Learning From Dropouts

Feb 1, 2010

Articles & Testimony

When I served on the staff of the 9/11 Commission, one of our primary tasks was to assemble the story of how al Qaeda's plot developed. One of the aspects of the plot on which we focused our attention was, therefore, the movements, activities, and associations of the 19 hijackers. The basic question we struggled to answer was how al Qaeda persuaded 19 young men to participate in an attack that would result in their certain death. Although al Qaeda's "success" on this front was rather startling, the organization failed to convince all of the initial would-be attackers to go through with their plot. Why not? The stories of the individuals selected for the 9/11 attacks who backed out, even in the face of pressure from the terrorist group, have received little attention in the media or among policymakers, but could teach us important lessons for thwarting future attacks.

While Mohamed Atta, the hijackers' operational leader, is now a household name, Mushabib al-Hamlan and Saud al-Rashid are far less well known. These two young Saudis were selected by al Qaeda's leadership to participate in the attacks and left the training camps in Afghanistan to return home to Saudi Arabia to obtain visas for travel to the United States. Both, however, were beset by second thoughts after arriving in Saudi Arabia. After getting his visa, Hamlan contacted his family despite clear instructions not to do so by his al Qaeda handlers. When Hamlan found out that his mother was ill, he decided not to return to Afghanistan -- even in the face of repeated follow-up pressure by al Qaeda. This included a personal visit at the Saudi college Hamlan had by then returned to from Khalid al-Zahrani, an associate from the training camps who was sent by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM), the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, to convince Hamlan to come back.

Rashid's story might illustrate even more dramatically the role that family can play in the dropout process. According to KSM, Rashid may have bailed on the plot because his family found out about his involvement in it and confiscated his passport.

In the summer of 2001, al Qaeda confronted an even larger potential challenge to the operation when Ziad Jarrah, who went on to pilot Flight 93, was deliberating about whether to withdraw from the operation, in part because of Jarrah's "troubled" relationship with Atta. In what was an "emotional conversation," according to the 9/11 Commission, Ramzi Binalshibh -- the Hamburg-based liaison between the cell and the al Qaeda leadership -- was able to persuade Jarrah to stay the course.

Given that we can't kill or capture every potential terrorist, developing a better grasp of this "dropout phenomenon" is critical for the United States and its allies' counterterrorism efforts, particularly in shaping the myriad counter-radicalization programs springing up in the Middle East, Asia, and Europe.

There are plenty of candidates for study. Despite al Qaeda's reputation for ferocity, secrecy, and esprit de corps, the organization has been plagued by desertions since its earliest days. More recently, key ideologues and leaders have turned against the group, challenging al Qaeda's vision for global jihad. And al Qaeda is hardly alone among the global jihadi groups in suffering from defections. Some of its affiliates have experienced important losses as well, ranging from foot soldiers to key leadership personnel.

The recent defections of prominent leaders, clerics, and ideologues from al Qaeda could have a profound long-term effect on the organization. The most prominent of these defectors is former Egyptian Islamic Jihad head Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (also known as Dr. Fadl). Al Qaeda often cited Dr. Fadl's treatises as ideological justification for its actions, but he has since firmly renounced Osama bin Laden and has written a new book rejecting al Qaeda's message and tactics.

Noman Benotman, a former leader of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), also publicly turned his back on jihad and played a key role in persuading other key figures in the organization to renounce al Qaeda as well. In September 2009, six leaders of the LIFG issued recantations challenging al Qaeda's global vision for jihad in a 400-plus-page book titled Corrective Studies in Understanding Jihad, Accountability and the Judgment of the People.

Dr. Fadl, Benotman, and the other leaders who have defected all cite al Qaeda's inaccurate interpretation of Islam as a major factor in their decision to abandon the cause. In his treatise, Dr. Fadl called al Qaeda's jihadism reprehensible, arguing that it violates Islam and sharia law. In 2007, Benotman wrote a public letter to al Qaeda's No. 2 leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri -- after years of criticizing the group privately -- arguing that al Qaeda's tactics violate Islam's call for the protection of "man's religion, life, mind, offspring, and wealth." In this letter, Benotman called for al Qaeda to cease its military operations, sentiments repeated in the LIFG's renunciations of al Qaeda in 2009.

Benotman also had more practical differences with bin Laden over the direction of the global jihadi movement and claims to have asked the al Qaeda amir to get out of the terrorism business at a 2000 summit, realizing that they were fighting a losing battle. Benotman thought al Qaeda's sole focus on the United States as the "head of the snake" would hurt the efforts of groups such as the LIFG to overthrow the apostate Arab regimes, which Benotman viewed as the real problem afflicting the Muslim world. Benotman later said that he made a "clear-cut request" to bin Laden to stop attacking the United States because it would "lead to nowhere," but bin Laden disregarded his concerns. After the 9/11 attacks, Benotman resigned from his position in the LIFG, concerned that the United States would likely respond to the attack by not only targeting al Qaeda, but his organization as well.

For midlevel al Qaeda operatives and foot soldiers, petty grievances have often played a larger role in their decision to turn their backs on the organization. Disagreements over money, for example, have led some terrorists to consider their inadequate compensation as a sign of unfair treatment. Take the case of Jamal al-Fadl, a Sudanese national, who was one of the first members of al Qaeda during its years in Sudan and played a role in the organization's unsuccessful efforts in the early 1990s to procure uranium. Fadl was displeased with his salary at the time -- he received $500 a month, as opposed to Egyptian members, who were paid $1,200 monthly. In response, he began embezzling funds, stealing approximately $100,000 from al Qaeda. When bin Laden learned of Fadl's actions, he ordered him to repay the money. After repaying about $30,000, Fadl fled, fearing retribution if he did not repay the full amount.

L'Houssaine Kherchtou, a Moroccan who joined al Qaeda in 1991 and trained to serve as bin Laden's personal pilot, had similar complaints. Kherchtou became bitter after one of bin Laden's aides turned down his request for $500 to cover the cost of his wife's cesarean section. His anger grew when al Qaeda paid the expenses of a group of Egyptians who were sent to Yemen to renew their passports. "If I had a gun," Kherchtou later testified, "I would shoot [bin Laden] at that time." When the organization moved to Afghanistan, Kherchtou refused to follow, thus violating his oath to bin Laden. Kherchtou was also embittered after bin Laden ordered his followers to cut back on spending. He thought that bin Laden -- a notoriously rich Saudi -- was being stingy. Kherchtou and Fadl went on to serve as key U.S. government witnesses in early 2001 in the trials for the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in East Africa.

The departure of a senior leader in a jihadi organization can undermine its legitimacy and cripple its operational capacity. Dr. Fadl's recantations caused approximately 600 to 700 members of Egyptian Islamic Jihad to abandon political violence, according to Omar Ashour, an expert on the group.

Benotman also played a constructive role in convincing imprisoned LIFG members to renounce their jihad against the Libyan government. He traveled to Libya more than 25 times over a two-year period to convince the jihadists to recant. In the end, his efforts paid off: The LIFG recantations had a major impact on the organization's rank and file, with the vast majority endorsing the shift away from jihad, according to terrorism expert Paul Cruickshank.

Although the defections of lower-level operatives and foot soldiers may not have the same impact on the organization as that of a leader, their effect should not be underestimated. An operative who can provide detailed information to governments about a group's members, plans, and operations can cause serious harm to the group and put a terrorist organization on the defensive. A great deal of the U.S. government's knowledge about al Qaeda prior to 9/11, for example, came from Fadl and Kherchtou.

As governments begin to shift away from a military-dominated approach to combating terrorism, they should increasingly focus on how to prevent individuals from going down the path toward radicalization and terrorism. What is clear is that the radicalization process is complex: Reasons for joining terrorist and extremist groups vary widely, and a recruit's trajectory rarely follows a linear path. Given the unique path to radicalization -- and increasingly deradicalization and disengagement -- that each individual travels, it is not surprising that a "one size

fits all" approach is unlikely to succeed. Governments must be flexible and creative as they seek to encourage terrorists and extremists to defect from these organizations or abandon their support for these dangerous causes.

Programs springing up around the world have already begun to chip away at the terrorist and extremist narrative. But it will be difficult for the United States and its allies to effectively counter extremist ideology without better understanding all aspects of the radicalization cycle, including why and how people are drawn to terrorist and extremist organizations, and why people have walked away. If we increase our focus on this process now, with any luck, we will have many more cases of terrorist dropouts to study in the future.

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