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The Ann Arbor - based bookseller

is bankrupt, all its stores closing. But in its heyday, there were few places closer to a literary heart.

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A CHANGING WORLD

9/11 + 10: The terrorism expert

September 8, 2011

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Scott Atran is a world-renowned expert on terrorism and terrorists. His research and his book "Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of Terrorists" derive from years in the field interviewing terrorists from around the globe. He is a professor of public policy and of psychology at the University of Michigan, a Presidential Scholar at John Jay University, and Director of Anthropological Research at the National Center of Scientific Research in Paris. Michigan Today contacted asked for his insights into the status of terrorism ten years after 9/11.



Scott Atran

How has terrorism changed since 9/11?

During the golden days of al-Qaeda, which lasted until 9/11/2001, most of guys who joined were fairly well educated, middle class and married with degrees usually in the sciences—medicine and engineering.

Today, al-Qaeda itself is dead. There are 50 to a hundred of the original core left alive. Most are in Pakistan, a few back in Saudi Arabia and Yemen. But it has mutated [from an organization] into a viral movement, and now it appeals to people on the margins: people who are much younger, more marginalized in society, less educated. It appeals to a much wider spectrum of people. For young people seeking glory and adventure, it's quite a thrilling thing.

If you travel in Africa and Asia, you see a lot of young people hanging around, wearing soccer jerseys with nothing much to do, and this "glorious thing" comes along: take up jihad and you can change the world.

What makes a person take the next step and actually take up arms, or a suicide belt, and try to kill people?

When I interview would-be suicide bombers, they're people who are

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 spelling has to be the most wonderful and infuriating. Case in point: "colonel."

TALKING ABOUT MOVIES »

Tennessee Williams



The playwright and screen-writer

would have turned 100 this year, and U-M is celebrating.

seeking glory and adventure, and to be significant. The single biggest predictor for taking action is who their friends are. It's almost random. Mostly they're normal people who get caught up with a bunch of friends, people they meet on the internet or even on the train. It's somewhat similar to the London riots of summer 2011: many of the kids who were rioting weren't particularly *for* anything, but their friends did it, so they joined in.

As far as a cause goes, most jihadis are born-again [Muslims], but most don't have a religious education to speak of, and the message they do receive is flat and superficial: "The world is persecuting Muslims." You can look on the internet or al-Jazeera and you can see what's going on, and if what you see as injustice resonates with you personally, then you're likely to join in.

This doesn't really apply in the USA, where immigrant Muslims for the most part buy into the American dream and achieve parity in income, education and social status with average Americans by the second generation. In Europe, it's different. In France, over 70% of the prison population is Muslim. Why? For many of same reasons that Black Americans are overrepresented in US prisons. In contrast to the USA, Muslims immigrants are 5 to 7 times more likely to be poor in Britain and Germany, and 19 times more likely to be poor in Spain. In prisons, jihadis protect each other, often from white supremacists.

In both European and American prisons, religious education is a *negative* predictor of jihadi activity. But in Europe, once someone catches the jihadi bug, the conditions of the community they go back to when released often support it, whereas as in the USA there is almost no community support and so it dies. Most plots in the USA are entrapment cases by law enforcement, whereas European jihadis need no help.

If the "old" al-Qaeda is dead, who are the most dangerous terrorists today?

Yemen has the most dangerous al-Qaeda affiliate in world to us. Still, they've only staged two unsuccessful attacks in two and half years. They are basically organized by three people. Ansar al-Awlaki, an American of Yemeni parents, had an engineering education but went on to become imam in Colorado and California, then moved to Yemen; another US citizen, Saudi-born Samir Khan, who grew up in Queens, got interested in Awlaki's internet musings and started his own net boastings, then went to Yemen find Awlaki. He found him after a month of looking, and he now produces "Inspire," al-Qaeda's English-language magazine in Yemen.

That magazine is the only interesting development in al-Qaeda. "Inspire" is aimed at enlisting young Americans and Europeans, but it tells them, "Don't go to Yemen or Afghanistan; you're likely to get caught, and besides we don't need you here. You should work at home. Try to do what the DC sniper did, or shoot up a movie

9/11 + 10 stories

The eyewitness: **"Suddenly, I knew I must run."**

The Marine: **"I wanted to be in combat."**

The terrorism expert: **"Today, al-Qaeda itself is dead."**

The researcher: **"The wars shrank the defense research horizon dramatically."**

The student: **"My teacher returned moments later, visibly shaken."**

The lost: **18 Michigan alums were killed on 9/11.**

theater or restaurant in Washington or New York; if you're really smart and motivated, try to make or get hold of chemical or biological weapons that can cause real mass destruction and chaos."

The third member of the Yemeni trio that targets the USA is master bomb-maker Ibrahim al-Asiri, who got his brother to blow himself up with an underwear bomb trying to kill Saudi Prince Nayef and then fitted Nigerian student Omar Abdulmutaalab with another crotch bomb to try to bring down a Detroit-bound plane on Christmas Eve 2009 (he picked a Detroit flight only because it was cheaper than the others).

But if you look these plots, including the planting of bombs in printer cartridges in the cargo holds of US-bound planes, it's really just three guys, and couple of unsuccessful plots. Period. These three are dangerous and should be taken out, but the majority of people in al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula are, like the Taliban, disgruntled youth and tribesmen interested in their homeland, not ours.

Apart from those three guys in Yemen, the 300 or so members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula pose no real danger to us or the world, except, perhaps, if they manage to take the port of Aden and, in team with their friends in Somalia, the al-Shabbab, managed to block maritime access to the Red Sea and Suez Canal. Oil prices would rocket, Israel could mobilize for war to clear passage, and the Saudis and Egyptians would be in a potentially destabilizing bind. Still, like the Taliban, they're basically local guys really only interested in their own countries and region.

You seem to be saying that at least some of these guys aren't as dangerous as they seem.

I don't think so few people in history have caused so much fear in so many people. In every aspect. I know these guys, they're no geniuses. They're committed. They believe they're doing something with their buddies for a glorious cause.

Since 9/11 there have been no successful attacks against the USA. In Europe, one attack (the 2005 London Underground bombers) had an indirect link to al-Qaeda, but even these guys were self-seekers, a group of friends who paid their own way. The 2004 Madrid train bombing, which actually led to a change of government, was wholly homegrown, concocted and executed by a few disgruntled North African students but mostly by a bunch of friends from one small neighborhood in Tetuan, Morocco, who were dealing drugs in Madrid and wanted to be something more glorious than petty criminals.

There have never been al-Qaeda recruiters anywhere. Al-Qaeda was like the National Science Foundation. They would accept proposals for attacks, and then if they liked them, they'd fund them.

For the most part, today the prospects for violent jihad against America consist of small numbers of relatively young self-seekers in transitional stages in their lives—immigrants, students, seeking jobs, mates, friends—seeking to convert their personal frustrations and aspirations into a great and glorious cause that promises adventure and significance. There's really nobody out there saying "come to us, we'll train you." Increasingly it's people like Awlaki over the internet saying to relatively educated, economically well off, but socially marginalized folk like the failed Christmas Day and

Times Square bombers, or someone like Major Hassan who killed fellow soldiers at Fort Hood, "Here are some suggestions for how to terrorize people, but figure it out for yourself guys. You know your country, its cities and neighborhoods; do something spectacular that will get on the evening news," because publicity is the oxygen of violent extremism.

So there's the general trend of disaffected youths with nowhere to go; there are Awlaki's guys promoting homegrown terrorism in the USA. Are there other threats?

The biggest threat is Pakistan. They're out of control. The government is weak, the intelligence service is split between those who support jihadis and those who don't. Who knows what will happen? Lashkar-e-Tayibah's head, Hafez Saeed, runs around freely spouting jihad against India and America. His group helped to carry out a suicide attack against India's parliament, enlisted Americans for jihad, cased Australia's nuclear facilities, and carried out the Mumbai attacks.

India has been very patient so far, but I fear its army will mobilize after the next large-scale attack. And the only way Pakistan could stop India's army from reaching the Pakistani capital of Islamabad in a couple of hours would be to launch their nukes. India would undoubtedly retaliate, and hundreds of millions of people could die. This would destabilize the entire political order of the world far more than now.

The Pakistani Taliban are a real danger, one which the USA very much helped to create by bombing the Taliban into togetherness with al-Qaeda. They have three times attacked nuclear facilities, which are located as far from India as possible, and therefore close to the tribal areas in the west. I've talked to Pakistan Army and ISI (army intelligence) guys, and my estimate is that about a third of them have Taliban sympathies and see us, Israel, and India as their prime enemies.

When I asked a Taliban leader "Where do you get your money," he answered. "We get some from Gulf States, some from kidnapping people like you, and from ISI."

"So," I said, "the USA gives Pakistan's army and intelligence money to give to the Taliban to kill Americans?"

"That is the wonder of Allah's way," responded the Taliban.

Where do you see the US's best hopes?

The Arab Spring has the potential to be the real cat killer. Those tech-savvy youth in Egypt did in 18 days what al-Qaeda couldn't in two decades—changed the core regime of the Arab world—and without violence. They thoroughly discredited al-Qaeda's central narrative, which is that only violence directed against the USA and its allies will make popular change in the Arab world possible. Al-Qaeda fervently hopes that the Arab Spring fails.

The USA has played it haphazardly. We support democracy but still give military and development assistance to remnants of the old guard, which merely reinforces the corroded, authoritarian regimes of patronage and privilege that the Arab Spring opposes. In Egypt now, the army and other remnants of the Mubarak regime, which we support, are starting to make an alliance of convenience with the Muslim Brotherhood, which originally declined to support the Arab Spring. The Brotherhood survived as Egypt's largest and best

organized political organization because previous regimes crushed all secular opposition, arresting people who simply spoke politics in cafes; but they couldn't go into mosques and arrest people, so the Brotherhood survived and thrived. Last February, I wrote in the New York Times that [the "Bumbling Brotherhood" poses no great threat to the USA or Arab Spring](#) unless remnants of the old guard prevail.

What I advocate—I just wrote a report to the Pentagon and previously testified to Congress—is not more government-to-government programs but the involvement of the most effective and influential peer-to-peer purveyors of American values, friendships and information: our universities, the entertainment industry, faith-based organizations and small businesses. It's unwise for the USA to attempt to direct, or even too strongly embrace, and thereby strangle, democratic forces of the Arab spring.

I'm a lifelong liberal but the government can't do much to help here. Our government's ability—as opposed to our *people's* potential ability—to deal with other peoples, especially from cultures and traditions alien to us, is pretty pathetic.

We can't control everybody. We shouldn't try to nation build. We should get our most effective tools into the game: our movie guys, our religious outreachers, our youth-savvy entrepreneurs, and our ingenious educators. But just involving the government itself wastes a lot of the public's money and often backfires on our country.

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