The Terrorists in Their Own Words: Interviews with 35 Incarcerated Middle Eastern Terrorists*

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Using semi-structured interviews, 35 incarcerated Middle Eastern terrorists have been interviewed – 21 Islamic terrorists representing Hamas (and its armed wing Izz a-Din al Qassan), Islamic Jihad, and Hizballah, and 14 secular terrorists from Fatah and its military wing, PFLP and DFLP. The purpose of the research was to understand their psychology and decision-making in general, and with special reference to their propensity towards weapons of mass destruction.

(This note is drawn from remarks presented at a memorial service for Ehud Sprinzak at Georgetown University on 2 November 2 2002.)

I have been a close friend and collaborator with Ehud Sprinzak for more than 20 years. In our last luncheon together at Georgetown in August, we spoke together with excitement of future collaborations. What drew us together from the beginning was our common fascination with the mind of the extremist. Ehud had a remarkable capacity to engage with extremists from the far left – his doctoral dissertation was on the Weathermen – to the extreme right – his award-winning study of the ascension of the radical right in Israel. There was a special vitality and solidity about Ehud that was compelling. One can't really pursue understanding the psychology of others without being quite comfortable with oneself, and Ehud was. In pursuing his fascination with what makes terrorists and extremists tick, he had this elegantly simple notion, that the best way to find out what leads people along the path of extremism, what leads people to be willing to kill in the name of their cause, is – to ask them!

Indeed, that was the central premise of our grant proposal to the Smith-Richardson Foundation which sponsored our project interviewing

incarcerated Middle-East terrorists. The best way to find out the interest of terrorists in using weapons of mass destruction was to ask them, and this we did, with the fascinating results reported below.

The findings are quite remarkable. Preliminary research suggested that the type posing greatest danger are religious fundamentalist terrorists, a population to which the Israeli team had ready access. The material elicited from the terrorists who were interviewed vastly exceeded our expectations. It provides rich contextual detail on their individual pathways into terrorism and the power of the group, the commitment to armed struggle, and the spectrum of rationalizations and justifications for their acts of terror. To provide a sense of the qualitative flavor of the interviews, excerpts have been included in this article.

Somewhat counter-intuitive, the backgrounds of the interview subjects varied widely and did not materially influence their decision as to whether to join the group. The boyhood heroes for the Islamist terrorists were religious figures, such as the Prophet, or the radical Wahabi Islamist, Abdullah Azzam; for the secular terrorists, revolutionary heroes such as Che Guevara or Fidel Castro were identified. Most had some high school, and some had education beyond high school. The majority of the subjects reported that their families were respected in the community. The families were experienced as being uniformly supportive of their commitment to the cause.

Clearly families that are politically active socialized their sons to the movement at an early age and were supportive of their involvement. However, families that were not politically active did not appear to dissuade active involvement by their children. The vast majority of both secular and Islamist group members reported that there were no other family members in the organization when they joined (70 per cent secular and 80 per cent Islamist) although several reported that younger brothers followed them. In most cases where a family member (father, older sibling) was already a member of an organization, the sons were more likely to join that same organization, and were more often members of the more militant, or armed, wing. This was true of any group regardless of ideological affiliation. In a few cases, sons did not follow the path of an older sibling, however when this occurred, the younger sibling invariably joined a more radical group.

When looking at family activism, including support in the home for the struggle, we found that the vast majority of secular group members (almost 85 per cent) reported that their family was active at an average or below average level. Some 68 per cent of Islamist group members reported a similar experience. However, over 30 per cent of Islamist group members reported extensive or radical involvement by their family. Of those Islamist

group members reporting a radical family background, all joined the militant armed wing of their respective organizations. In the secular groups, only 15 per cent report coming from radically active families and there is no correlation between radical family involvement and members joining the mainstream or militant wing of their organizations.

But it was clear that the major influence was the social environment of the youth. As one terrorist remarked, 'Everyone was joining'. Individuals from strictly religious Islamic backgrounds were more likely to join Islamist groups, while those who did not have a religious background might join either a secular or a religious group. The peer group was of much greater influence, and in many cases it was a friend or acquaintance in the group who recruited the subject. For the secular groups their social environment centered around school and social clubs, while for the Islamist group members, their social environment was dominated by the mosque, religious organizations and religious instruction.

Some 64 per cent of the secular group members, while only 43 per cent of the Islamist group members, report that the group they joined was the most active in their community. Over 50 per cent of the secular group members cite the involvement of their community or a youth club, such as Shabiba, as the primary influence in their recruitment. For the Islamist groups, almost 50 per cent cite the Mosque, Moslem Brotherhood or other religious influence as central, another 20 per cent cite their experience at the University or other professional school as of primary importance.

Only 30 per cent of the secular group members and not quite 20 per cent of Islamist group members report their families as a central influence in their decision to join an organization. Although introduction to 'the cause' varies among the interview subjects, almost all subjects report growing up in villages or refugee camps that were extremely active in the struggle. Over 80 per cent of the secular group members reported growing up in communities that were radically involved and slightly more than 75 per cent of the Islamist members report a similar experience. Less than 10 per cent of each group reports coming from communities that were not particularly active in the struggle.

The recruitment process is predominantly a casual or informal process among both secular and Islamist groups with only 15 per cent of secular group members reporting a formal recruitment process and 30 per cent of Islamist members reporting a similar experience. For the vast majority of those citing a formal recruitment process, the process involved either a formal swearing of allegiance or probationary period. Two Hizballah members reported the most formalized recruitment process of any of the interviewees involving multiple interviews with observers behind a mirrored window.

Over half the members of each group type knew their recruiter prior to recruitment. For some this was a family member, and for others someone from the community they knew casually. Another small percentage reported that their recruiter was introduced to them through a third party. 23 per cent of the secular and 16 per cent of the Islamist group members reported not knowing their recruiter before being approached about membership.

Two Islamist group members reported that they were confronted with information that they were collaborators and were given the option by their unknown recruiters to join the organization or be exposed. This however was the rare exception. A few members with active siblings or family members reported no recruitment process, their membership was a given within the family, the community and the organization.

At the time the interviews were conducted (before the collapse of the Camp David II talks and the resumption of the *intifada*), the secular terrorists, who sought a political solution, were turning away from violence as no longer necessary. This is almost certainly no longer the case. The secular terrorists did distinguish to some degree between legitimate military and government targets, and civilians, while the Islamists made no such distinction because Israelis all occupied Islamic territory.

Surprisingly, there was little attention to obtaining WMD weapons, but a desire to produce the largest number of casualties possible was evident, which they thought that conventional weapons could produce. If directed to use WMD weapons, they would not object, although several Islamist terrorists noted that the Koran proscribed the use of poisons. The two groups had different ultimate objectives. The secular terrorists sought an independent state, but the Islamists sought eradication of Israel in order to bring about the establishment of an Islamic state.

Both groups discussed the necessity of armed attacks. The Islamist terrorists believed that self-martyrdom ('suicide bombing') was the most valued technique of jihad, distinguishing this from suicide, which is proscribed in the Koran. Several Islamist terrorist commanders interviewed called the 'suicide bomber' holy warriors carrying out the highest level of jihad.

The prison experience was intense, especially for the Islamist terrorists. It further consolidated their identity and the group or organizational membership that provided the most valued element of personal identity. The impact of the prison experience showed more divergence between the secular and Islamist groups. While the incarcerated members felt that their prison experience brought them closer to the group they learned more about the group and were more committed to the cause following their incarceration. The percentage of Islamist group members describing this experience was much higher (77 per cent) than that of the secular groups (54 per cent).

Only a small percentage of either group stated that they were less connected to the group after their incarceration. Of the interviewees 31 per cent of the secular group members and 29 per cent of the Islamist group members had served multiple prison sentences. While still loyal to the group, only 62 per cent of secular group members reported returning to activity with their organization, compared to 84 per cent of the Islamist group members who returned or plan to return upon their release. Some 75 per cent of the Islamist group members interviewed are still incarcerated, including three Izz a-Din al-Qassam members who are serving life (or multiple life) terms.

The prison experience also reinforced negative perceptions of Israelis and Israeli security forces. Most had never had any contact with Israelis before becoming terrorists. No regret was expressed by any of the terrorists for their actions; the majority expressed intense pride in their acts, and only regretted getting caught. For the secular terrorists, their acts were justified because they were at war. For the Islamist terrorists, their acts were in defense of their faith and commanded by their faith, and they received religious absolution for their acts.

Concerning the group dynamics of decision-making, both group types indicated that they were free to question operational details. It became clear they could question details, but not whether or not the authorized act should be carried out. The Islamic terrorists were less tolerant of dissent, but they were freer to act at a lower cell level, whereas the secular groups tended to be more hierarchical. Most striking in both cases was the fusion of the individual with the group.

The feelings of victimization, of being evicted from their family lands, and the sense of despair concerning their people's destiny referred to in the family background section contributed to the readiness to merge their individual identity with that of the organization in pursuit of their cause. Once recruited, there is a clear fusing of individual identity and group identity, particularly among the more radical elements of each organization.

There is a heightened sense of the heroic associated with fallen group members as the community supports and rallies around families of the dead or incarcerated members. Most interviewees reported not only enhanced social status for the families of fallen or incarcerated members, but financial and material support from the organization and community for these families as well. 'Success' within the community is defined as fighting for 'the cause' – liberation and religious freedom are the values that define success, not necessarily academic or economic accomplishment. As the young men adopt this view of success, their own self-image then becomes more intimately intertwined with the success of the organization. With no other means to achieve status and success, the organization's success become central to individual identity and provides a 'reason for living'.

As an individual succumbs to the organization, there is no room for individual ideas, individual identity and individual decision-making. As this occurs, individual measures of success become increasingly linked to the organization and stature and accomplishments within the organization. Individual self-worth is again intimately tied to the 'value' or prominence of the group – therefore each individual has a vested interest in ensuring not only the success of the organization, but to increase its prominence and exposure. The more prominent and more important (and often times the more violent) a group is, the greater the prestige that is then projected onto group members. This creates a cycle where group members have a direct need to increase the power and prestige of the group through increasingly dramatic and violent operations.

As the individual and group fuse, the more personal the struggle becomes for the group members. Regardless of group affiliation, interview subjects paint a similar picture of this personalization. Subjects were unable to distinguish between personal goals and those of the organization. In their discussion of group action, the success or failure of the group's action was personal – if the group succeeded, then as an individual they succeeded; if the group failed, they failed. Pride and shame as expressed by the individual were reflections of group actions, not individual actions, feelings or experiences.

An overarching sense of the collective consumes the individual. This fusion with the group seems to provide the necessary justification for their actions with an attendant loss of felt responsibility for the individual member – if the group says it is required and justified, then it is required and justified. If the authority figure orders an action, then the action is justified. Guilt or remorse by the individual is not tolerated because the organization does not express it. Again this is intensified among Islamist groups who feel they have a religiously sanctioned justification – indeed obligation – for their actions.

The statements of individual members echoed, in some cases verbatim, the public rhetoric of the respective groups. As a member of a secular or Islamist group, individuals are able to establish their identity within a framework valued by their social community – the group provides others of a like mind with whom the individual has a common bond of belief. The need of individuals to control their own lives is paramount, but it is intensified in communities where segments are ostracized or persecuted. By belonging to a radical group, otherwise powerless individuals become powerful.

Socialization and Recruitment

Somewhat counter-intuitive, the backgrounds of the interview subjects varied widely and did not materially influence decisions as to whether to join the group. For both groups, joining the terrorist group seemed only natural. In effect, everyone was joining. Some from religious families joined a secular group, and vice versa, although a common pattern was the importance of those who recruited and sensitized the audience to the path of terrorism.

Islamist

> I came from a religious family which used to observe all the Islamic traditions. my initial political awareness came during the prayers at the mosque. That's where I was also asked to join religious classes. In the context of these studies, the sheik used to inject some historical background in which he would tell us how we were effectively evicted from Palestine.

> The sheik also used to explain to us the significance of the fact that there was an IDF military outpost in the heart of the camp. He compared it to a cancer in the human body, which was threatening its very existence.

> At the age of 16 I developed an interest in religion. I was exposed to the Moslem Brotherhood and I began to pray in a mosque and to study Islam. The Koran and my religious studies were the tools that shaped my political consciousness. The mosque and the religious clerics in my village provided the focal point of my social life.

Community support was important to the families of the fighters as well:

> Families of terrorists who were wounded, killed or captured enjoyed a great deal of economic aid and attention. And that strengthened popular support for the attacks.

> Perpetrators of armed attacks were seen as heroes, their families got a great deal of material assistance, including the construction of new homes to replace those destroyed by the Israeli authorities as punishment for terrorist acts.

> The entire family did all it could for the Palestinian people, and won great respect for doing so. All my brothers are in jail, one is serving a life sentence for his activities in the Izz a-Din al-Qassam battalions. My brothers all went to school and most are university graduates.

The Emir blesses all actions.

> Major actions become the subject of sermons in the mosque, glorifying the attack and the attackers.

Joining Hamas or Fatah increased social standing.

> Recruits were treated with great respect. a youngster who belonged to Hamas or Fatah was regarded more highly than one who didn't belong to a group, and got better treatment than unaffiliated kids.

> Anyone who didn't enlist during that period (*intifada*) would have been ostracized.

The hatred towards Israelis was remarkable, especially given that few reported any contact with Israelis.

> You Israelis are Nazis in your souls and in your conduct. In your occupation you never distinguish between men and women, or between old people and children. You adopted methods of collective punishment, you uprooted people from their homeland and from their homes and chased them into exile. You fired live ammunition at women and children. You smashed the skulls of defenseless civilians. You set up detention camps for thousands of people in sub-human conditions. You destroyed homes and turned children into orphans. You prevented people from making a living, you stole their property, you trampled on their honor. Given that kind of conduct, there is no choice but to strike at you without mercy in every possible way.

Decision-Making and Military Hierarchy

There is a clear hierarchical structure, with orders passed on down to unquestioning members of the organization. The leaders made the key decisions:

> And the rank and file were ready to follow through fire and water. I was subordinate to just one person. my relations with him were good, as long as I agreed to all that was asked of me. It was an organization with a very clear hierarchy, and it was clear to me that I was at the bottom or the ladder and that i had to do whatever I was told.

> Commanders in the Hamas are commanders in every way. A commander's orders are absolutely binding and must not be questioned in substance.

View of Armed Attacks

Armed attacks are viewed as essential to the operation of the organization. There is no question about the necessity of these types of attacks to the success of the cause.

> You have to understand that armed attacks are an integral part of the organization's struggle against the Zionist occupier. There is no other way to redeem the land of Palestine and expel the occupier. Our goals can only be achieved through force, but force is the means, not the end. history shows that without force it will be impossible to achieve independence. Those who carry out the attacks are doing Allah's work…

> The more an attack hurts the enemy, the more important it is. That is the measure. The mass killings, especially the martyrdom operations, were the biggest threat to the Israeli public and so most effort was devoted to these. The extent of the damage and the number of casualties are of primary importance.

The Justification of 'Suicide Bombings'

The Islamist terrorists articulated a religious basis for what the West has called 'suicide terrorism' as the most valued technique of jihad. One in fact became quite angry when the term was used in our question, angrily exclaiming:

> This is not suicide. Suicide is selfish, it is weak, it is mentally disturbed. This is *istishad* (martyrdom or self sacrifice in the service of Allah.)

Several Islamist terrorist commanders interviewed called the 'suicide bomber' holy warriors carrying out the highest level of jihad:

> A martyrdom operation is the highest level of jihad, and highlights the depth of our faith. the bombers are holy fighters who carry out one of the more important articles of faith.[1]

> It is attacks when a member gives his life that earn the most respect and elevate the bombers to the highest possible level of martyrdom.

> I am not a murderer. A murderer is someone with a psychological problem; armed actions have a goal. even if civilians are killed, it is not because we like it or are bloodthirsty. It is a fact of life in a people's struggle the group doesn't do it because it wants to kill civilians, but because the jihad must go on.

Quote from prisoner sentenced to 26 life terms for role in several suicide-bombing campaigns:

> I asked Halil what it was all about and he told me that he had been on the wanted list for a long time and did not want to get caught without realizing his dream of being a martyrdom operation bomber. He was completely calm and explained to the other two bombers, Yusuf and Beshar, how to detonate the bombs, exactly the way he had explained things to the bombers in the Mahane Yehuda attack. I remember that besides the tremendous respect I had for Halil and the fact that I was jealous of him, I also felt slighted that he had not asked me to be the third martyrdom operation bomber. I understood that my role in the movement had not come to an end and the fact that I was not on the wanted list and could operate relatively freely could be very advantageous to the movement in the future.

Attitudes Toward Casualties and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)

There was surprising little attention to obtaining WMD weapons. But it was asserted, there was no need, conventional weapons could cause such mass casualties. Many opined they were doing fine with conventional terrorism:

> 'Just give me a Kalishnikov'.

Another stated he did very well and will continue to do well with the weapons we had. Although they had not thought about them, they in general had few objections, indeed saw some advantages. One stated that he:

> Personally I made do with a pistol. But I would like the organization to have arms that could wipe out a village or a neighborhood. Atomic and chemical weapons, and things like that, though, frighten me, and I would worry about their impact and consequences of using them.

Izz a-Din al-Qassam (the military wing of Hamas) members are overwhelmingly in favor of the use of weapons of mass destruction. One stated that they *would not hesitate to use them.*

The overwhelming view was that they would like the organization to have any kind of weaponry

> That is necessary to defeat the enemy and to liberate our lands and can inflict damage to the enemy.

For Islamic Jihad members, not only was there no interest expressed in obtaining weapons of mass destruction, but subject raised concerns regarding the use of such weapons being contravened by the Koran.

As for the question of weapons of mass destruction or non-conventional weapons, the question never arose. All I wanted was a pistol. But we did discuss the subject once. Islam wants to liberate, not kill. Under Islamic law, mass destruction is forbidden. For example, chemical, biological or atomic weapons damage the land and living things, including animals and plants, which are God's creations. Poisoning wells or rivers is forbidden under Islam.

Sense of Remorse/Moral Red Lines

When it came to moral considerations, we believed in the justice of our cause and in our leaders… I don't recall ever being troubled by moral questions.

The organization had no red lines or moral constraints in actions against Jews. Any killing of a Jew was considered a success, and the more the better.

The lack of remorse or moral considerations was particularly striking in the military wing of Hamas, Izz a-Din al Qassam. There is a deep sense of righteousness in their discussion of their actions and the legitimacy of action undertaken by the action in the fight for their cause. There is also a sense that the actions of the Israeli Security Forces provide justification for any action they might take. The language becomes more forceful in this section as the Israelis are referred to as 'the enemy' and 'foreign occupiers' – the Israelis are depicted as 'them', not as people living within the same community.

The organization has no moral red lines. We must do everything to force the enemy to retreat from out lands. Nothing is illegitimate in achieving this.

As for the organization's moral red lines, there were none. We considered every attack on the occupier legitimate. The more you hurt the enemy, the more he understands.

In a Jihad, there are no red lines.

Secular Groups

Family Background and Early Life

As with most other Palestinian terrorist organizations, there is a dichotomy between how families felt, in theory, about their sons joining organizations and how they felt in reality. Publicly, families supported the organization and were proud of their sons for joining. Privately, they feared for their sons

and often for what the security forces might do to their families. Members were seen as heroes, but:

> On the other hand, families who had paid their dues to the war effort by allowing the recruitment of a son, tried to prevent other sons from enlisting too.

While most Fatah members reported their families had good social standing, their status and experience as refugees was paramount in their development of self-identity:

> I belong to the generation of occupation. My family are refugees from the 1967 war. The war and my refugee status were the seminal events that formed my political consciousness, and provided the incentive for doing all I could to help regain our legitimate rights in our occupied country.

For the secular terrorists too, enlistment was a natural step:

> Enlistment was for me the natural and done thing… in a way, it can be compared to a young Israeli from a nationalist Zionist family who wants to fulfill himself through army service.

> My motivation in joining Fatah was both ideological and personal. It was a question of self-fulfillment, of honor and a feeling of independence… the goal of every young Palestinian was to be a fighter.

> After recruitment, my social status was greatly enhanced. I got a lot of respect from my acquaintances, and from the young people in the village.

Decision-Making and Military Hierarchy

Like many of the other Palestinian terrorist organizations, there is a stark absence of critical thinking concerning following instructions and carrying out actions:

> There was no room for questioning. The commander got his orders from his superiors. You couldn't just take the initiative and carry out an armed attack without the commander's approval.

View of Armed Attacks

In addition to causing as many casualties as possible, armed action provided a sense of control or power for Palestinians in a society that had stripped them of it. Inflicting pain on the enemy was paramount in the early days of the Fatah movement:

I regarded armed actions to be essential, it is the very basis of my organization and I am sure that was the case in the other Palestinian organizations. An armed action proclaims that I am here, I exist, I am strong, I am in control, I am in the field, I am on the map. An armed action against soldiers was the most admired. …The armed actions and their results were a major tool for penetrating the public consciousness.

The various armed actions (stabbing, collaborators, martyrdom operations, attacks on Israeli soldiers) all had different ratings. An armed action that caused casualties was rated highly and seen to be of great importance. An armed action without casualties was not rated. No distinction was made between armed actions on soldiers or on civilians; the main thing was the amount of blood. The aim was to cause as much carnage as possible.

Attitudes Toward Casualties and Weapons of Mass Destruction

There was no discrimination between military and civilian targets. They were all occupiers of their land:

The organization did not impose any limits with regard to damage or scope or nature of the armed attacks. The aim was to kill as many Jews as possible and there was no moral distinction between potential victims, whether soldiers, civilians, women or children.

As for the kind of weaponry we would like to have, mass destruction or conventional weapons, we have never given it any thought.

Another ex-prisoner state similarly that

As for non-conventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction, we never gave it any thought during the armed struggle, but morally I don't see any problem with using such weapons, and had I been able to get them, I would have used them gladly precisely because the casualties would have been that many times greater. I would not have had any problem with 200,000 casualties.

But another Fatah prisoner observed,

As for weapons of mass destruction and unconventional weapons, as an underground organization, we never needed anything more than light automatic weapons and grenades.

Before closing, we should distinguish the Palestinian 'suicide bombers' with the Al-Qaeda suicidal hijackers. The profile of a typical Palestinian is:

age, 17–22, uneducated, unemployed, unmarried. Unformed youth. Once in hands of Hamas and Islamic jihad, they are never let out of sight before an attack, lest they backslide.

This is in vivid contrast to the hijackers of Al-Qaeda. The latter were older; many had higher education Atta, the alleged ringleader has an advanced degree from a technical university in Hamburg, Germany. The majority of the 11 September hijackers were from comfortable middle-class families in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. And, most importantly, on their own in the West for upwards of seven years, the 11 September hijackers experienced the opportunities of democratic society, yet maintained within them their mission to kill thousands while giving their own lives. These were fully formed adults, 'true believers', who have subordinated their individuality to the group, to the cause of radical Islam, as articulated by the destructive charismatic leader, Osama bin Laden.

These interviews have resulted in information not previously elicited from terrorists. We have gained invaluable insight that takes us further along the path of understanding the social context, mindset, motivations and recruitment of these individuals, a unique and invaluable insight into the tragedy unfolding before our eyes.

NOTE

1. Hassan Salame, responsible for the wave of suicide bombings in Israel in 1996, in which 46 were killed. He is now serving 46 consecutive life sentences.