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No Easy Answers

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No easy answers

No trend explains why some people choose to be terrorists – still, there are things we can do to reduce the likelihood they will

ERIKA **SIMPSON**

What led two graduates of South Collegiate Institute in London to allegedly join a splinter al-Qaida group that attacked an Algerian gas plant, taking hostages and randomly killing dozens of foreigners and locals? Would Ali Medlej and Xristos Katsiroubas have been motivated by frustration or the presence of politically radical recruiters? Is there is any evidence why yet a third man from London may have intended to participate in the attack, although his brother says he had no contact with the others in over a year?

We simply do not know the answers yet. There is no demographic trend that explains why some people choose to become terrorists. Terrorists can be male or female, religious or secular, highly-educated or with less than a high school education. They can be foreign-born and raised or "home-grown," as federal Public Safety Minister Vic Toews and Foreign Minister John Baird have described them.

Like these young men in London, they might not be from poverty-stricken backgrounds, nor necessarily wealthy or highly-educated. Their average age tends to be in their early 20s, but they can be much older. Mostly single, they can be married and have families.

We do not know a lot about what causes young people to join fundamentalist groups that call for beheading others, hostage taking and the indiscriminate killing of civilians.

The "Black Widow" terrorists saw their husbands killed or tortured, so they are seen to be victims of what is called primary traumatization. But secondary traumatization — when people hear about or view grisly massacres online — can also motivate alienated youth to join radical terrorist groups, like this off-shoot group known as Signatories of Blood.

Canada's intelligence-gathering agency, CSIS, reportedly was watching Katsiroubas and Medlej as far back as 2007, but not lately. CSIS and the Communications Security Establishment monitor the telecommunications of suspicious individuals, and certainly al-Qaida cells have historically recruited online and in person, and then trained their suicide bombers overseas.

Should we therefore check everyone's e-mails, censor the Internet and monitor young people's Facebook accounts, so as to determine whether they are thinking of joining a radical terrorist group? It would be expensive, fruitless and nigh impossible. Moreover, there is no demographic trend that identifies would-be third-generation terrorists.

The first generation learned side by side with Osama bin Laden and his right-hand man, Ayman al-Zawahari, while the second-generation developed hundreds of autonomous cells that communicated with each other but did not necessarily agree, meet or train together.

The third generation seems to learn from the Internet, watch televised happenings and adopt Global Salafism's perception of the "Near Enemy" and the "Far Enemy" on their own, perhaps because they harbour suicidal tendencies.

We can learn about and advocate for ways to help prevent teenage and young-adult suicide. We can alert medical counsellors and police authorities — as one family member of the terrorists reportedly did, here in London. If we think our sons and daughters are feeling alienated and alone, we can try to make sure they are not attracted to radical groups bent on instigating violence.

But entirely stopping home-grown terrorism will be difficult. The fact these young men came from London really means they could have come from any mid-sized urban town in Canada.

The causes of third-generation terrorism are not due to the denial of opportunities, relative inequality or poor job prospects for youth. We do not know yet what factors lead young men and women to join radical jihadist cells.

We do know from studying the writings of home-grown terrorists in the past that their behaviour seems to have its roots in mental instability, arising almost inexplicably from nowhere.

As the Unabomber case demonstrates, it is always difficult to pinpoint who is more likely to succumb to terrorist ideology, so such proposals as somehow censoring the Internet are not workable solutions.

What can be done, then, to combat terrorism and suicide bombers? Some hard-power techniques include strengthening North America's intelligence-gathering and intensifying its military reprisals. Using new technology, like drones, can disrupt or destroy terrorist organizations, but it can also create new cycles of terror in retaliation.

North America could also increase its homeland security, erecting more walls to prevent terrorists from entering. But these can incite frustration if they entail policies such as racial or religious profiling that are seen to violate human rights and encourage a fortress America mentality.

Some soft-power techniques would be to decrease primary and secondary traumatization by reducing or ceasing military reprisals, creating more trust between adversaries and setting up programs that educate youth on the benefits and successes of non-violent campaigns.

Obviously, ending the transmission of horrifying images through the Internet and video games — images that can inspire alienated individuals — is another feasible option, which U.S. lawmakers are grappling with in the wake of the two latest shooting rampages there.

We should also oppose the belief systems of groups that espouse indiscriminate, randomized killing, including the makers of many violent online video games.

Moderate Muslims around the world will also need more help to stand against the crusading discourse by radical Islamists, specifically Global Salafists, who preach non-negotiable goals with no middle ground. The dichotomous understanding of friends versus foes leads fundamentalists to portray moderate voices as part of the "crusading imperialism" of the Far Enemy. Global Salfism's ideology, for instance, with its declaration of war against the "Crusader-Zionist alliance," links conflicts across time and space as part of a broader Islamic struggle.

This sort of cosmic thinking is fuelled by rants against the perceived enemy.

For example, according to Bin Laden, "The people of Islam have suffered from aggression, iniquity and injustice imposed on them by the Zionist-Crusader alliance." Another of his speeches attests, "The horrifying pictures of the massacre of Qana in Lebanon, are still fresh in our memory. Massacres in Tajikistan, Burma, Kashmir, Asam, the Philippines . . . Ogaden, Somalia, Eritrea, Chechnya and Bosnia-Herzegovina . . . send shivers in the body and shake the conscience."

Such diatribes by the first- and second-generation of Bin Laden's followers, many of whom have since been martyred and killed, seem to play a powerful role in activating third-generation terrorism.

Alienated young people with suicidal tendencies need to be discouraged from believing it is somehow noble to join the global "struggle."

By encouraging all moderates, including moderate Muslims, to take a stand in their communities, churches, mosques and schools against extremism, we ourselves can help combat values and practices that incite indiscriminate killing.

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Paul Lachine

Islam View: On the Spirituality & Ethics page, the tale of two young London athletes – and the choices available to our youth. **Page E7**

Letters to the Editor: Readers weigh in on the shocking news that two London men are implicated in the deadly attack on a gas plant in Algeria. **Page E4**