

The Appeal of Jihad

By Dr. Peter Neumann
Director, International
Centre for the Study of
Radicalisation and
Political Violence (ICSR)

Following the recent wave of arrests in England and even Australia, everyone seemed surprised that most of the terrorist suspects were highly educated, some apparently from middle-class or privileged backgrounds. At least two of them had completed their medical training, with one about to become a neurosurgeon.

Why would such accomplished people want to become terrorists? Clearly, the profiles of the suspects do not fit the stereotype of the deprived, uneducated loner.

In the case of the IRA, the cliché turned out to be largely true. Many Irish Republican terrorists came from poor, working class neighborhoods, and few had any great prospects. Becoming involved in the “armed struggle” was the only way to achieve any degree of social status within their communities.

With Islamist militants, however, the sociological dynamics seem to be different. No researcher has yet been able to construct a single profile based on simple socioeconomic indicators that would accurately describe the “typical” jihadist. A senior British intelligence officer summed it up as follows: “The pattern is that there is no pattern.”

Indeed, social scientists are overwhelmed by the diversity of backgrounds and attributes that can be found among known Islamist terrorists. In fact, a fair number of them are highly educated, often holding advanced university degrees. Many seem to have trained in the sciences, with chemists, engineers and medical doctors playing a prominent role in jihadist movements across the world.

Mohammed Atta, the ringleader of the Hamburg cell that was responsible for the September 11th attacks in the United States, had just completed his post-graduate degree in urban planning and was set to join the professional elite in his home country. And let’s not forget Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden’s deputy, who trained as a medical doctor and whose family is among the most influential in Egypt.

So, if it’s not the social and economic background, what connects the people who have become involved in jihadist terrorism? The Dutch domestic intelligence service recently published a study of jihadist recruitment in the Netherlands, which identifies three types of personalities that can be found in extremist cells.

First are the so-called new immigrants, who grew up in Middle Eastern and North African countries, came to Europe as students or refugees and had no previous involvement with jihadism before they arrived in the West. This applied to Mohammed Atta, but it could also be true for the suspects who have been arrested in recent days.

The second group are second or third generation “immigrants” whose parents or grandparents settled in European countries as “guest workers.” Most are citizens of European countries and speak the language of their home country fluently.

Finally, there is a small but growing number of converts who have embraced militant Islamism shortly after they became Muslims.

Marc Sageman, an American psychologist who carried out an extensive study of the profiles of Al Qaeda members, found that, indeed, there is very little that would connect these groups in terms of quantifiable socioeconomic indicators.

What they share, however, is that they have all experienced tensions in their personal lives, or were faced with deep and sustained crises of identity that they resolved by embracing jihadism.

The “new immigrants” felt alienated and isolated when they left their home countries, and extremist Islam not only provided them with new friends but also with a new identity and a place in the world.

The children and grandchildren of immigrants frequently experience a tension between the traditional, cultural Islam of their parents and an unaccepting Western society. Extremism gives them an identity that allows them to rebel against both.

And the converts, by definition, have gone through a personal crisis that led them to adopt a new identity.

None of this will be of much help to the security service in constructing a profile of the “typical” terrorist suspect. But it provides a glimpse into the internal tensions through which some of these people have gone before committing themselves to jihad. And it also explains why doctors and engineers are as vulnerable to jihadism as petty thieves and the unemployed. After all, personal crisis - a sense of being isolated and the search for identity - is not a privilege of the poor and uneducated.