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What's This? Traduire

# Keystone Al-Kaeda

In the battle against Al Qaeda, the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.

BY SCOTT ATRAN | NOVEMBER 5, 2010



The printer-cartridge bombs sent from Yemen to a Chicago synagogue were probably never meant to reach their destination -- they were addressed to a 12 century Crusader who was beheaded by Osama Bin Laden's hero, Saladin, and to a 15 century

inquisitor notable for his torture of Muslims and Jews -- but the important thing is that they detonated at all. As with almost every al Qaeda-directed plot against the West since 9/11 -- from the underpants dud on a flight to Detroit last Christmas to the recent firecracker fizzle in Times Square -- the attempt flopped.

Nonetheless, Americans have once again panicked about their vulnerability to terrorist attacks. Once again, their president has proclaimed that the country will not rest until it tracks down everyone involved and assured that the sum of U.S. national power would be brought against them. Once again, conservative politicians and pundits have pounded the president for ignoring a much broader-based "Islamic threat" to Western civilization. And again, congressional leaders have joined the anxious chorus

In truth, terrorists just aren't worthy of this level of hysteria. Rarely in the history of human conflict have so few people with so few actual means and capabilities frightened so many. Islamist terror groups are undoubtedly the enemy of all humanity, but it is our own exaggerated fear that may be the greater threat.

Far from diabolical masterminds, our adversaries are actually improvisatory bumbleres. The underwear bomber and Times Square terrorist were Internet lurkers and familial black sheep before they were terror-camp attendees. Across the jihadi world, the turn to violence is instigated not by far-off gurus but by close-knit groups of friends and family. Terrorist plots don't follow well-drawn blueprints; they stumble through ad hoc anarchy toward their goal.

Even plots with direct al Qaeda involvement are products of this sort of organized chaos, growing from nodes of personal association and coalescing through contingent and unforeseen events into radicalized cells. The 9/11 suicide pilots were Middle Easterners who befriended one another in Hamburg, not Taliban-controlled Afghanistan; the core group of Madrid train bombers were friends from one small Moroccan neighborhood who had no religious education or organized direction; and one group of Palestinian suicide attackers likely found their way to martyrdom largely

because they were all teammates on a soccer team. (There are many more such examples detailed in my new book *Talking to the Enemy*.)

In case after case, the young jihadis who go on to violence were powerfully bound to each other -- they were campmates, school buddies, soccer pals, and the like -- who became enthralled to a thrilling and heroic cause that seduces them into thinking, "You, too, can cut off the head of Goliath with a paper cutter." It should come as no surprise that jihadi organizations have such a low rate of success: They are increasingly amateur membership clubs.

In that way, Osama bin Laden does not enjoy nearly the centralized and concentrated power that the U.S. media -- and, unfortunately, U.S. policymakers -- often ascribe to him. Perhaps we inflate the threat because it makes us feel like we can and must do something about it. It is more comforting (and politically salient) to say that we will align every "element of U.S. power" to eliminate jihadism rather than conceding that we will use police work and community outreach to observe the threat and mitigate it. But in doing so, we have allowed bin Laden to capture our public discourse, making him victorious beyond his wildest dreams.

Indeed, even on their own terms, America's militarized counterterrorism operations have often been counterproductive. Yes, Washington has thwarted specific terrorist plots. But the United States has also created enemies of even greater strategic menace, like the Pakistani Taliban, who seek to topple a nuclear state. That group didn't exist before 9/11; it emerged only *after* Washington prodded Pakistan's government to attack Pashtun tribes that were honor-bound to give sanctuary to their Afghan brethren.

Ultimately, pundits who blithely speak of the war on terror as a clash of civilizations -- see American Enterprise Institute scholar **Ayaan Hirsi Ali** -- are misunderstanding the central conflict. Violent extremism is the product of people unmoored from

traditions and flailing about in search of a social identity. The clash of civilizations isn't happening between West and East -- it's happening within Islam.

In places like Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen, the forces of globalization have shattered social and political stability. Jihadists have developed culturally savvy peer-to-peer appeals and interactions to address the Muslim world's marginalized youth; we need to do the same. Of course, this isn't how we can stop al Qaeda and company today. We still need good police and intelligence work for that. But it will be how we beat them tomorrow.

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*Scott Atran is an anthropologist at France's National Center for Scientific Research, the University of Michigan, and John Jay College in New York City.*

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