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TESTIMONY

Understanding Terrorist Motivations

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CT-338

December 2009

Testimony presented before the House Homeland Security Committee, Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing and Terrorism Risk Assessment on December 15, 2009

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The RAND Corporation

Understanding Terrorist Motivations²

**Before the Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing and Terrorism Risk Assessment
United States House of Representatives**

December 15, 2009

I would like to thank the Chair and Ranking Member and the House Committee on Homeland Security's Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing and Terrorism Risk Assessment for inviting me to testify on the subject of terrorist recruitment inside the United States and also to take this opportunity to commend the Committee for recognizing the importance of understanding how and why individuals become susceptible to recruitment by al-Qaeda and associated movements.

Over the past fourteen years, during the course of my research on terrorism and insurgency, I have explored the topics of what motivates individuals to become terrorists, as well as what influences communities to sympathize with terrorist groups. This research can be found in a number of RAND publications, including *Terrorism and Development*, *Dissuading Terror*, and more recently *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together*, which was released in the Spring of 2009.

Both issues – individual motivations and community support – are important to understanding the challenges of terrorist recruitment inside the United States. For example, potential exists for terrorist groups to persuade US citizens and residents to 'pick up a gun' and conduct attacks either in the US homeland or abroad. Potential also exists for terrorist groups to garner financial or other forms of support from local communities inside the United States. Indeed, recent events have brought the topic of terrorist recruitment to the forefront of US homeland security.

As you know, last week, five young American men were arrested in Pakistan, allegedly trying to make their way to militant training camps that exist along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Initial reporting suggests that these individuals pursued at least two different avenues to reach these

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT338/>.

training camps – an Islamic school and an extremist organization – and yet were rebuffed due to their “western demeanor” and lack of language skills.³ Although we have yet to learn fully about the intentions of these five men, they appear to be one of several recent examples of US citizens and residents who have been susceptible to recruitment by al-Qaeda and associated movements.

In September of this year, for example, Najibullah Zazi, a Denver resident, pled not guilty to conspiracy to detonate bombs inside the United States. Zazi reportedly traveled from the United States to Pakistan in August 2008 and, according to investigators, participated in a militant training camp in that country.⁴ Upon his return to the United States, Zazi allegedly purchased chemicals to build a bomb, planning to detonate it in New York City, although he never followed through with the attack, apparently tipped off that he was under suspicion by authorities.⁵

Similarly, the FBI arrested David C Headley, formerly known as Daood Gilani, in October 2009 and accused him of scouting potential targets in advance of the November 2008 attacks in Mumbai that killed 165 people.⁶ And, in October 2008, Shirwa Ahmed blew himself up in Somalia, becoming the first known American suicide bomber. He, along with approximately 20 other young Americans over the past eight years, had traveled to Somalia to participate in local training camps and fight with al-Shabaab.⁷ So examples exist of US citizens and residents traveling abroad to fight in local insurgencies, traveling abroad to fight US forces, as well as participating in training camps abroad in anticipation of conducting attacks here at home.

What happens in these militant training camps? Bryant Neal Vinas, another individual arrested on terrorism charges who pled guilty to terrorism-related charges in January 2009, has provided investigators with unique insight. Bryant Neal Vinas, a convert to Islam, departed for Afghanistan in late 2007 after visiting multiple jihadist websites. He reportedly described activities in a Peshawar training camp as follows: an introduction to the AK-47 and other guns, followed by a 15-day course in how to make suicide belts and rocketed propelled grenades and then graduations.⁸ Other information suggests that al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan historically also have included classes on political Islam, essentially in an attempt to indoctrinate new recruits in what some would refer to as the violent Salafi jihadi movement.⁹ Indeed, training camps clearly

³ Waqar Gilani and Jane Perlez, “5 US Men arrested in Pakistan Said to Plan Jihad Training,” *New York Times* 11 December 2009; Jerry Markon, “Pakistan arrests 5 N. VA men, probes possible jihadist ties,” *The Washington Post*, 10 December 2009.

⁴ Kevin Johnson, “Alleged terror threat seen as ‘most serious’ since 9/11; suspect bought chemicals to make bombs, feds say,” *USA Today*, 25 September 2005.

⁵ Michael Wilson, “From Smiling Coffee Vendor to Terror Suspect,” *New York Times*, 26 September 2009.

⁶ Peter Slevin and Spencer S. Hsu, “Arrests in Chicago drive home global nature of terrorism threat,” *Washington Post*, 20 November 2009.

⁷ Andrea Elliot, “A Calls to Jihad, Answered in America,” *New York Times*, 12 July 2009.

⁸ Michael Wilson, “From Smiling Coffee Vendor to Terror Suspect,” *New York Times*, 26 September 2009

⁹ Kim Cragin, “Early History of al-Qaeda,” *The Historical Journal*, November 2008.

play a key role in solidifying individuals' commitment to al-Qaeda and associated movements.

The question remains, how do individuals end up in these training camps?

Unfortunately, research conducted at RAND and elsewhere suggests that no single pathway towards terrorism exists, making it somewhat difficult to identify overarching patterns in how and why individuals are susceptible to terrorist recruitment as well as intervention strategies.¹⁰ Having said that, I am going to attempt to generalize from the findings from our research as much as possible, while still providing specific examples of nuances in terrorist motivations whenever appropriate.

For the remainder of my testimony, I will address two basic questions. First, how do individuals progress from articulating sympathy for al-Qaeda and associated movements to actively participating in terrorist activities? And, second, what can we do about it?

How do individuals become terrorists?

To answer this question, it is useful to explore the radicalization processes that individuals and clusters of individuals have gone through as they progressed from being sympathetic to the al-Qaeda worldview to being willing to 'pick up a gun.'

These processes can be understood as having three separate and distinct phases. In the first phase, termed "availability" environmental factors make certain individuals susceptible to appeals from terrorist groups. Of course, these factors are likely to vary according to individual, but they might include being brought up in a family that articulates a violent Salafi worldview, frustration with local government policies, peer group influences, or frustration with foreign policies.

For example, in his research on suicide bombers in the Palestinian territories, Ami Pedhazur has noted that one particular cell played soccer together prior to their recruitment into Hamas.¹¹ Shazhad Tanweer, one of the 7 July 2005 London bombers, apparently had expressed frustration with UK foreign policy, particularly the conflict in Iraq.¹² Of course, that is not to say that all soccer players or individuals frustrated with the conflict in Iraq are potential terrorist recruits, but rather, at the "availability" stage multiple factors can make al-Qaeda's appeal attractive.

¹⁰ Andrew Silke, ed, *Terrorists, Victims and Society: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and its Consequences*, (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd 2003).

¹¹ Ami Pedhazur, "The Culture of Death: Terrorist Organizations and Suicide Bombings," presented at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington DC as part of the Eisenhower Speaker Series, 17 February 2005.

¹² Paul Temelty, "An In-Depth Look at the London Bombers," *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 3, No. 15, 28 July 2005.

While the first phase, “availability”, can occur on the internet, the second phase, termed “recruitment and indoctrination” occurs after initial contact between individuals and the clandestine group. That is, our research as well as others’, suggests that terrorist recruitment works best when virtual contact has been backed up by or strengthened through social linkages. In examining the second “recruitment” phase, it is useful to focus on “nodes” or gateways through which individuals come into contact with terrorist recruiters, members or leaders.¹³ Some potential recruitment nodes include prayer groups, sports clubs, charitable organizations or even criminal gangs and prisons. For example, in December 2001, Singaporean authorities disrupted a plot to attack Western as well as local targets in that country. According to a White Paper released by that government, some of the arrested individuals had been recruited through religious study groups in Singapore.¹⁴

Importantly, these nodes vary according to country and community. So it is difficult to identify a laundry list of potential recruitment nodes worldwide. If any commonalities exist in recruitment nodes, they appear to be best grouped into ‘diaspora communities’ – so for example, the United States, the United Kingdom or Singapore -- versus ‘majority Muslim communities, such as Indonesia, Yemen or Algeria.’¹⁵ That is, we have found some general commonality in the types of recruitment nodes in these locations. But al-Qaeda and affiliated movements have demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt to different recruiting environments, adjusting both message and method of recruitment.

The third phase of the radicalization process yields a commitment to action on the part of certain individuals. To be honest, this final step has been the most difficult to isolate during the course of our research, because it seems to vary the most individual by individual. In some instances, a specific grievance appears to have acted as a final trigger. So, for example, Galib Andang aka Commander Robot, a former member of the now defunct Moro Nationalist Liberation Front in the Philippines, was motivated in part by the death of his grandmother at the hands of the Filipino Army. Other common factors, at least for diaspora communities, appear to be isolation from the broader Muslim community and participation in a foreign jihad. Somehow the process of participating in a training camp and fighting overseas makes individuals more willing to engage in terrorism back home as well.

¹³ This concept also was used by Javed Ali, Senior Intelligence Office, Department of Homeland Security, in his testimony before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs entitled, “Prison Radicalization: Are Terrorist Cells Forming in US Cell Blocks?” 19 September 2006.

¹⁴ “White Paper: The Jemaah Islamiyah Arrests and the Threat of Terrorism,” Singapore Government, 7 January 2003.

¹⁵ See, for example, Michael Taarnby, *Recruitment of Islamist Terrorists in Europe: Trends and Perspectives*, Denmark: Centre for Cultural Research, January 2005; and Peter Nesser, *Jihad in Europe: A Survey of the Motivations of Sunni Islamist Terrorism in the Post-Millennium Europe*, Norway: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2004.

I should say, at this point, that my description of radicalization processes for individual terrorists and sympathizers is not particularly unique. That is, Philip Zimbardo, who is probably best known for his Stanford prison experiment, has observed similar processes with the recruitment of high school students into cults in the United States.¹⁶ But I find it a useful construct to understanding all the various factors that motivate individuals to 'pick up a gun.'

So I am often asked, "What motivates terrorism? Is it ideology, politics or poverty?" And my answer is, "Yes, all three, at least to varying degrees." The key question for us today is how can we best intervene in this process?

What can we do about it?

Unfortunately, if determining how individuals become terrorists is difficult, then deriving intervention strategies is even more problematic. As I previously implied, our research suggests that it would be best to intervene before individuals depart the United States for training camps abroad, because experiences in these camps tend to harden their commitment towards al-Qaeda and associated movements. Yet, in many instances, individuals have not engaged in illegal activities prior to their departure. It is these circumstances that have proven to be the most difficult and so I would like to focus the rest of my testimony on them. And, indeed, much can be learned from how other countries have attempted to deal with this dilemma.

First, beyond US borders, the US government could work with partner nations abroad to pressure those ideologues and recruiters who have shown particular success at reaching susceptible US and other Western recruits. It is well-known that al-Qaeda and associated movements are interested in recruiting new fighters from the United States; this is not a new phenomenon. Wadih el-Hage, for example, testified that al-Qaeda focused recruitment efforts on him in anticipation of the 1998 US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania due to his American passport. So while partner nations, such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, work towards muting the voices of ideologies and recruiters who have reached susceptible individuals within their own countries, the United States could encourage them to extend these programs to those focused on Western recruits as well.

Second, within the United States, the US government could work with local Muslim community leaders to develop programs that reduce their youths' susceptibility to messages articulated by al-

¹⁶ Philip Zimbardo and C. Hartly, "Cults Go to High School: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis of the Initial Stage in the Recruitment Process, *Cultic Studies Journal*, Vol. 2. No. 1, 1985, pp 91-147.

Qaeda and associated movements. The US government already has established ties with Muslim community leaders. And, indeed, the aforementioned case of the five youths arrested in Pakistan last week reportedly was brought to the attention of US authorities through Muslim community leaders. I cannot image how difficult it was for these community leaders to call US authorities and, regardless of the outcome, we owe them a great deal of respect and gratitude. Nonetheless, more could be done.

In Singapore, for example, a group of Muslim scholars have led a number of different programs to develop barriers to radicalization in that country. These scholars have formed a Religious Rehabilitation Group that works with individuals arrested on terrorism charges and their families to help re-integrate these individuals back into the community. A similar model could be used for US citizens and residents who are accused of participating in training camps abroad. Similarly, several scholars who work with the Religious Rehabilitation Group have established their own English language blogs to refute online claims by al-Qaeda and associated movements. This approach also could be attempted in the United States. Finally, like with efforts to combat recruitment into criminal gangs or cults, US law enforcement and other entities could help local community members develop programs to inhibit youths' susceptibility to al-Qaeda recruitment. Notably, with any of these potential initiatives, it is important to emphasize that US law enforcement should continue to partner with local Muslim community leaders to prevent them and others from any potential backlash.

Which brings me back to the original question of -- how and why do individuals become terrorists? Clearly, more needs to be done on the part of academics to get a better understanding of this phenomenon. Yet I would urge you not to leave it at that. As we move forward, we also need a better understanding of how al-Qaeda and associated movements retain the loyalty of their recruits. And, perhaps more importantly, why individuals choose not to become terrorists. For if we are truly going to develop barriers to al-Qaeda recruitment in the United States, it is equally important that we understand the motives of those who reject al-Qaeda's overtures.