Young guns: the new generation of jihadists are self-styled terrorists seeking thrills.
The Next Generation of TERROR

The world’s most dangerous jihadists no longer answer to al Qaeda. The terrorists we should fear most are self-recruited wannabes who find purpose in terror and comrades on the Web. This new generation is even more frightening and unpredictable than its predecessors, but its evolution just may reveal the key to its demise.  

Marc Sageman

When British police broke down Younis Tsouli’s door in October 2005 in a leafy west London neighborhood, they suspected the 22-year-old college student, the son of a Moroccan diplomat, of little more than having traded e-mails with men planning a bombing in Bosnia. It was only after they began examining the hard drive on Tsouli’s computer that they realized they had stumbled upon one of the most infamous—and unlikely—cyberjihadists in the world.

Tsouli’s online username, as they discovered, was Irhabi007 (“Terrorist007” in Arabic). It was a moniker well known to international counterterrorism officials. Since 2004, this young man, with no history of radical activity, had become one of the world’s most influential propagandists in jihadi chatrooms. It had been the online images of the war in Iraq that first radicalized him. He began spending his days creating and hacking dozens of Web sites in order to upload videos of beheadings and suicide bombings in Iraq and post links to the texts of bomb-making manuals. From his bedroom in London, he eventually became a crucial global organizer of online terrorist networks, guiding others to jihadist sites where they could learn their deadly craft. Ultimately, he attracted the attention of the late leader of al Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. When British police discovered this young IT student in his London flat, he was serving as Zarqawi’s public relations mouthpiece on the Web.

Tsouli’s journey from computer geek to radical jihadist is representative of the wider evolution of Islamist terrorist networks today. Since Sept. 11, 2001, the threat confronting the West has changed dramatically, but most governments still imagine their foe in the mold of the old al Qaeda. The enemy today is not a product of poverty, ignorance, or religious brainwashing. The individuals we should fear most haven’t been trained in terrorist camps, and they don’t answer to Osama bin Laden or Ayman al-Zawahiri. They often do not even adhere to the most austere and dogmatic tenets of radical Islam. Instead, the new generation of terrorists consists of homegrown wannabes—self-recruited, without leadership, and globally connected through the Internet. They are young people seeking thrills and a sense of significance and belonging in their lives. And their lack of structure and organizing principles makes them even more terrifying and volatile than their terrorist forebears.

THE NEW FACE OF TERROR

The five years between Osama bin Laden’s 1996 declaration of war against the United States from his safe haven in Afghanistan to the attacks of 9/11 were the
“golden age” of what could be called al Qaeda Central. Those days are long over, but the social movement they inspired is as strong and dangerous as ever. The structure has simply evolved over time.

Today’s new generation of terrorists constitutes the third wave of radicals stirred to battle by the ideology of global jihad. The first wave to join al Qaeda was Afghan Arabs who came to Pakistan and Afghanistan to fight the Soviets in the 1980s. They were, contrary to popular belief, largely well educated and from solidly middle-class backgrounds. They were also mature, often about 30 years old when they took up arms. Their remnants still form the backbone of al Qaeda’s leadership today, but there are at most a few dozen of them left, hiding in the frontier territories of northwest Pakistan.

The second wave that followed consisted mostly of elite expatriates from the Middle East who went to the West to attend universities. The separation from family, friends, and culture led many to feel homesick and marginalized, sentiments that hardened into the seeds of their radicalization. It was this generation of young men who traveled to al Qaeda’s training camps in Afghanistan in the 1990s. They were incorporated into al Qaeda Central, and today there are at most about 100 of them left, also in hiding in northwest Pakistan.

The new, third wave is unlike its predecessors. It consists mostly of would-be terrorists, who, angered
by the invasion of Iraq, aspire to join the movement and the men they hail as heroes. But it is nearly impossible for them to link up with al Qaeda Central, which was forced underground after 9/11. Instead, they form fluid, informal networks that are self-financed and self-trained. They have no physical headquarters or sanctuary, but the tolerant, virtual environment of the Internet offers them a semblance of unity and purpose. Theirs is a scattered, decentralized social structure—a leaderless jihad.

Take the case of Mohammed Bouyeri, perhaps the most infamous member of a network of aspiring jihadists that Dutch authorities dubbed the “Hofstad Netwerk,” in 2004. Bouyeri, then a 26-year-old formerly secular social worker born to Moroccan immigrants in Amsterdam, could also trace his radicalization to outrage over the Iraq war. He became influential among a loosely connected group of about 100 young Dutch Muslims, most of whom were in their late teens and born in the Netherlands. The network informally coalesced around three or four active participants, some of whom had acquired a local reputation for trying (and failing) to fight the jihad abroad. Some of the initial meetings were at demonstrations for international Muslim causes, others at radical mosques, but mostly they met in Internet chatrooms. Other popular meeting spots included Internet cafes or the few apartments of the older members, as most of the network still lived with their parents. The group had no clear leader and no connection to established terrorist networks abroad.

On Nov. 2, 2004, Mohammed Bouyeri brutally murdered Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh on an Amsterdam street, nearly sawing off van Gogh’s head and pinning a five-page note threatening the enemies of Islam to his victim’s chest. Bouyeri had been enraged by van Gogh’s short film, Submission, about Islam’s treatment of women and domestic violence, and written by former Dutch parliamentarian Ayaan Hirsi Ali. After killing van Gogh, Bouyeri calmly waited for the police in the hope that he would die in the gunfight that he expected would follow. He was only wounded and, less than a year later, sentenced to life in prison. A series of raids against other members of the network uncovered evidence of plans to bomb the Dutch parliament, a nuclear power plant, and Amsterdam’s airport, as well as assassination plots against prominent Dutch politicians.

The fluidity of the Hofstad Netwerk has created problems for Dutch prosecutors. The first few trials succeeded in convicting some members as belonging to a terrorist organization because they met regularly. But at later trials, when defendants faced more serious charges, the prosecutors’ cases began to break down. Some guilty verdicts have even been subsequently overturned. In January, a Dutch appeals court threw out the convictions of seven men accused of belonging to the Hofstad Netwerk because “no structured cooperation [had] been established.” It is difficult to convict suspects who rarely meet face to face and whose cause has no formal organization.

The perpetrators of the Madrid bombings in March 2004 are another example of the self-recruited leaderless jihad. They were an unlikely network of young immigrants who came together in haphazard ways. Some had been lifelong friends from their barrio in Tetouan, Morocco, and eventually came to run one of the most successful drug networks in Madrid, selling hashish and ecstasy. Their informal leader, Jamal Ahmidan, a 33-year-old high school dropout who liked to chase women, wavered between pointless criminality and redemptive religion. When he was released from a Moroccan jail in 2003 after serving three years for an alleged homicide, he became increasingly obsessed with the war in Iraq. He linked up with Tunisian-born Sarhane Ben Abdelmajid Fakhet, who had moved to Madrid to get his doctorate in economics. They were part of a loose network of foreign Muslims in Spain who spent time together after soccer games and mosque prayers. They later masterminded the Madrid bombings, the deadliest Islamist terror attack on European soil. As Spanish authorities closed in on their hideout several weeks after the bombings, Fakhet, Ahmidan, and several accomplices blew themselves up as the police moved in.

Try as they may, Spanish authorities have never found any direct connection between the Madrid bombers and international al Qaeda networks. The 2007 trials of collaborators concluded that the bombings were inspired by al Qaeda, but not directed by it.

Evidence of hopeful young jihadists is not limited to Western Europe. In June 2006, Canadian security forces conducted a series of raids against two clusters
of young people in and around Toronto. The youths they apprehended were mostly second-generation Canadians in their late teens or early 20s and from secular, middle-class households. They were accused of planning large-scale terrorist attacks in Toronto and Ottawa, and when they were arrested, they had already purchased vast quantities of bomb-making materials. The core members of the group were close friends from their early high school years, when they had formed a “Religious Awareness Club,” which met during lunch hours at school. They also created an online forum where they could share their views on life, religion, and politics. Eventually, a number of the young men and women intermarried while still in their teens.

The group expanded their network when they moved to other parts of the greater Toronto area, attending radical mosques and meeting like-minded young people. They also reached out in international chatrooms, eventually linking up with Irhabi007 prior to his arrest. Through his forum, they were directed to Web sites providing them with information on how to build bombs. Other militants in Bosnia, Britain, Denmark, Sweden, and even Atlanta, Georgia, also virtually connected through this forum, and actively planned attacks. Again, there is no evidence that any of the core Toronto plotters were ever in contact with al Qaeda; the plot was completely homegrown.

What makes these examples of the next generation of terrorists so frightening is the ease with which marginalized youths are able to translate their frustrations into acts of terrorism, often on the back of professed solidarity with terrorists halfway around the world whom they have never met. They seek to belong to a movement larger than themselves, and their violent actions and plans are hatched locally, with advice from others on the Web. Their mode of communication also suggests that they will increasingly evade detection. Without links to known terrorists, this new generation is more difficult to discover through traditional intelligence gathering. Of course, their lack of training and experience could limit their effectiveness. But that’s cold comfort for their victims.

WHY THEY FIGHT

Any strategy to fight these terrorists must be based on an understanding of why they believe what they believe. In other words, what transforms ordinary people into fanatics who use violence for political ends? What leads them to consider themselves special, part of a small vanguard trying to build their version of an Islamist utopia?

The explanation for their behavior is found not in how they think, but rather in how they feel. One of the most common refrains among Islamist radicals is their sense of moral outrage. Before 2003, the most significant source of these feelings were the killings of Muslims in Afghanistan in the 1980s. In the 1990s, it was the fighting in Bosnia, Chechnya, and Kashmir. Then came the second Palestinian intifada beginning in 2000. And since 2003, it has been all about the war in Iraq, which has become the focal point of global moral outrage for Muslims all over the world. Along with the humiliations of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, Iraq is monopolizing today’s conversations about Islam and the West. On a more local level, governments that appear overly pro-American cause radicals to feel they are the victims of a larger anti-Muslim conspiracy, bridging the perceived local and global attacks against them.

In order for this moral outrage to translate into extremism, the frustrations must be interpreted in a particular way: The violations are deemed part of a unified Western strategy,
namely a “war against Islam.” That deliberately vague worldview, however, is just a sound bite. The new terrorists are not Islamic scholars. Jihadists volunteering for Iraq are interested not in theological debates but in living out their heroic fantasies.

How various individuals interpret this vision of a “war against Islam” differs from country to country, and it is a major reason why homegrown terrorism within the United States is far less likely than it is in Europe. To a degree, the belief that the United States is a melting pot protects the country from homegrown attacks. Whether or not the United States is a land of opportunity, the important point is that people believe it to be. A recent poll found that 71 percent of Muslim Americans believe in the “American Dream,” more than the American public as a whole (64 percent). This is not the case in Europe, where national myths are based on degrees of “Britishness,” “Frenchness,” or “Germanness.” This excludes non-European Muslim immigrants from truly feeling as if they belong.

Feeling marginalized is, of course, no simple springboard to violence. Many people feel they don’t belong but don’t aspire to wage violent jihad. What transforms a very small number to become terrorists is mobilization by networks. Until a few years ago, these networks were face-to-face groups. They included local gangs of young immigrants, members of student associations, and study groups at radical mosques. These cliques of friends became radicalized together. The group acted as an echo chamber, amplifying grievances, intensifying bonds to each other, and breeding values that rejected those of their host societies. These natural group dynamics resulted in a spiral of mutual encouragement and escalation, transforming a few young Muslims into dedicated terrorists willing to follow the model of their heroes and sacrifice themselves for comrades and cause. Their turn to violence was a collective decision, rather than an individual one.

During the past two or three years, however, face-to-face radicalization has been replaced by online radicalization. The same support and validation that young people used to derive from their offline peer groups are now found in online forums, which promote the image of the terrorist hero, link users to the online social movement, give them guidance, and instruct them in tactics. These forums, virtual marketplaces for extremist ideas, have become the “invisible hand” that organizes terrorist activities worldwide. The true leader of this violent social movement is the collective discourse on half a dozen influential forums. They are transforming the terrorist movement, attracting ever younger members and now women, who can participate in the discussions.

At present, al Qaeda Central cannot impose discipline on these third-wave wannabes, mostly because it does not know who they are. Without this command and control, each disconnected network acts according to its own understanding and capability, but their collective actions do not amount to any unified long-term goal or strategy. These separate groups cannot coalesce into a physical movement, leaving them condemned to remain leaderless, an online aspiration. Such traits make them particularly volatile and difficult to detect, but they also offer a tantalizing strategy for those who wish to defeat these dangerous individuals: The very seeds of the movement’s demise are within the movement itself.

Islamist terrorism will likely disappear for internal reasons—if America has the sense to allow it.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END?

There has been talk of an al Qaeda resurgence, but the truth is that most of the hard-core members of the first and second waves have been killed or captured. The survival of the social movement they inspired relies on the continued inflow of new members. But this movement is vulnerable to whatever may diminish its appeal among the young. Its allure thrives only at the abstract fantasy level. The few times its aspirations have been translated into reality—the Taliban in Afghanistan, parts of Algeria during its civil war, and more recently in Iraq’s Anbar Province—were particularly repulsive to most Muslims.

What’s more, a leaderless social movement is permanently at the mercy of its participants. As each generation attempts to define itself in contrast to its predecessor, what appeals to the present generation of young would-be radicals may not appeal to the next. A major source of the present appeal is the anger and moral outrage provoked by the invasion of Iraq. As the Western footprint there fades, so will the appeal of fighting it. And new
hotheads in the movement will always push the envelope to make a name for themselves and cause ever escalating atrocities. The magnitude of these horrors will, in turn, likely alienate potential recruits.

The U.S. strategy to counter this terrorist threat continues to be frozen by the horrors of 9/11. It relies more on wishful thinking than on a deep understanding of the enemy. The pursuit of “high-value targets” who were directly involved in the 9/11 operation more than six years ago was an appropriate first step to bring the perpetrators to justice. And the United States has been largely successful in degrading the capability of al Qaeda Central.

But this strategy is not only useless against the leaderless jihad; it is precisely what will help the movement flourish. Radical Islamist terrorism will never disappear because the West defeats it. Instead, it will most likely disappear for internal reasons—if the United States has the sense to allow it to continue on its course and fade away. The main threat to radical Islamist terrorism is the fact that its appeal is self-limiting. The key is to accelerate this process of internal decay. This need not be a long war, unless American policy makes it so.

Terrorist acts must be stripped of glory and reduced to common criminality. Most aspiring terrorists want nothing more than to be elevated to the status of an FBI Most Wanted poster. “[I am] one of the most wanted terrorists on the Internet,” Younis Tsouli boasted online a few months before his arrest in 2005. “I have the Feds and the CIA, both would love to catch me. I have MI6 on my back.” His ego fed off the respect such bragging brought him in the eyes of other chatroom participants. Any policy or recognition that puts such people on a pedestal only makes them heroes in each other’s eyes—and encourages others to follow their example. These young men aspire to nothing more glorious than to fight uniformed soldiers of the sole remaining superpower. That is why the struggle against these terrorists must be demilitarized and turned over to collaborative law enforcement. The military role should be limited to denying terrorists a sanctuary.

It is equally crucial not to place terrorists who are arrested or killed in the limelight. The temptation to hold press conferences to publicize another “major victory” in the war on terror must be resisted, for it only transforms terrorist criminals into jihadist heroes. The United States underestimates the value of prosecutions, which often can be enormously demoralizing to radical groups. There is no glory in being taken to prison in handcuffs. No jihadi Web site publishes such pictures. Arrested terrorists fade into oblivion; martyrs live on in popular memory.

This is very much a battle for young Muslims’ hearts and minds. Any appearance of persecution for short-term tactical gains will be a strategic defeat on this battlefield. The point is to regain the international moral high ground, which served the United States and its allies so well during the Cold War. With the advent of the Internet, there has been a gradual shift to online networks, where young Muslims share their hopes, dreams, and grievances. That offers an opportunity to encourage voices that reject violence.

It is necessary to reframe the entire debate, from imagined glory to very real horror. Young people must learn that terrorism is about death and destruction, not fame. The voices of the victims must be heard over the bragging and posturing that go on in the online jihadist forums. Only then will the leaderless jihad expire, poisoned by its own toxic message.

Want to Know More?


For links to relevant Web sites, access to the FP Archive, and a comprehensive index of related FOREIGN POLICY articles, go to ForeignPolicy.com.