains and kill innocent Spaniards, but as

Benjamin and Simon conclude, “they also helped trigger the fall of a Western democratic government.” More than that, like Carlos the Jackal, Jamal “El Chino” Ahmidan became something of a criminal legend among young Spanish jihadists; that others would imitate his terrorism was to be expected. Later that year Spanish authorities arrested more than forty suspects for plotting a sequel to the Madrid bombings—an attack with a half-ton of explosives on Spain’s criminal court. Nearly half the group had arrest records for charges ranging from drug trafficking to fraud and forgery.

London, 2005

On July 7, 2005, four coordinated rush-hour bombs exploded in central London, killing 56 bus and subway riders, and wounding 700 more, marking the bloodiest day in England since World War II. Two weeks later on July 21, a second attack was launched against the London Underground; this time, however, the bombs failed to explode, and no one was hurt. Nevertheless, the dual attacks were viewed by police as a piece of the same cloth.

The conspiracy centered on thirty-year-old Mohammad Siddique Khan, a British-born Pakistani from Leeds, an old mill town in northern England. A graduate of Leeds University and a natural born leader, Khan was a teaching assistant for disabled elementary school students and a community activist who worked with young immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. In 1999, Khan came under the influence of a Jamaican-born jihadist cleric known as Abdullah el-Faisal. With the outbreak of the war in Iraq in 2003, Khan began to distance himself from his old friends. He also started socializing with two youths of Pakistani descent with whom he had been working: an eighteen-year-old high-school dropout and delinquent named Hasib Hussain, and a twenty-two-year-old vocational-school graduate named Shahzad Tanweer, who was known as the neighborhood “rich kid” because his father owned a successful fish and chips shop.

In late March 2004, British counter-terrorism authorities rooted out a seven-man sleeper cell of ethnic Pakistanis in southern England, seizing 1,300 pounds of ammonium nitrate fertilizer that the Pakistanis intended to use in a plot to blow up London pubs, nightclubs, or trains in an act of revenge against Britain’s support for the United States’ invasion of Iraq. All seven men had known contacts with al-Qaeda and had spent time in Pakistan acquiring expertise in explosives. One of the men had allegedly made inquiries about buying an atomic bomb from Russian mafia figures in Belgium. Operation Crevice, as the investigation was known, led to the discovery of Mohammad Siddique Khan, who had been in telephone contact with one of the cell members.

Authorities decided that Khan did not constitute a terrorist threat, however, and that November, he and Tanweer traveled to Lahore, Pakistan, where they spent time studying religion at a madrassa. (Hasib Hussain made a similar trip to Pakistan in July 2004). When they returned, Khan quit his teaching job and left his wife and infant child, while Tanweer and Hussain began to demonstrate a blatant disdain for all things western. A friend of Tanweer’s would later recall that Tanweer “was sick of it all, all the injustice [especially] all the Iraqi kids who die.” Around this time a fourth jihadist joined the cell: Germaine Lindsey (a.k.a., Ahdullah Jamal), a nineteen-year-old Jamaican-born Brit and Muslim convert from the Leeds suburbs, who reportedly befriended Khan and Tanweer in Pakistan. Like Khan, Lindsey was also on a list of names collected in connection with Operation Crevice, though he, too, was never listed as a major

terrorism suspect. Investigators believed that Khan and the others met with hardened extremists while in Pakistan and that those meetings were crucial in turning the four young men into suicide bombers.

In late 2004, Khan and his confederates began meeting at a Leeds bookstore called Iqra the Learning Centre. “Iqra not only sold hatemongering Islamist literature,” opined Thomas Friedman in the New York Times, “but . . . was the sole distributor of Islamgames, a U.S.-based company that makes video games . . . [featuring] apocalyptic battles between defenders of Islam and opponents. . . . Guess what: Video games matter.” Through a series of meetings held at the bookstore over the next several months, Khan’s crew stockpiled explosives and planned their bombings to coincide with the opening of the G8 Summit. The plans also included notifying authorities that their passports had been lost, possibly to cover evidence of trips to Pakistan.

Around this time, the second cell was congregating at a Fitness First gym in North London. Then, working out of a North London housing project, Muktar Ibrahim, a twenty-seven-year-old British citizen born in Eritrea, and Yasin Omar, a twenty-four-year-old Ethiopian who posed as a Somali refugee to gain legal residency in Britain, along with a British resident born in Somalia and another man from East Africa, began constructing explosives inside Tupperware-like containers. These bombs would be used in “follow on” assaults against the London Underground. Ibrahim was the undisputed leader of the operation. A former gang member, he was convicted of a string of muggings and street crimes in 1995 and sentenced to five years in prison. During his incarceration, Ibrahim became a devout and radicalized Muslim. Either in prison or later through the North London Central Mosque in Finsbury Park, Ibrahim became acquainted with Richard Reid, the so-called “shoe bomber” who attempted to blow up a commercial airliner over the Atlantic in late 2001.

Sometime in early to mid-June, Khan’s cell moved to the final phase of preparation at a bomb factory in Leeds. Four crude devices were constructed, each containing less than ten pounds of military-grade C-4 plastic explosives, Czech-made Semtex explosives, and TATP—a highly unstable explosive composed of common chemicals available from hardware stores (acetone, sulfuric acid, and hydrogen peroxide), which is known among Palestinian bomb-makers as the “Mother of Satan.” Once built, the bombs were stored in coolers to stabilize the explosives. Like the devices used in the Madrid bombing, these devices would not be detonated by the bombers themselves, but by some kind of timing device set to go off within 50 seconds of each other. (The source of the explosives and timers remain unknown to the public.) Whereas the Madrid terrorists would exit the train before the bombs were detonated, Khan’s crew would remain seated and die in the explosions. On June 27, three of the four bombers traveled to London and conducted a dry run on the route they would take ten days later.

They arrived at King’s Cross station in London carrying backpacks at 8:30 am. on Thursday, July 7 (“7/7”). Minutes after the 311 train left King’s Cross, a blast tore through the lead car, killing twenty-one. A second bomb went off a few minutes later on train 204 near Liverpool Street, killing seven. The next one exploded at 8:50 aboard train 216 as it left Edgewood station, blowing a crater in the floor, tearing through a wall and into a train passing in the opposite direction, and killing seven. At 9:47, the final bomb went off on a bus in Tavistock Square, killing thirteen. In all forty-eight people died at the scene, including the four terrorists, whose

bodies were later identified when investigators found personal documents close to the seats where they had been sitting when the blasts occurred.



Subsequently, on July 21, Ibrahim’s cell made its move. Four assailants boarded four different trains and tried to set off explosives carried in sports bags, and then fled on foot when the bombs failed to detonate. All four men were caught on closed-circuit security televisions, and subsequently apprehended. Investigators later told reporters that the failed bombs were made of the same material used by both Richard Reid and the 7/7 cell—TATP; they also added that one goal of the second set of attackers may have been to divert resources away from the primary 7/7 investigation.

After authorities traced Yasin Omar’s travels by monitoring cell phone activity from England to France to Italy, he was arrested in Rome, whereupon he claimed that the July 21 group was not working for al Qaeda and that the London bombs were “copy-cat” attacks intended to draw attention to anger over the war in Iraq. Then, eight weeks after 7/7, al-Qaeda released a statement from Ayman al-Zawahiri, carried on Aijazeera, praising the bombings as a retaliation for the “inferno in Iraq” and adding that Prime Minister Tony Blair was conducting a “crusader war against Islam.” The video also featured a statement from Mohammad Siddique Khan, shot months before 7/7, justifying his actions. Khan praised “our beloved sheik, Osama bin Laden,” and referred obliquely to Iraq. “Until you stop the bombing, gassing, imprisonment and torture of my people,” he said, “we will not stop this fight. We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you will taste the reality” of this situation. Investigators concluded that Khan was not directed by al-Qaeda but that the group had somehow managed to acquire his video and then released it so as to bolster its reputation.

Policing the Self-Starter Problem

For law enforcement, the jihadist self-starter phenomenon carries a number of unanticipated implications. First, it transcends ethnic and national causes by blending ideological fervor with

common criminality rooted inside the target country. Self-starters are well integrated inside their home countries, but inscribe their actions in a global perspective: increasingly, the inspiration for terrorism is the United States' involvement in Iraq, which is seen as part of a global trend toward cultural domination. As Richard Clarke notes, there have been twice as many terrorist attacks outside Iraq in the three years after 9/11 than in the three years before. Simply put, self-starters think globally but act locally. Because this violates assumptions about traditional terrorist threats, the self-starter phenomenon complicates law enforcement strategies to combat it.

Second, because self-starter groups represent a mutating form of terrorism, the phenomenon indicates that the centrally controlled al-Qaeda of 9/11 has undergone a significant change. Although self-starters are driven by a reverence for Osama bin Laden, most of them are too young to have been battle-hardened by the wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Somalia, and Chechnya. Likewise, they are too young to have trained in the Qaeda camps of Afghanistan. Instead, investigators believe they learn their terrorist strategies over the Internet; thus, there is no need for terrorist training camps. The result, as we have seen, can be a mastery of criminal method and organization designed to exploit technologies and everyday activities of local communities. Self-starter groups are also more heterogeneous than traditional terrorist outfits. They are comprised of individuals from varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Poor, undereducated slum dwellers join university students and young professionals, the former bringing street smarts and criminal sensibilities to the group, the latter bringing the capacity for sophisticated recruitment and proselytizing activities, along with technical skills for complex operational functions. The two factions are bound by a common sense of alienation—of not fitting into the folds of modernity—and by the allure of fundamentalism. Coming from various nations, some self-starters may hold dual nationalities, making it easier for them to travel legitimately—that is, without having to create fake passports, bribe border police, or falsify claims about fleeing political persecution.

Third, self-starter networks are more decentralized and less structured than al-Qaeda. Instead of being organized through top-down command structures, self-starter groups rely on friendship and kinship arrangements in motivating members to carry out their attacks. Thus, if one leader is taken off the streets, another comes along to take his place. This makes law-enforcement's search for outside "masterminds" pointless. As Marc Sageman's research shows, the willingness to carry out suicide bombings depends heavily on a dynamic within a cell in which members are pressured to meet one another's expectations. Central to this dynamic is the fact that these cells often form from pre-existing social groups—what Sageman calls "just a bunch of guys." Criminologist James Q. Wilson defines this dynamic as simply "the instinct to be part of a team." Self-starters are less likely to be drawn together and indoctrinated by a radical imam at the local mosque than they are to congregate secretly, in a bookstore, barbershop, gymnasium, or a prison cell, where they hold intense discussions that lead to the decision to mount an attack and to commit the crimes that support it. In this respect they are much like the European left-wing terrorists of the 1970s, who joined their groups less out of ideological commitment than some type of common experience, such as living in the same neighborhood or hanging out at the same bar. This is a trait that self-starters also share with elements of the American radical Right of the 1990s. The neo-Nazi skinheads who became foot soldiers for the Aryan Republican Army, for example, initially met through the Philadelphia white power rock scene—an experience that set the stage for their recruitment into the American terrorist underground. The decentralized nature of jihadist self-starter cells means that in the future a greater number of terrorists and terrorist

plots may escape the notice of intelligence services altogether.

But at the end of the day, self-starters are still Islamic terrorists, and they share some important commonalities with the archetypical cases of terrorist-oriented criminality explored in this research. Most notably—and in marked similarity to the way precursor crimes were ignored by law enforcement in the lead-up to the first World Trade Center bombing—aggressive law enforcement may have halted some of the self-starter conspiracies before they mutated into terrorist cells.

When Casablanca police failed to crack down on the Salafiya Jihadiya gang for victimizing local communities, they opened up opportunities for more strident forms of violence to come. Youssef Fikri in particular, if we are to believe the international press reports, was known in his neighborhood as a human predator, committing executions of people who were guilty of nothing more than failing to conform to Fikri's idiosyncratic world view. A similar law enforcement failure is found in the case of Jamal Ahmidan. Before meeting Sarhane Fakhret and undergoing a conversion to the secretive Islamic sect Takfir wal Hijra, El Chino had killed another man (a crime for which he did precisely two years in prison), committed passport fraud, and peddled drugs for more than fifteen years. Yet he remained free to plan and coordinate the train bombings in Madrid. Like Mohammed Salemech in the lead-up to the World Trade Center bombing, Ahmidan was actually in police custody for a routine traffic violation while in possession of the explosives that would be used in the attack, but was allowed to go free despite the fact that he was traveling with forged identity papers. Further, when Ibrahim he was fifteen, he was sentenced to five years in youth detention for using a knife during a street robbery. Upon his release, however, Ibrahim was granted British citizenship, even though he had a serious criminal record. Taking advantage of this lapse of judgment, Ibrahim went on to execute the London attacks of July 21.

Once again, the implication for law enforcement is that when authorities concentrate on the everyday enforcement of law, they may preempt more disastrous events.

There is, however, a further difficulty that resonates throughout the years: namely, the problems associated with the gathering and disseminating of information on terrorist conspiracies. The 1993 World Trade Center bombing; the 1998 East African embassy bombings; the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord; the Order; and the Aryan Republican Army—every one of these conspiracies was shot through with informants who supplied their handlers with leads and links related to terrorist planning and operations. And in nearly every case (the CSA being the rare exception), intelligence officials failed to act on the information available to them. Intelligence is the result of information that has been subjected to analysis and synthesis. Here is where the historical record can help us understand the threat posed by jihadist self-starter groups of the twenty-first century. If law enforcement agencies are to avoid mistakes of the past, they must do a better job of transforming information into actionable intelligence. So far, at least in Europe and North Africa, law enforcement's record is dismal.

The three leaders of the Madrid bombings were all under government surveillance while they were planning the attacks in 2004. Information collected from one of them—the Moroccan cell phone expert Jamal Zougam—from as far back as 2001 would connect to Mohamed Fizazi, who

would go on to play a role in the Casablanca attacks of 2003, yet that information was not acted upon. Information from another— Fakhret—would set off the Qaeda alarm bell, but it was ignored as well. And information from the undercover drug agent El Chino could have given agents early warning about a bombing plot intended to retaliate against Spain's support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq. But nobody bothered to connect the dots; nobody subjected the information to analysis and synthesis. The FBI and CIA made a similar mistake prior to 9/11 when they failed to place two of the hijackers, Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, on U.S. government watch lists. Immigration made an analogous error when, after flying from Miami to Madrid in January 2001, Mohamed Atta was allowed by INS agents to re-enter the United States despite the fact that he had overstayed his previous visa. British counter-terrorism officials also went to sleep in the run-up to the London bombings. During his 2004 trip to Pakistan, 7/7 bomber Shehzad Tanweer visited a guerrilla training camp north of Islamabad where he expressed a desire to assassinate President Musharraf. Intelligence services had previously monitored both the leader of the July 7 attacks, Mohammed Siddique Khan, and co-conspirator Germaine Lindsey, as part of the anti-terror inquiry Operation Crevice, but failed to follow up on their activities.

Self-Starters in America

As of this writing, the jihadist self-starter trend has made only a blip on the intelligence radar screen in America. Nevertheless, on at least one occasion, the response has been a model of intelligent anti-terrorist policing. During a routine investigation of a string of armed robberies of gas stations in Torrance, California, in July 2005, police uncovered a larger conspiracy being directed from behind the walls of the state prison at Sacramento. In 2003, Kevin James, then a twenty-seven-year-old American citizen also known as Shakyh Shahaab Murshid, used a radical interpretation of Islam to recruit followers while doing time at Folsom Prison. Three fellow prisoners—two American citizens, including a former Los Angeles gang member, and a legal resident from Pakistan— joined James's conspiracy to "kill infidels or non-believers" in a guerrilla war against the United States. Upon their release in 2004, the three recruited jihadists began robbing gas stations, using the proceeds to buy weapons and a computer which they used to conduct surveillance on possible targets, including several synagogues, the Los Angeles International Airport branch of the Israeli airline El Al, and a National Guard recruiting office. James, now incarcerated in Sacramento, directed the plan from his prison cell. James was not connected to al-Qaeda; however, the attacks were scheduled to take place on September 11, 2005. The break in the case came not by an elite federal counter-terrorism unit working under authority of the USA Patriot Act, but by local police who found a cell phone one of the robbers had lost during a gas station stick-up. The subsequent arrests gained national attention, leading FBI director Robert Mueller III to proclaim that the attacks "were well on the way" to being carried out and thereby underscoring the threat of "homegrown extremists" in American prisons and elsewhere.

America faces an emerging threat from its own self-starter jihad groups and a long-standing threat from al-Qaeda central, but neither threat compares to the potential danger now dominating policy discussions in Washington.

BLOWBACK: AL-QAEDA IN IRAQ

From the start, America’s war in Iraq never achieved the popular support its neoconservative architects expected. After U.S. forces failed to discover either weapons of mass destruction or a connection between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein—the Bush administration’s stated purposes for going to war, both of which were based on faulty and willfully distorted intelligence—pessimism about the war reached a dangerous level, calling into question whether the invasion was necessary in the first place. By 2005, more than half of the American public believed that the war had not made the United States safer. The following year a global poll found that 60 percent of respondents from 35 countries believed that the war had increased the likelihood of terrorist attacks around the world. The war in Iraq was officially condemned by the governments of Russia, China, France, Germany, Canada, Pakistan, Spain, and others. It was also denounced by the Vatican, Nelson Mandela, William F. Buckley, and half a dozen Nobel Prize laureates. Protests against the war drew millions of people from across the globe; the February 15, 2003, protest alone attracted more than six million people from more than 600 cities, prompting the 2004 Guinness Book of Records to declare it the largest mass protest in history.

A central concern of the worldwide protest movement has been the number of Iraqi civilians who have died as a consequence of the American invasion. While there is no mathematics of certainty in tallying war-related fatalities, a widely reported estimate is that of the Iraq Body Count (IBC) project, a London-based group of academics and human-rights and anti-war activists. Extracting data from an analysis of over 10,000 press reports, the IBC estimated that 24,865 civilian non-combatants were killed in Iraq during the first two years of the war (between March 2003 and March 2005, though the number would increase to 650,000 by September 2006). Of this number, IBC found that 37 percent (or 9,200 Iraqis) were killed by U.S.-led forces, mostly in air strikes. Another 36 percent (8,951 Iraqis) were killed by post-invasion criminal gangs, while 9 percent of the civilian victims (2,237 Iraqis) were killed by anti-occupation insurgents. (Killers of the remaining 18 percent could not be identified.) When the estimated 9,673 civilians killed by U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan are added to the 9,200 civilians killed by U.S.-led forces in Iraq, the number of casualties totals 18,873. In other words, between 2001 and 2005 the United States military was involved in killing three times as many civilians as were killed by terrorists in 9/11, Casablanca, Madrid, London, and Iraq put together. Figures like these, combined with headlines about Iraq’s persistent slide toward civil war, have led such influential neoconservative scholars as Francis Fukuyama, an early supporter of the war, to conclude that the United States has overreacted to 9/11 and failed to use its dominant military power prudently. As such, the war on terrorism and the resulting bloodshed in Iraq and Afghanistan have contributed to the pervasive idea that Islam is under siege—feeding the fury that helps radical Islamists win adherents throughout the Middle East and Europe.

<p>Current estimates from the Iraq Body Count Project (click for more info and methodology):</p>	 <table border="1" data-bbox="1112 1617 1299 1690"> <tr> <td>Min</td> <td>Max</td> </tr> <tr> <td>70663</td> <td>77183</td> </tr> </table>	Min	Max	70663	77183
Min	Max				
70663	77183				

NOTE – body count figures will only be valid if you are connected to the internet

No volume better summarizes the terrorist threat emanating from Iraq than the [National Intelligence Council's 2005 report titled "Mapping the Global Future."](#) (The National Intelligence Council is the CIA director's think tank.) The report, which took a year to produce and includes the analysis of 1,000 U.S. and foreign experts, concludes that Iraq not only has replaced Afghanistan as the training ground for the next generation of "professionalized" terrorists, but also has provided terrorist groups with increased recruitment and fundraising capabilities and real-life opportunities to develop technical skills. The American-led invasion has turned Iraq into a magnet for international terrorist activity. Hundreds of foreign jihadists have crossed into Iraq, where they have found tons of unprotected weapons caches that have been used against U.S. troops. These foreign fighters, who are believed to make up a large portion of today's suicide bombers, are forming alliances with former Baathist fighters and other insurgents—including the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's arm of al-Qaeda in Iraq. The NIC's greatest concern is the possibility that al-Qaeda in Iraq may acquire biological or nuclear weapons. These assessments led CJA Director Goss to warn the U.S. Senate in 2005: "These jihadists who survive will leave Iraq experienced in, and focused on, acts of urban terrorism. They represent a potential pool of contacts to build transnational terrorist cells, groups and networks in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and other countries."

Jihadists trained in Iraq have already established "transnational terrorist cells" in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, where they have begun to carry out attacks. Among them was a plot against some of Saudi Arabia's key oil and gas fields, timed to coincide with the U.S. energy shortages brought on by Hurricane Katrina in September 2005. A month earlier, al-Zarqawi's organization reached across the Iraqi border into Jordan to carry out a rocket attack that narrowly missed a United States warship in the Red Sea port of Aqaba. Then, on November 9, the group bombed three hotels in Amman, killing fifty-seven people, most of them Muslims, in Jordan's deadliest terrorist attack ever. To execute the strikes, al-Zarqawi's organization recruited four Iraqi suicide bombers, including a husband and wife team whose children had been killed by American troops in Baghdad.

If we use those attacks as background for understanding al-Qaeda in Iraq, we find that the threat to U.S. security turns on three issues. First, al-Zarqawi once pledged his allegiance to bin Laden; bin Laden then urged al-Zarqawi to attack the United States; and, even though al-Zarqawi is no longer alive, the FBI continues to believe that al-Qaeda in Iraq may be planning to broaden its campaign to include strikes in the United States. Second, al-Qaeda in Iraq reportedly has sufficient resources to mount these attacks. The organization is said to bankroll its operations through extortion, kidnapping, and graft. It may also have benefited from the wholesale theft of a portion of Iraq's gasoline supply, perhaps earning millions of dollars on the black market. Last, al-Qaeda in Iraq has developed a loose arrangement of sympathizers in Europe who officials believe to have provided support to various terrorist operations in a number of countries. Sympathizers in Belgium, in particular, have offered jihadists safe haven, false documents, and financing. Some of these jihadists have made their way to Iraq where they trained and fought with al-Zarqawi's forces. One of the Madrid bombers, for example, stopped in Belgium en route to Iraq where he blew himself up in a suicide bombing. Belgium sympathizers also provide a support network for jihadists returning from Iraq and seeking travel elsewhere. Not only do these sympathizers hold European Union passports, but they also look like northern Europeans, thus

allowing them to gain easy access to soft targets in western countries. In fact, French intelligence has learned that Islamic terrorist networks in Europe are increasingly trying to recruit Caucasian women to handle terrorist logistics because they would be less likely to raise suspicion.

Therefore, our questions are twofold. If and when they arrive on American soil, what criminal skills will these jihadists bring with them? And, what routine activities are they likely to exploit?

The first question is easily answered: they will bring highly sophisticated skill sets that could have never been achieved at al-Qaeda's camps in Taliban-run Afghanistan. These include surveillance techniques; methods of evading U.S. electronic signals and human intelligence; methods of penetrating police and intelligence services; methods of evading and attacking cyber security; methods of extortion, kidnapping, and beheading; the use of improvised explosive devices (or IEDs), some of which are triggered by encrypted radio signals or laser beams; sniper skills; and a host of techniques for carrying out suicide bombings, including the use of European women on bicycles.

The second question is not so easily answered, but any discussion of the threat must begin with potential methods used by members of al-Qaeda in Iraq to enter the United States. Due to increased security screening at U.S. airports, terrorists must consider alternative means of entry. One scenario involves the porous 1,400-mile border between the United States and Mexico, which hundreds of thousands of people cross illegally every year. This has raised concerns that members of al-Qaeda in Iraq may exploit the current crossing procedures to make their way into the United States. One way to do this is by paying smuggling networks, especially those operated by organized gangs.

Another method is to exploit a loophole in the system that separates the large number of illegal Mexican entrants, who are automatically refused entry, from citizens of other countries who are allowed in, pending immigration hearings. The Department of Homeland Security refers to these people by the acronym OTM (for "Other Than Mexicans"). Although most OTMs come from other Latin American countries, some come from countries outside the hemisphere. Either way, their numbers are staggering. In 2004, some 44,000 OTMs were admitted to the U.S., while the number of illegal OTMs who were apprehended totaled 65,814. The concern, then, is that terrorists can either legally enter as OTMs, or blend into the human flood of illegal immigrants coming across the border. Either way, the concern is justified. In a 2005 hearing before a House Appropriations Committee, FBI Director Mueller testified:

"The FBI has received reports that individuals with known al-Qaeda connections have attempted to enter the U.S. illegally using alien smuggling rings and assuming Hispanic appearances. An FBI investigation into these reports continues."

It is not clear how many of these al-Qaeda operatives tried to enter the United States. Nor is it clear if they attempted to enter as OTMs with fake passports. Moreover, Mueller did not identify the countries from which they came. A week after Mueller's testimony, though, an FBI official told reporters that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was planning to strike in America, adding that it "would be easy" to infiltrate the United States through the southern border. According to information obtained by the CIA during the interrogation of a member of al-Qaeda in Iraq, who

was taken into custody in 2004 (there is of course no way to determine the conditions under which the information was obtained), the terrorists' plan involved obtaining a "visa to Honduras" and then traveling across Mexico. An operative could then "bribe his way into the U.S." at the border. From there, the plan involved hitting soft targets in the United States, including "movie theaters, restaurants and schools."

THE RADICAL RIGHT

In the wake of 9/11, it is easy to forget that racist, anti-government and anti-abortion groups have been responsible for nearly all of the terrorist attacks in the United States over the past two decades—the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and the 9/11 attacks are the exceptions. The American radical Right was responsible for both the Oklahoma City bombing and the bombing at the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, as well as bombings of abortion clinics, the assassination of abortion providers, multiple cases of individual rampages, mass shootings at U.S. high schools, and bogus anthrax mailings. These attacks killed and injured scores of Americans. By no means has this threat diminished, even though it receives little media attention. In the ten-year period since the bombing in Oklahoma City, the radical Right has been the source of some sixty terrorist plots. These have included plans to bomb federal buildings, refineries, banks, bridges, synagogues, and mosques. The radical Right has also assassinated police officers, minorities, and informants and attempted to assassinate politicians judges, and civil rights activists. And it has amassed machine guns, explosives, missiles, and biological and chemical weapons.

Like their predecessors the new generation of right-wing terrorists has financed its plots by robbing banks and armored cars, counterfeiting, and stealing cars. So what's new? Kidnapping is a new means of raising money for the radical Right; so are car-jacking, drug trafficking, and credit card theft. Some of these extremists have also become more audacious in their showcasing of imagery and style. In April 2004, for instance, neo-Nazi skinhead Sean Gillespie actually videotaped himself as he firebombed an Oklahoma City synagogue for a film he was making to inspire other racists to violent revolution.

Another new development, and potentially more worrisome, is the fact that America's current defender of national security, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), does not consider the radical Right to be a threat to the nation's safety. In a controversial report released in 2005, the DHS contended that future terrorist threats will come primarily from al-Qaeda and other foreign jihad groups, as well as domestic radical Islamic groups. The report also lists left-wing domestic groups, such as the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), as terrorist threats, but it does not mention anti-government groups or white supremacist or antiabortion organizations. Among the sixty plots waged by the radical Right over the past ten years, however, several cases demonstrate that the movement is still worthy of the government's attention. One case in particular, and the final case explored here, is not only an outstanding example of that threat, but is also an outstanding illustration of what it means to police terrorism in the new millennium.

Chemical Warfare

The story begins in April 2004 when an informant in rural McKenzie, Tennessee (population 2,489), provided an officer of the state's drug task force with information about a

methamphetamine dealer who had asked the informant questions about acquiring nuclear waste. The Tennessee Bureau of Investigation passed the tip onto the FBI office in Jackson, and an agent began an investigation of the suspect, a thirty-nine-year-old farmhand from McKenzie named Demetrius “Van” Crocker, who was known to local authorities as a member of a white supremacist group during the 1980s. The informant told the FBI that Crocker “had absolute hatred for the United States government and had made comments . . . to the effect that the country needs to be taken back by the people.”

On September 16, the informant introduced Crocker to an undercover FBI agent. In the course of that meeting, Crocker told the agent that he hated the government, adding that “it would be a good idea if somebody could detonate some sort of weapon of mass destruction in Washington, D.C., while both the U.S. Congress and Senate were in session.” Crocker said that he admired Adolf Hitler and the Nazi ideology, that he hated Jews, and that he believed that setting up a concentration camp for Jewish insurance executives “would be a desirable endeavor.”

The agent met with Crocker again on September 29. This time Crocker candidly talked about his previous experience working at an electroplating factory where he had had access to various chemicals. Once, Crocker said, he had produced a batch of nitroglycerin and went on to describe how to use it in a booby trap. On another occasion, Crocker said he had produced mustard gas.

Saying that he owned an AK 47 and would willingly kill any cop who tried to take it away from him, Crocker also boasted of his ability to “kill government people” and blacks with his assault rifle. He then inquired about the agent’s ability to get automatic weapons and chemical weapons, including nerve agents. Crocker said that he had targeted a federal courthouse and that he “enjoyed hearing the news” of the sarin nerve-gas attack on a Japanese subway system years earlier. Crocker asked if the agent had access to VX, a nerve agent. The agent did not have access to VX, but said he could get Difluoro, a precursor and key component for sarin nerve gas, stolen from Pine Bluff Arsenal, the state’s weapons depot.

On October 7, Crocker met with the agent again and gave him \$500 cash to steal the Difluoro from Pine Bluff. The agent told Crocker he could also deliver some stolen C-4 plastic explosives to him, to which Crocker enthusiastically agreed.

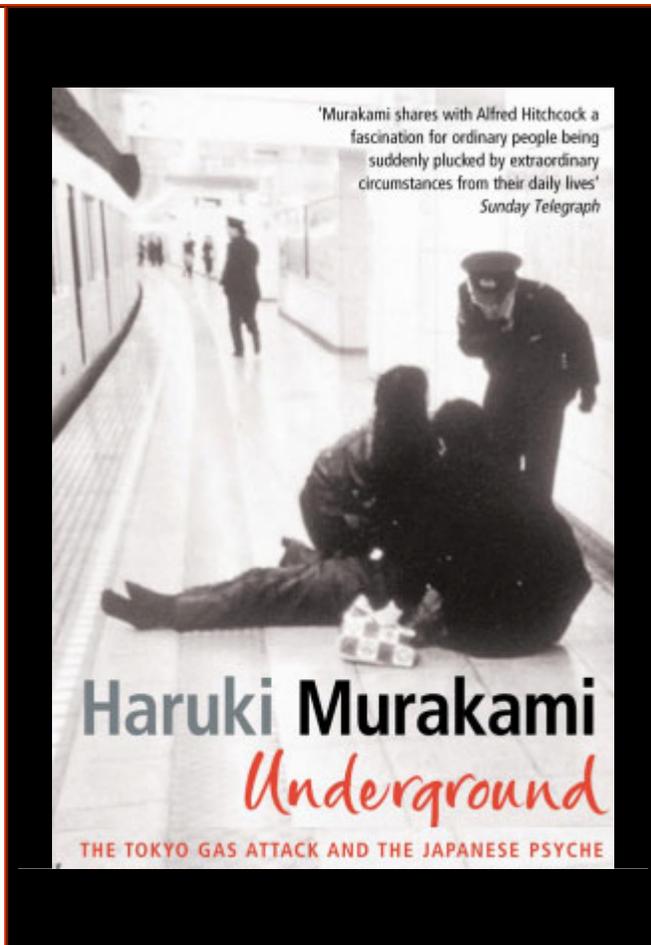
The two met for the final time in Jackson on October 25, where the agent gave Crocker a container marked “Difluoro” and a block of C-4. Both the precursor and the explosives were made of inert substances, however, and at this point Crocker was surrounded by FBI agents and arrested on charges of attempting to acquire weapons of mass destruction intended to “blow up” government buildings. The seven-month federal investigation was, in effect, a sting.

The Crocker case is significant on a number of levels. To begin with, it signals a trend: In recent years domestic terrorists have been arrested with a number of poisons, including ricin (a deadly white powder distilled from castor beans), *Yersinia pestis* (which causes bubonic plague), and bacteria that cause cholera. Yet sarin nerve gas, developed by Nazi doctors during World War II, is one of the deadliest weapons in the terrorist’s arsenal, 500 times more toxic than the cyanide discovered at the CSA compound in 1984, in what was then the biggest terrorism investigation ever conducted by the FBI. When the Japanese religious cult Aum Shinrikyo released sarin into

the Tokyo subways in 1995, it killed twelve people and sent more than 5,000 to hospitals. Witnesses said that the subway entrances resembled battlefields as injured commuters lay gasping on the ground with blood gushing from their noses and mouths. The attack demonstrated how easy it is for a small group to engage in chemical warfare. Sarin is made into a weapon by synthesizing the gas with other readily available chemicals; and today, the instructions for doing that can be found on the Internet, in books like *Silent Death* available on Amazon, or in self-published books like *BioToxic Weapons* sold at gun shows. Experts claim that a college chemistry student could follow these instructions.

On March 20, 1995, followers of the religious cult Aum Shinrikyo unleashed lethal sarin gas into cars of the Tokyo subway system, an attack that exposed Tokyo authorities' total lack of preparation to cope with such fiendish urban terrorism. Many died, many more were injured. This is acclaimed Japanese novelist Murakami's (*The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, etc.) nonfiction account of this episode. It is riveting. What he mostly does here is listen to and record, in separate sections, the words of both victims, people who "just happened to be gassed on the way to work," and attackers. Cumulatively, their tales fascinate as they weave together to create a complex narrative. The attackers do not regret having been, members of Aum. As with the work of Studs Terkel, which Murakami acknowledges is a model for this work, the author's voice is seldom heard. He offers no grand explanation, no existential answer to what happened, and the book is better for it. This is a compelling tale of how capriciously and easily tragedy can destroy the ordinary, and how we try to make sense of it all.

Information from Amazon.com or [publisher's website with excerpt](#). Also of interest: Robert Jay Lifton, *Destroying the World to Save It: Aum Shinrikyo, Apocalyptic Violence, and the New Global Terrorism*



The greatest mistake made by authorities over the years has been to underestimate terrorists. That was the lesson of Munich, of 9/11, of Oklahoma City, of Madrid, and of London, to mention but a few instances of massive intelligence failures. The Crocker case, then, should be of profound concern to Homeland Security. Given the radical Right's hoary history of murder and mayhem, Crocker's mere intention to use sarin nerve gas is a far greater threat to national security than anything done by ELF. They have killed no one.

And if this were not enough, it is entirely possible that the radical Right's intention to use chemical weaponry against the U.S. government could be of interest to the jihad movement. Shortly before he was killed in a roadside attack near Kabul, Afghanistan, in November 2001,

Spanish journalist Julio Fuentes found 300 bottles of Russian-made sarin nerve gas at an abandoned Qaeda base known as Farm Hada, some 25 miles south of Jalalabad. In May 2004, an IED containing sarin nerve agent exploded near a military convoy en route to Baghdad International Airport, causing two soldiers to be hospitalized with low-level chemical exposure. Experts claimed that the sarin gas had been smuggled into Iraq by terrorists from Syria. It was with radicals from Syria, it must be remembered, that Robert Mathews and the Order attempted to forge an Aryan-Islamic alliance capable of mounting a campaign of urban terrorism in the United States. Such intentions have persisted into the post-9/11 era. A collection of internet postings by hate groups examined by the New York Times after the September 11 attacks include a message written by Billy Roper, a ranking officer of (Turner Diaries author) William Pierce's National Alliance. "The enemy of our enemy is, for now at least, our friend," Roper wrote. "We may not want them marrying our daughters, but anyone who is willing to drive a plane into a building to kill Jews is alright by me."

Finally the story of Demetrius Crocker confirms the importance of policing as an effective counter-terrorism strategy. Once more, the case was made not by an elite federal counter-terrorism unit operating under the wide sweeping legislative powers of the Patriot Act, but by FBI agents' developing a single informant, patiently working a suspect, and then allowing that suspect to expose his own criminal vulnerabilities.

CONCLUSION

The main finding of this study is that the most successful method of both detecting and prosecuting cases of terrorism is through the pursuit of conventional criminal investigations. By focusing on the broad spectrum of crimes committed by terrorist groups and by acting on solid intelligence, the FBI and other policing agencies may forestall larger conspiracies designed to kill hundreds if not thousands of civilians. This comes as no surprise to investigators who have spent their careers in the trenches, nor has it escaped the attention of experienced counter-terrorism officials in Washington.

As David Kaplan points out in his exhaustive exposé on the growing criminality of terrorist groups around the world, the National Security Council has recently adopted a new policy on transnational crime that makes the crime-terrorism connection a top priority. The CIA's Crime and Narcotics Center has also implemented new policies to deal with international crime, focusing on the linkages between drug smuggling, organized crime, and terrorism. On the domestic side, the federal Joint Terrorism Task Force has begun to take a harder look at the criminal inroads made by terrorist groups. A similar program is underway in Britain, where London's Metropolitan Police now routinely monitor low-level criminal activity for suspected links to unfolding terrorism conspiracies.

Getting a grip on the pervasive criminality of terrorist groups will not be easy, though. Despite recent law enforcement advances, the U.S. approach to the crime-terrorism problem is for the most part embedded in military measures, both practically and metaphorically. The U.S. response to terrorism is primarily a military venture fought by the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines. Dismantling and degrading the international jihad network will require unprecedented international intelligence and law-enforcement cooperation, not expensive new

airplanes, helicopters, and armed personnel carriers. The vision of heroic U.S. soldiers hunting down Osama bin Laden may play well to American television audiences, but it is not the model to deal with passport fraud, credit card theft, cell phone cloning, motor vehicle violations, low-level drug dealing, or arms smuggling. These crimes are rooted in local communities, and they cannot be solved by military incursions or specially designed judicial proceedings at offshore detention facilities conducted under the auspices of a war on terrorism. Terrorism is a tactic, and it is impossible to wage “war” against a tactic.

In the long term—and the Bush administration has repeatedly argued that the global war on terrorism could last ten, twenty, or even thirty years—effectively countering terrorist-oriented criminality requires taking such unglamorous steps as strengthening law enforcement management capabilities in the developing countries of Central Asia and North Africa. Black market economies, heroin smuggling, graft, and fraud thrive in that part of the world. It is no accident that these regions produce some of the world’s most violent jihadists.

Effectively countering terrorism also requires assisting some nations in developing strong school systems to counteract the appeal of the madrassas that have become terrorist breeding grounds. It also requires what Francis Fukuyama calls “realistic Wilsonianism ... a dramatic demilitarization of American foreign policy and re-emphasis on other types of policy instruments.” These include, on the one hand, abandoning incendiary rhetoric about a global war on terrorism and, on the other promoting political and economic development abroad through “soft power” (job training, advisement, and financial incentives to weaken cultures of terrorism).

But perhaps most importantly, the United States must repair its appalling public diplomacy record in the Muslim world. It is well known that the photographs of abuses by American soldiers at Baghdad’s Abu Ghraib prison—of a man standing hooded on a box with electric wires attached to his hands; of guards leering as a pile of naked men simulated sexual acts; of a man led around on a dog leash by female guard Lynndie England; of Lynndie England posing in front of a line of naked men, cigarette dangling from her mouth, her finger pointed towards the genitals of naked victims; of a man handcuffed and gagged, lying in his own feces with a banana protruding from his rectum; of a plastic-wrapped corpse of a man beaten to death—infuriated Muslims around the world. Copies of these photos are now sold in marketplaces from Karachi to Bangkok, vividly demonstrating the worst suspicions of Muslims everywhere: that Americans are corrupt, heartless, and hell-bent on humiliating Muslims and mocking their values. “If Osama bin Laden had hired a Madison Avenue public relations firm to rally Arabs’ hearts and minds to his cause,” observes military analyst Phillip Carter, “it’s hard to imagine that it could have devised a better propaganda campaign.”

The damage done to the credibility of the United States by military guards at Abu Ghraib will never be fully rectified. However, a meaningful step was proposed by the person ultimately responsible for what an internal U.S. Army report on Abu Ghraib described as “numerous incidents of sadistic, blatant, and wanton criminal abuses.” After the abuses became public, Bush proposed to demolish the Abu Ghraib facility as a gesture to the local population. Blowing the prison up, bulldozing its remains underground, and allowing al-Jazeera to broadcast these scenes would have sent the Arab world a powerful message about America’s repentance for the sins of Abu Ghraib. Ironically, an American military judge ordered that the prison be preserved as a

crime scene. A potentially significant political stride in fighting terrorism's global criminal threat—reducing the bitter anger against America that is now spreading across the Muslim world like an unchecked fire in a vast field—was itself usurped by crimes committed by the United States. Consequently, Abu Ghraib remains a symbol of all that has gone wrong with the U.S. occupation of Iraq and a potent recruiting tool for terrorists around the world.

Much the same can be said for that other American military gulag, the naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. In 2006, the United Nations recommended that Guantanamo be closed down “without further delay” because practices at the camp violated the U.N Convention against Torture. The United States has failed to follow the United Nations' recommendation and continues to incarcerate approximately 505 men who are being held in long-term detention as suspected terrorists, even though the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that no legal grounds can be found to warrant their continued imprisonment. Since 2002, over three hundred specific cases of serious detainee abuse have surfaced, yet the United States has failed to put an end to “special interrogation techniques” widely considered torture. These practices include subjecting detainees to excessive cold and heat, loud music, sleep deprivation and “gender coercion” by female guards. Female guards at Guantanamo have doused a detainee with perfume; smeared a prisoner with what was meant to appear to be menstrual blood; stripped off their uniforms and rubbed up against prisoners in a sexually provocative manner; forced a prisoner to wear a bra and put women's underwear on his head; and performed a pseudo lap dance on a prisoner (by straddling the prisoner's lap and massaging his neck). These women, like Private Lynndie England and the other women at Abu Ghraib, were following orders of their co-abusing male superiors. Unlike the FBI agents at the CSA siege in 1985, who appreciated the social role of women in terrorist groups and used that knowledge to mediate violence, officials at U.S. military prisons have created a culture supporting the exploitation and debasement of women soldiers by having them behave like sexual predators. The effect is also to further inflame the Muslim rage that incites terrorism.

In addition, the United States has failed to stop the process of “extraordinary rendition”—the secret transfer of detainees to countries where they might be tortured. A 2005 Amnesty International report reveals that the United States is believed to have rendered over one hundred detainees in the war on terrorism to countries that the U.S. State Department cites for torture or ill-treatment of prisoners; these countries include Jordan, Syria, and Egypt, where prisoners are routinely beaten, deprived of sleep, and left hanging in the air by their wrists. Using torture to solve the problem of terrorism is like eating rat poison to cure a stomach ache. It was the United States' rendition of Ayman al-Zawahiri's brother from Albania to Egypt, where he was likely to be tortured (as was Ayman al-Zawahiri himself in the early 1980s for his suspected role in the Sadat assassination), that contributed to the grievances behind al-Qaeda's bombings of the East African embassies in 1998—the prelude to 9/11. Over and over again, U.S. policy makers have failed to realize that the campaign against international terrorism is as much a battle for the political and moral high ground as it is a struggle to collect meaningful intelligence.

Fighting terrorism requires a full recognition of this hard lesson, along with improved international law enforcement, economic assistance, and humanitarian aid on a scale equivalent to the \$100 million that the United States spends each day on the deceitfully perpetrated and

abysmally failed war in Iraq. Without drastic steps like these, crime and terrorism will endure as global problems.