

Lessons from Israel's Unlikely Spy

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Articles & Testimony

In the new book *Son of Hamas* now grabbing headlines, Mosab Hassan Yousef, the son of one of Hamas's founders, reveals that he was a long-time informant for the Israeli government, providing intelligence that helped prevent numerous terrorist attacks.

Yousef, who has since converted to Christianity and lives in California, says he turned against Hamas while in an Israeli prison, witnessing firsthand how Hamas tortured other imprisoned members whom it suspected of collaborating.

While Yousef's story is compelling, it is hardly unique. Even al-Qaida has had many seemingly committed members abandon the organization over the years. In fact, a few of the key defectors from al-Qaida's early years in Sudan ended up cooperating with the US government, and testifying against their former comrades in the 2001 "embassy bombing" trial in New York. Al-Qaida's affiliates in Southeast Asia, North Africa and the Persian Gulf have suffered similar blows.

Yousef's change of mind while in prison is also hardly unprecedented. While most of the focus on prisons is as a potential site for radicalization, being imprisoned can also have the opposite effect, and a number of people have turned away from terrorism and extremism while incarcerated.

For former Jemaah Islamiyah commander Nazir Abas, for example, his treatment in prison contributed to his shift in thinking. According to Abas, he was very surprised that he was not beaten or tortured and, in fact, was treated quite humanely and in a very "Islamic" manner. Abas later recounted that, even more importantly, he was invited to pray with his interrogators, which in his view, undermined Jemaah Islamiyah's contentions that "the government was murtad (apostate)."

Yousef's disgust at Hamas' brutality is not an uncommon emotion among those who turn on terrorist groups, and this type of revulsion has sparked a number of individuals' decision to leave. For Usama Hassan, a fighter in Afghanistan in the 1980s who had returned to his native England, the final turning point was the 2005 attack on the London transportation system that killed 52. Hassan, who had been supportive of al-Qaida for many years, was dismayed by the deadly plot: "I was devastated by the attack. My feeling was, how dare they attack my city?"

And in fact, support for al-Qaida has dropped dramatically in the countries in which it has carried out the most attacks -- including Iraq, Pakistan and Jordan. Seeing firsthand the impact of the terrorist groups' actions can cause many to have second thoughts.

The part of the Yousef story that differs from many of the other "dropout" cases is the negative role that his family played. Well before the latest revelations about his cooperation with Israeli, Yousef described leaving Hamas as "the most difficult decision in my life," and said that his family members pleaded with him not to go public with his renunciation. His defection has caused problems for his father in Hamas, and Yousef explains that his mother cries "all day long" because of his decision. In the Hamas-governed Gaza Strip, where martyrdom is encouraged and families are rewarded for their relatives' suicide attacks, it is perhaps not surprising that families do not always play a productive role in the dropout process.

By contrast, in many cases, families play a critical and constructive role in peeling their relatives away from the clutches of the terrorist group. Recent reports that Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the young Nigerian who allegedly tried to blow up a Detroit-bound plane, is now cooperating with the FBI based on the pleas of his family members, is not surprising.

In fact, al-Qaida recognizes that its members who maintain contact with friends and family outside the organization are more likely to withdraw than those with a more limited social network. The 9/11 plot offers a number of vivid examples of this phenomenon. Two of the potential 9/11 plotters, Saud al-Rashid and Mushabib al-Hamlan, bailed on the plot after returning to their home country of Saudi Arabia following training in Afghanistan. Both had contacted their families, despite clear instructions not to do so, and quickly returned to their previous lives.

The Saudis -- who have established the best-known rehabilitation program for former terrorists -- also understand the role that families can play in ensuring that their wayward relatives stay on the right course. The Saudis use both threats and incentives to persuade the families and tribes to pay close attention to the activities of their supposedly reformed member.

While it is encouraging that individuals leave terrorist organizations not infrequently, why does this matter in the broad scheme of things, when the groups are clearly able to continue their dangerous operations and activities?

Most importantly, by better understanding Yousef and the other dropouts, and the reasons they turned on their former organizations, might help the government identify and recruit the next terrorist who might be willing to switch sides.

In addition, over the past few years, there has been a growing recognition that capturing or killing every possible terrorist is not a realistic strategy, and that we must do far more to halt and reverse the radicalization process. Understanding all aspects of the radicalization cycle -- including not only why individuals are becoming terrorists, but why others have walked away -- is a critical first step in developing more effective policies to counter the extremist narrative and to stem the tide of radicalization.

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