The Bombers Who Weren't

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Articles & Testimony

On Dec. 10, 2001, after completing his al-Qaeda training in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Sajid Badat returned home to Britain. Badat, a 22-year-old Muslim born in Gloucester, had an associate, a gangly man named Richard Reid, and the duo were now ready to carry out their mission: blowing up two separate aircraft traveling from Europe to the United States. Badat and Reid had been given identical explosive devices, specially designed to evade airport security and destroy an aircraft in mid-flight. On Dec. 22, Reid -- now infamous as the "shoe bomber" -- was jumped by his fellow passengers when he tried to light his device on an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami. He got further than Badat, who simply bailed on the plot, leaving his dismantled bomb in his parents' house.

Badat is now serving a 13-year sentence in a British prison. He told prosecutors that he decided to "get away from danger and introduce some calm in his life."

Badat's case sheds some light on a rarely considered question: Why do some terrorists drop out? We rightly think of al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups as formidable foes, but the stories of would-be killers who bail give us some intriguing clues about fault lines that counterterrorism officials should exploit. The reasons for a change of heart can be strikingly prosaic: family, money, petty grievances. But they can also revolve around shaken ideology or lost faith in a group's leadership.

It's become a truism of counterterrorism that we must understand how and why individuals become jihadists in the first place. But almost nobody is studying the flip side of radicalization -- understanding those who leave terrorist organizations. We'd do well to start. Figuring out why individuals walk away from terrorist groups can help governments predict whether an individual -- or even a cell -- is likely to go through with a plot. Understanding the dropouts should also make it easier for governments to determine which terrorists might be induced to switch sides, help stop radicalization and craft messages that could peel away people already in terrorist organizations. The more we know about why terrorists bail, the better we can fight them.

So where to start? Despite al-Qaeda's reputation for ferocity and secrecy, plenty of wannabes wind up dropping out from it and its affiliates -- not just the hapless Badat.

Consider the Sept. 11, 2001, plot. Even in Osama bin Laden's greatest triumph, not all of his recruiting efforts paid off. Two Saudis who were selected for the plot -- Mushabib al-Hamlan and Saud al-Rashid -- decided not to participate in the attacks after leaving the training camps in Afghanistan. And in the summer of 2001, Ziad Samir Jarrah, who became the hijacker pilot on United 93, agonized about whether to withdraw from the operation. In an emotional conversation, Ramzi Binalshibh -- the Hamburg-based liaison between the plotting cell and al-Qaeda's senior leadership in Afghanistan -- persuaded Jarrah to stay.

Al-Qaeda prides itself on its esprit de corps, but key members have turned against the group from its earliest days. These include Jamal Ahmed al-Fadl, a Sudanese radical who was one of al-Qaeda's first members and helped work (unsuccessfully) in the early 1990s to procure uranium for the organization; Essam al-Ridi, an Egyptian veteran of the 1980s jihad against the Soviets who later purchased an airplane in the United States to help ship Stinger missiles

from Pakistan to Sudan; and L'Houssaine Kherchtou, a Moroccan who trained to serve as bin Laden's personal pilot. (All three became prosecution witnesses in the trial of the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August 1998.)

Looking at al-Qaeda dropouts, some clear patterns emerge. Some left after becoming disillusioned with the group's tactics and strategy. Probably the unkindest cut from any former member was delivered by bin Laden's fourth son, Omar bin Laden, who had spent nearly five years living in Afghan training camps. After 9/11, Omar quit al-Qaeda, calling the attacks "craziness," according to the journalist Peter Bergen. "Those guys are dummies," bin Laden's son said. "They have destroyed everything, and for nothing. What did we get from Sept. 11?"

Another factor driving jihadists to drop out is a general lack of respect for the group's leadership. Ridi testified during the embassy bombings trial that he resented having to take battlefield orders during the Afghan jihad from bin Laden and others who lacked military experience. For Ridi, the final straw was a battle in which many jihadists died -- in his view needlessly -- thanks to inept leadership, but that al-Qaeda nonetheless declared a victory. Jarrah, the 9/11 pilot, felt cut out by ringleader Mohamed Atta's leadership style.

Another reason bad guys bail out is money. Like the rest of us, some terrorists see inadequate compensation as a sign of unfair treatment. Fadl, the Sudanese radical, fumed over his salary while al-Qaeda was based in Sudan and began embezzling funds -- stealing approximately $100,000 from bin Laden, according to his testimony in the embassy bombings case. (When bin Laden got wind of Fadl's theft, he ordered Fadl to repay the money; after forking over about $30,000, Fadl fled, fearing retribution.)

Don't forget the role of petty slights, either. Kherchtou grew bitter after a bin Laden aide turned down his request for $500 to cover the costs of his wife's Caesarean section -- and grew livid when al-Qaeda subsequently paid the expenses of a group of Egyptians sent to Yemen to renew their passports. "If I had a gun," Kherchtou later testified, "I would shoot [bin Laden] at that time."

The final factor seems to be good old family ties. Terrorists who maintain contact with friends and family outside their cell or organization seem more likely to drop out. This may be why Atta forbade the 9/11 hijackers to contact their families to say goodbye. The wobbliest of the hijackers, Jarrah, resisted al-Qaeda calls to cut his ties with his fiancee in Germany and his family in Lebanon, souring his relationship with Atta, according to the 9/11 commission.

Something similar happened to two would-be 9/11 plotters, Rashid and Hamlan. Both men bailed out when they left the fanatical, insular atmosphere of the Afghan training camps and returned home to Saudi Arabia. After getting a visa to enter the United States, Hamlan contacted his family, despite clear al-Qaeda instructions to the contrary. He found out that his mother was ill and decided not to return to Afghanistan, despite intense pressure from his handlers. Hamlan later moved back in with his parents and returned to college. Similarly, Badat, the would-be shoe bomber, appears to have decided to abandon the plot once he returned to Britain and resumed contact with his family.

There's no obvious silver bullet here, of course. But the tales of the terrorists who weren't are of more than academic interest. Counterterrorism officials have spent a great deal of effort trying to understand the process of radicalization that turns ordinary people into killers. But strikingly little work has been done on the flip side of the coin: on the factors that can turn a fanatical would-be killer into a somewhat chastened citizen. We'd do well to spend some time trying to understand how Mr. Hyde turns back into Dr. Jekyll. It might help us beat back a rising tide of radicalization -- and win a war that is clearly not going well.

Michael Jacobson, a former staff member of the 9/11 commission, is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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