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# Radical, Religious, and Violent

The New Economics of Terrorism

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## Why Are Religious Terrorists So Lethal?

In the tense days after the horrific attacks of September 2001 the United States vowed a “global war on terrorism,” with the support of almost all the world’s governments. Since then the United States and most of the world have massively increased their counterterrorism effort. Has the threat from terrorism diminished?

Counting casualties from terrorism since September 11 provides a clear answer. In the six years *following* those attacks, starting in October 2001, terrorists killed about 11,800 people worldwide. In the three years and eight months before 9/11, starting from January 1998, when the first comparable data are available, the world suffered approximately 4,800 fatalities resulting from terrorist attacks.<sup>1</sup> These numbers paint a stark and sobering picture. *From an average of 109 people killed per month by terrorists before the attacks of September 11, the global death rate rose to about 158 people killed per month in the six years following, an increase of 45 percent.* That figure excludes fatalities resulting from terrorist attacks in the active conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> If the toll included Iraq and Afghanistan the global fatality rate in the six years after September 11 would be much higher—529 people killed monthly in terrorist attacks.

These striking figures are consistent with what we see and read in the media. Al-Qaeda has not managed another day as devastating as September 11, 2001, but the bombings in Madrid, London, Bali, Sinai, and Amman, the attacks in Turkey, Chechnya, and Mumbai, and the ongoing carnage in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan provide stark evidence that global terrorism is worsening. The death toll has risen despite our monumentally expensive counterterrorism effort. That effort forced

Al-Qaeda to reorganize and reduced its potential. Yet the threat from more localized terrorists has only increased. Hezbollah, Hamas, the resurgent Taliban, and even Muqtada al-Sadr's militia (the so called "Mahdi Army") each constitute more of a threat to governments in their own countries than Al-Qaeda ever did.

These four radical religious organizations, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Taliban, and the Mahdi Army, continue to surprise established militaries with both their resilience and their lethality. Eight years after their expulsion by Coalition forces, the Taliban has re-established itself in most provinces of Afghanistan and in neighboring regions of Pakistan. Muqtada al-Sadr has built a militia out of a religious charity and used it to become a kingmaker in Iraqi politics, favoring coalition forces with a ceasefire when he sees fit. The Lebanese Hezbollah, who invented the modern high-casualty suicide attack in Lebanon in 1982, withstood a month of Israeli air strikes in the summer of 2006 while unleashing daily rocket fire on northern Israeli towns. It is currently a partner in Lebanon's coalition government, with veto power. Hamas has built the most potent militia in Palestine, won national elections in January 2006, and defeated tens of thousands of Palestinian security forces to take military control of the Gaza Strip in June 2007. It took them only three days. At this writing they are negotiating a power-sharing agreement to create a unity government in the Palestinian Authority.

The experience of these four groups frames a puzzle common to all four organizations: Why are religious radicals, who often start out appearing benign and charitable and generally avoid conflict, so effective at violence when they choose to engage in it?

## **Hezbollah**

For Americans, Israelis, French, and Lebanese, radical religious terrorism is by now an old wound, dating back to the first deadly attacks by Hezbollah in the early 1980s. Hezbollah seemed to emerge from nowhere in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion of south Lebanon in 1982. It surprised Israeli forces, as well as American and French peacekeepers with a consistently deadly series of attacks, including the Marine barracks attack of October 1983 in Beirut. The remains of those barracks

are displayed in the photograph that opened this chapter. That suicide attack claimed the lives of 241 servicemen.<sup>3</sup>

Hezbollah was formed by a group of former seminary students. Many had studied in the Shiite holy cities of Najaf and Qom and had subsequently been expelled—either by the Iranian government of the Shah or by the Iraqi government under Saddam Hussein. In the eastern Lebanese city of Baalbek, and later in the poor Shiite neighborhoods of Beirut, Hezbollah organized mosques, schools, and charities, with generous support from the Islamist government of Ayatollah Khomeini that had just seized power in Iran. Between 1982 and 1987 Iran spent more than \$100 million annually on hospitals, mosques, schools, and charitable organizations affiliated with Hezbollah. Baalbek, a picturesque city in the Bekaa valley east of Beirut, which had been tolerant enough to attract secular tourists of all denominations, was radicalized over a few short years. The *burka*, a loose garment worn by traditional Muslim women, became ubiquitous, first in Baalbek, then in the Shiite neighborhoods of Beirut, and after that in south Lebanon, as Hezbollah displaced the more secular Shiite *Amal* movement. This religious radicalization was accompanied by massive increases in social service provision, all because of Hezbollah. In 1996 Lebanese sociologist Waddah Sharara dubbed this network the *Hezbollah State* in a book bearing that title, arguing that the institutional base that Hezbollah established was functioning as a sort of alternative government.<sup>4</sup>

Hezbollah developed and improved many of the tactics that currently torment Coalition troops in Iraq and Afghanistan: roadside bombs, suicide attacks, and rocket attacks. Those tactics were battle-tested, from the treacherous mountain roads of southern Lebanon to the putrid alleyways of South Beirut. Hezbollah demonstrated their tactical prowess again in this decade, successfully kidnapping Israeli soldiers patrolling Israel's northern border, in October 2001 and again in July 2006. When Israel retaliated against that second kidnapping with air strikes within Lebanon, Hezbollah responded with a month of rocket attacks on Israeli civilians. Entrenched in fortified bunkers camouflaged by the terraced hills and olive trees of southern Lebanon, Hezbollah retained their tactical capacity to fire rockets into Israel despite relentless strikes by Israeli fighter planes and constant artillery fire. On the political front Hezbollah

has been even more successful, displacing Amal as the leading representative of Lebanese Shiite Muslims, effectively undermining the authority of Western-oriented governments, and eventually negotiating its way into the governing coalition.

## The Taliban

In 1994 another apparently benign group of clerics suddenly achieved remarkable success at violence, organizing a small insurgency in southern Afghanistan. They called themselves Taliban—"students" in Arabic—and they changed the course of modern history. The Taliban began as a motley collection of former seminary students from the dusty, squalid Afghan refugee camps scattered across the border in Pakistan. Their background was typical of religious radicals: they were pious and mostly poor. As far as we know, their aspirations were also typical. They sought to provide services, both spiritual and tangible, to local residents. The most important of these services was, by their own lights, *safety*. In the Taliban's own version of their origins they organized to prevent schoolchildren from being abducted and raped on their way to school in the impoverished villages around Kandahar in southern Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

Amazingly, a ragged band of religious radicals with little military experience, poor training, and no particular theological motivation for conquest managed to do what for centuries the strongest military powers in the world had struggled with and mostly failed at. The Taliban conquered Afghanistan, hill by hill, village by village, road by road, and province by province, and then they held it.

Though they could not have known it at the time, the Taliban conquest of Afghanistan would be a catalyst for conflicts in the new century. They went on to provide a safe haven in Afghanistan for foreign radical Islamists, including Osama Bin Laden. The foreigners were free to organize and set up training camps. Al-Qaeda grew and thrived with Taliban protection, using Afghanistan as a base to plan and train for a chain of terrorist attacks, including eventually the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Coalition forces from Western countries responded to the 9/11 attacks within months; an overwhelming barrage of high-tech attacks from the air supported the expulsion of the Taliban by the Northern Alliance and

other domestic forces. Eight years later those Western forces remain mired in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future in support of its new government. Had the Taliban not managed to conquer Afghanistan, and then make the fateful decision to provide a haven for Al-Qaeda, facilitating the attacks of 9/11, there would most likely never have been a “global war on terrorism.” Recalling that countering terrorism provided a rationale for the United States and its allies to invade Iraq in March 2003, it is already difficult to imagine how the first decade of the twenty-first century might have developed had the Taliban not first conquered Kandahar, and then gone on to control the country.

The subjugation of Afghanistan by the Taliban in the last decade of the twentieth century was not only a catalyst but also a prelude—to other violent campaigns by resilient Islamist rebels against Western countries and their allies. It demonstrated quite dramatically that a radical religious group has the potential to be an amazingly potent and violent force. In conquering Afghanistan the Taliban managed to tame an ethnically diverse country whose stark, breathtaking mountains and decrepit roads made it scarcely passable, much less governable. Afghanistan was ruled by a patchwork of well-armed local warlords, each more experienced than the Taliban in guerilla warfare, having spent years in active conflict during their victorious insurgency against the Soviet Union and its proxies. In Kabul, in the north, and in the east the Taliban defeated well-organized militias with foreign allies, formal command structures, and ample revenue bases. At this writing, the reconstituted Taliban threaten both the Afghan and Pakistani governments despite a concerted Coalition effort, so much so that some experts now suggest negotiating an interim truce with moderate Taliban rather than continuing to try to suppress them.

The Taliban began like many other radical religious groups, with noble aspirations and limited ambitions. They sought to improve their own lives and those of local community members through personal piety and local Islamic government. Following their initial conquests in the southern provinces, they developed an aspiration to become a national Islamic government. However, to achieve even their initial successes, these clerics and seminary students had to somehow outmaneuver and outfight their Afghan rivals. How did they acquire that tactical skill?

## Hamas

The Palestinian radical Islamic group Hamas is puzzling for the same reason. Why are they so effective at violence? For almost four decades, beginning with their founding in the 1950s, the Islamic Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Moslemoon*, or simply *al-Ikhwan*) in the Gaza Strip was a benign, nonviolent religious organization. Like other branches of the Brotherhood worldwide, they complemented the spiritual services provided in mosques with social and welfare services, delivered through a network of clinics, schools, charities, drug treatment centers, and even sports clubs. In 1988 the Islamic Brotherhood in the Gaza Strip changed course. The *Intifada* (the common Arabic name for the Palestinian revolt against Israeli occupation), which had just begun, was immensely popular among Palestinians. The rank and file organizers of the Brotherhood suddenly found themselves politically impotent because their popular following was drawn away by the young secular leaders of the rebellion. Though it had traditionally treated the national conflict as a secondary issue, the Brotherhood realized that it had to reinvent itself or become irrelevant. It established a militia, naming it *Hamas*. Almost overnight Hamas became the single deadliest terrorist organization in the Israel-Palestine conflict. It was hard to penetrate, disciplined, adequately funded, trained, and committed. Among Palestinian terrorist organizations it has carried out the most deadly attacks on civilians. By January 2006 Hamas had become the most potent *political* force among Palestinians as well, with its victory in Palestinian national elections. By June 2007 it had taken Gaza by force. In January 2009 Hamas survived an all out assault by Israeli ground forces on Gaza, aimed at halting rocket fire from Gaza on Israeli settlements. While at this writing it is too soon to judge the long-term effects of that incursion, first indications are that by surviving the incursion (and continuing the intermittent rocket attacks), Hamas has been strengthened politically and is now well positioned to negotiate a position of partnership in the government of the Palestinian Authority.

As with Hezbollah and the Taliban, the effectiveness of Hamas at violence came as an awful surprise to its targets. Hamas entered the conflict with less experience than either of its secular rivals, Fatah (the



major component of the Palestine Liberation Organization) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Both of these were experienced fighters by the late 1980s, with two decades of rebellion, hijackings, guerilla warfare, and terrorism under their belts. Hamas also had less experience than the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which shares the same radical Islamist ideology but has proven to be far less dangerous than Hamas, both in the number of attacks it carries out and in the number of casualties it inflicts per attack.

### **The Lethality of Religious Radicals**

If the initial victories of Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Taliban were preludes, September 11, 2001, was the opening act of a much larger drama. Suddenly the United States and Europe were engaged in a “war” with radical religious terrorists, simultaneously, and on multiple fronts. Al-Qaeda’s ability to plan and execute those audaciously deadly attacks will disturb our sleep for generations. It planned the operations, financed them, recruited operatives, trained them for months, controlled them in foreign countries, and successfully executed the attacks, all without being discovered.

Despite increased security and heightened public awareness, Islamist terrorists continue to kill hundreds of civilians in high-profile attacks. Al-Qaeda in Iraq, reportedly organized by the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi until his assassination in June 2006, is responsible for large numbers of civilian casualties in Iraq and Jordan. It has killed numerous U.S. troops and has even struck at the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad, claiming twenty dead. The effectiveness of Al Qaeda Iraq is less of a surprise than that of the Taliban, Hezbollah, or Hamas. The core group of insurgents were seasoned militants, reportedly imprisoned together in Jordan, and bonding with al-Zarqawi during his jail sentence from 1992 until 1999 for conspiring against the Jordanian Kingdom. Muqtada al-Sadr’s militia, the so-called Mahdi Army, is more like the Taliban, Hezbollah, and Hamas. It evolved quickly from a benign religious organization, providing welfare services to Shiite residents of Baghdad’s slums, into a potent militia with substantial political power.

Radical Islamists are particularly lethal terrorists. Looking at organizations designated as international terrorists by the U.S. State Department, we have information on 3,932 terrorist attacks carried out worldwide over the forty years between 1968 and 2007. Excluding attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan, the nineteen secular terrorist organizations on the State Department list committed 2,077 attacks, claiming 2,668 lives, an average of 1.3 fatalities per attack. (Those groups include the Basque separatists (ETA), the National Liberation Army and the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) in Colombia, the Shining Path in Peru, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka.) During the same four decades religious terrorists perpetrated fewer attacks, 1,265, but killed far more people, 3,784, averaging almost three deaths per attack. If we include the 587 attacks reported in Iraq and Afghanistan in that calculation, the death toll resulting from religious terrorism rises to 6,706, or 3.6 fatalities per attack. Adding in the three attacks of 9/11 raises the number of deaths resulting from religious terrorism to 9,689, and the lethality per attack to 5.2, four times as lethal on average (per attack) as the secular organizations.<sup>6</sup>

Of the twenty religious terrorist organizations on that list, eighteen are radical Islamists. The other two are *Kahane Chai*, a Jewish group with two attacks recorded, and the Japanese cult *Aum Shinrikyo*, which launched the infamous sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway system, killing twelve people and injuring about five thousand. These figures reflect a general pattern in global terrorism over the past few decades: radical religious terrorists of the early twenty-first century have become extremely dangerous to citizens and pose an existential threat to some governments.

The threat from modern religious terrorist organizations is unprecedented. In retrospect, the secular terrorist organizations of the 1960s and 1970s did not pose nearly as potent a threat. The militant leftist Baader-Meinhof Group in West Germany, the Japanese Red Army, the Canadian FLQ (Front de Libération du Québec), and even the Fatah under the young Yasir Arafat, kidnapped, hijacked, inflicted casualties, and drew attention but were brought under control long before they threatened sovereign states.

Before examining the reasons why religious terrorism is so dangerous, it is worth noting that not all religious terrorists succeed. The so-called Jewish Underground was a group of Orthodox Jewish settlers living on the occupied West Bank in the 1980s. They had a messianic theology and political/terrorist agenda. The conspirators hoped that by targeting civilian Arabs and Muslim holy sites they could provoke a war that would prevent Israel from withdrawing from the Palestinian West Bank. So extreme was their ideology that they aspired to extort the Almighty into dispatching the Messiah to prevent that withdrawal—by triggering Armageddon. Yet, despite theological commitment, military experience, and a pool of like-minded potential recruits among Jewish settlers, the Jewish Underground was quickly infiltrated and suppressed by Israeli intelligence. In a very important way the Jewish Underground was typical of violent conspiracies, religious or secular—its members leaked information, leading to infiltration by the authorities, arrest, and successful prosecution. Their strong theological commitment to their cause must have been *necessary* for the Underground's members to attempt such dangerous and severe acts of destruction, yet it was not *sufficient* for their conspiracy to succeed.

### What Motivates Terrorists? The Afterlife and Other Myths

Why do some religious terrorists succeed while others fail? Is it because some religious groups can motivate members by promising rewards in the afterlife? Are they particularly adept at “brainwashing” their followers? These are popular and romantic ideas. The pious Jihadist, programmed with an ideology of hate to be a human guided missile, or dreaming of virgins in heaven, makes for compelling news broadcasts and emotional sound bites,<sup>7</sup> but the concept does not stand up to scrutiny.

The research of Ariel Merari is particularly convincing in debunking myths about the religious motivation of terrorists. Merari is an Israeli psychologist who began studying the motivations of combatants after his own experience in battle during the Arab-Israeli war of 1973. He carefully interviewed families and friends of Palestinian suicide attackers, even interviewing suicide attackers themselves who failed to detonate their explosive belts and were captured in the attempt.

Merari's first conclusion is that suicide attackers do not fit the usual profile of suicidal individuals. They are not generally depressed, abusing drugs or alcohol, showing suicidal tendencies, or displaying other signs of mental illness. (In an exception that might prove the rule, Fatah attempted to exploit a mentally impaired West Bank youth to act as a suicide attacker during the second Intifada. When he was captured and disarmed, they were severely criticized by Palestinians for the cynical use of an innocent and have not repeated that mistake.)<sup>8</sup>

Is the primary motivation religion and its heavenly rewards, including the infamous seventy-two virgins? Even among suicide attackers from radical religious groups such as Hamas and the PIJ, the terrorists Merari interviewed did not generally mention religion as their main motivating factor. Moreover, many Palestinian suicide attackers come from secular organizations such as Fatah and the PFLP. This is consistent with what we know from other conflicts. The group responsible for the most suicide attacks in the late twentieth century was the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam) in Sri Lanka, who perpetrated seventy-five attacks.<sup>9</sup> The LTTE are not only secular but neo-Marxist; members are (at least nominally) atheists. The PKK (Kurdish Worker's Party) in Turkey, another group that has carried out suicide attacks, is also neo-Marxist. Combining the religious radicals who don't mention heavenly rewards and the secular suicide attackers who are not counting on an afterlife, we must conclude that most suicide attackers are not motivated by rewards in the hereafter. Virgins in heaven make a colorful story, but that story is not consistent with most of the facts.

What about an ideology of hate? Here again, Merari's interviews reveal that hate, or even revenge, do *not* consistently form the primary motivation of a suicide attacker. The Palestinian assailants in Merari's sample frequently carry out their attacks within a few weeks after recruitment, scarcely long enough to be indoctrinated with an ideology of hate. Polls show that Palestinians are very angry in general, but only a few carry out suicide attacks. To be sure, throughout the world there is widespread animosity toward repressive governments, toward occupying powers in general, and toward the United States and Israel in particular, especially in the very places where terrorists recruit. That should cause concern and may be a *necessary* condition for terrorist attacks. Yet the

evidence weighs against hatred, or an ideology of hate, being a *sufficient* motivation for suicide attacks.

If not theology, ideology, anger, or psychosis, what *is* the primary motivation of Palestinian suicide attackers? Merari does not claim to have a single simple answer. The suicide attackers he studied were typically not ignorant or economically deprived (relative to their neighbors), and had generally not suffered the loss of a close friend or family member. Although they defy simple characterization, if we were to look for a single answer, I think it must be that these individuals are altruists—at least with respect to their own communities. Merari's research suggests that the attackers truly believe that their courageous act will bring great benefit to some cause, and that their neighbors, community, or country will benefit.

An altruistic suicide attacker is an uncomfortable idea, so we should stop and consider his (or sometimes her) psychology for a moment. Altruism seems strange and even insulting to us when combined with a callous lack of empathy for the basic humanity of the victims. Unfortunately, such a lack of empathy is not unusual in an environment of violent conflict and certainly would not qualify as a psychosis in that setting. On the other hand, altruistic acts on behalf of a cause are quite common, especially if the cause is the safety of their family or community, or perhaps the liberation of their country. Firefighters ran up the stairs into the burning towers on September 11. They selflessly and regularly endanger their own lives. Bus drivers in Israel who suspect that a suicide bomber has boarded their bus have clear instructions: physically kick the suspect from the bus, and failing that, throw your body on top of the attacker to absorb the explosion. Soldiers throw their bodies on grenades to protect their comrades. The pilots who won the Battle of Britain faced a shockingly high risk of being shot down in order to defend their country. Perhaps terrorists see themselves as well-balanced altruists, and heroic at that?

Beyond altruism, a suicide attacker would seem to also require an exaggerated view of the importance of the attack. He must believe that the terrible price he has committed himself to paying is justified because the attack will truly make an appreciable difference to the outcome of the conflict. Otherwise why give up his or her life? Yet most acts of

violence, however lethal, have very little effect on any given conflict, military or political. So an inflated view of the importance of one's act must generally be necessary for a terrorist. Yet that would be an easy criterion to satisfy; social scientists know that delusions of self-importance are hardly rare, especially among young men.

In short, attaching a psychological profile to a suicide attacker is not difficult: He lacks empathy for the victims, is altruistic toward his own cause or side, and is a little deluded about his importance in the grand scheme of things. Unfortunately that profile is not at all helpful in screening for possible suicide attackers—those three characteristics are simply too common in conflict-ridden areas of the world.

A large pool of psychologically healthy, basically altruistic, suicide attackers? That is truly disturbing and frightening idea, which may be why we've been more comfortable thinking of them as psychotic or brainwashed, despite decades of evidence to the contrary, dating back to the secular terrorists of the 1970s. Yet understanding the phenomenon requires an unblinking look at Merari's findings. For one thing, the idea of psychologically healthy suicide attackers is disturbing because we would like to be able to draw an ethical distinction between acts of courage and altruism on our side and acts with the same motivation by our enemies. Firefighters, police officers, and soldiers who stare death in the eye when protecting and defending us are altruists. We think of them as heroes, and justifiably so. Altruism, we would like to believe, should be reserved for the "good guys." Like it or not, many people in conflict-ridden parts of the world feel the same way about suicide attackers who target civilians in the name of some higher cause. The ethical distinction between targeting civilians and targeting combatants is not compelling to many people, particularly in the Middle East. The key is how they judge terrorist acts, not how we do.

The profile of an altruistic suicide attacker is also frightening because it implies vulnerability for us, the potential targets. Imagine huge recruiting pools of very angry young altruists who would not hesitate to risk or even sacrifice their own lives to further their cause by attacking civilians. Indeed, there seem to be ample supplies of volunteers available for suicide terrorism, not only in Iraq and Palestine, but in much of the Middle East, Asia, and even in Europe. To make matters worse, explo-

sives and other deadly weapons used by terrorists are extremely simple to devise or obtain, so that the pool of volunteers would not require a lot of equipment or training. That sense of vulnerability triggered the extreme reaction of Western countries to September 11, 2001, capturing our attention and driving a massive shift in government spending toward defending civilians against terrorism.

### **Terrorist Organizations—Why So Few?**

Are we really that vulnerable? Two reassuring facts insulate our daily lives from the nightmare of a huge pool of suicide terrorists armed with truck bombs, explosive belts, and other simple, deadly weapons. First, terrorists almost never act alone. They are usually part of a coordinated network of operatives, which recruits, raises funds, motivates, arms, directs, covers tracks, takes credit, publicizes, and even compensates families. Timothy McVeigh, the lone terrorist of Oklahoma City, is an exception. True, he destroyed the Murrah Federal Building in April 1995 with a rental van full of homemade explosives and the help of only one other conspirator. Yet those cases are extremely rare. Terrorists are usually members of a single cell belonging to a larger organization with a political agenda. That's reassuring because of a second fact: very few militant groups in any given conflict actually succeed in carrying out coordinated violence. In fact, the U.S. State Department's list of foreign terrorist organizations has only forty-two entries for the entire world. Among those, most of the casualties are due to the eight deadliest organizations.<sup>10</sup>

Only forty-two entries for the entire world; why is the list so short? The technical requirements of terrorism are hardly onerous. The raw materials for explosive weapons are available almost anywhere and the technical details necessary to assemble conventional bombs—as opposed to nuclear or biological weapons—are fairly easy to download and understand. The supply of angry people with grievances (justified or not) is huge, be those disputes with their own government or with some occupying power. Considering the availability of recruits and technology, the number of truly dangerous organizations is tiny. Why are there so few successful militias and terrorist organizations? From what we

know about people's grievances, it cannot be for lack of motivation or recruits. If volunteers for suicide attacks are many, it must be relatively easy to find willing operatives to take on lesser risks within terrorist organizations. Yet only forty-two organizations worldwide seem to be viable enough to pose a threat. Why?

If the supply of potential terrorists is large, and only a few terrorist organizations are viable, some terrorists must be failing, perhaps even before they get started. What makes some terrorist organizations viable while others fail? The economics we teach in business school, of all places, suggests an answer. Some organizations are more resilient than others. Much of this book will be about the *vulnerabilities* of terrorist organizations. I will argue that successful militias and terrorist organizations share one common characteristic. They have found a way to *control defection*, the Achilles' heel of coordinated violence. The more destructive terrorist organizations become, the more governments are willing to spend in order to buy information and bribe operatives into defection, and the more worried terrorist operatives must be about leaks and defection among their comrades.

The history of modern terrorism provides plenty of examples illustrating the vulnerability of these organizations to leaks and defection. For instance, the assassination of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in June 2006 was reportedly made possible by information from an internal Al-Qaeda source. Former Al-Qaeda operative Jamal al-Fadl, a native of Sudan, defected in the mid-1990s after a dispute over finances. He informed on and incriminated his old comrades for a decade in exchange for a generous reward and witness protection in the United States.

In May 2008 Nelly Avila Moreno surrendered after twenty-four years as a senior leader of FARC, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. Moreno, who the *Los Angeles Times* describes as a "fierce, resourceful and ruthless leader," is suspected of "orchestrating mass murders and summary executions." She faces charges of murder, terrorism, and drug trafficking. Her explanation for surrendering to undercover police and facing punishment, rather than fighting on, is very clear on the dangers of leaks and defection: "At a news conference in Medellin, Moreno said she surrendered because of increasing Colombian army pressure, the deterioration of rebel forces and her fear she might be killed by her own



troops for the \$900,000 bounty on her head. ‘You may have a lot of fighters at your side, but you never have an idea of what they are really thinking,’ Moreno told reporters at an army base.”<sup>11</sup>

Considering the loyalty required of operatives in the face of such attractive incentives, it is easy to understand why so few terrorist organizations manage to function successfully for long. The vast majority of terrorist conspiracies go the way of the plotters who were exposed trying to make truck bombs in Toronto, also in June 2006. That group of seventeen men, who would gather to play soccer together, had been under surveillance for two years and was shut down by well-informed Canadian intelligence officers before anyone was harmed. The Canadian authorities could wait patiently for sufficient evidence to accumulate, without risk, because they had an informant.<sup>12</sup>

### Internal Economies and Organizational Efficiency

The two facts just highlighted—that terrorists seldom act alone and that there are very few effective terrorist organizations—should put our fears in context, and should inform counterterrorist efforts. Rather than concentrating on the motivations of individuals, which would lead to rediscovering that there is no shortage of angry, capable, and very sane potential recruits,<sup>13</sup> security services should focus on the internal operation of the few *effective and resilient* terrorist organizations (i.e., those that continue to carry out high-casualty attacks despite intense counterterror efforts). Significantly, the deadliest among these organizations are radical religious groups. Al-Qaeda, Al-Qaeda Iraq, the Sri Lankan LTTE, Hamas, and Hezbollah together accounted for 5,880 of the 6,975 fatalities resulting from suicide attacks between 1983 and 2003. Of these five organizations, all but the LTTE are religious radicals. The four radical Islamic organizations were responsible for 4,917 of those fatalities, fully 70 percent of lives lost to suicide attacks over those two decades. We rejected theological motivations of *individuals* as an explanation for the lethality of religious radicals, which leads us to a more focused question: What makes radical religious *organizations* so deadly?

What we will see in the chapters that follow is that violent radical religious organizations survive, and even thrive, because they can limit

leaks and defection. Why? The answer will be quite surprising. It has to do with a subtle relationship between defection and a very benign activity—mutual aid. Sociologists of religion have discovered a remarkable regularity: regardless of denomination or faith, radical religious groups typically share a common organizational design, which makes them magnificent providers of social services through mutual aid. By mutual aid I mean individual members providing goods and services through acts of charity within a community. Unpaid charitable work is common in many communities, religious and secular. It usually ranges from occasionally helping out, perhaps at a PTA bake sale, to volunteering regularly, maybe at a soup kitchen or hospital. Yet among religious *radicals* mutual aid is far more intense: an example familiar to Americans is a communal barn raising, where an entire Amish or Mennonite community turns out to donate labor for a day or two, working together to build a barn for a newlywed couple. Radical religious communities—Amish, Mennonites, Hutterites, and ultra-Orthodox Jews—also require that members demonstrate their commitment to the group through some costly or painful sacrifice, often giving time early in life to some religious cause. The theological explanation for that sacrifice differs across religious groups but the rules are the same; those who sacrifice gain acceptance as full members, while those who do not suffer marginalization, shunning, or even expulsion. This sacrifice and selection is divisive but crucially effective; it weeds out potential members who might cheat later in life, shirking their responsibilities in mutual aid. Weeding out shirkers—whom economists call “free riders”—is painful but critical, because shirking is the Achilles’ heel of mutual aid organizations. Members who draw services when in need but do not volunteer to help when they are capable will leave barns half-raised, the bereaved unconsolated, soup kitchens understaffed, and eventually bankrupt a mutual aid pool. Thus sacrifices early in life, while they are economically costly for individual members, are necessary to the economic survival of the mutual aid organization because sacrifice identifies shirkers and weeds them out. We will explore those benign forms of cooperative activity among religious radicals first, because of the insight they provide into violent cooperative activity such as rebellion and terrorism.

Militias and terrorist organizations face a very similar problem to that of a mutual aid organization. The cheaters they worry about are not shirkers, but informants and defectors—a far greater threat. A single shirker in a mutual aid organization can be disruptive and expensive, but a single defector can cause an entire cell to be exposed, probably leading to the arrest or assassination of all his fellow members.

Now here's the key point. Radical religious communities who turn to organized violence operate with a huge advantage over other militants. Having already weeded the cheaters and shirkers out of their mutual aid operations, they can be confident that the remaining members are loyal. Pressing that advantage, religious radicals can conduct deadly attacks against high-value targets with a low risk of leaks or defection, even against targets whose governments invest mightily in protection and counterintelligence.

At this point it will help to clarify what I mean by a “religious radical.” Since September 11 the discussion of religion and violence has become so emotionally charged that even a neutral term such as *religious* or *Islamist* risks gratuitously insulting someone. All the more so for the expression “religious radical.” Yet at the risk of seeming insensitive, careful analysis requires a foundation of well-defined terms. We need a term *for a member of a group whose religious practice is much more demanding—generally more time consuming—than is mainstream practice*. That is what I mean by a religious radical. I don't mean to suggest violence, extremism, or even political mobilization. Hutterites, Mennonites, Amish, Hassidim, Misnagdim, and members of the Muslim Brotherhood are all religious radicals, using the term as a sociologist (or an economist) would. Some of these groups are pacifists and distance themselves from politics. The vast majority of the communal activity that these radical religious communities perform is benign, if not downright noble. Two centuries ago Adam Smith used the term *sect* to describe these groups in his brilliant foundational text of economics, *The Wealth of Nations*. An economist or sociologist would use *sect* interchangeably with *religious radical*, although *sect* has taken on a more negative connotation in the two centuries since Adam Smith wrote. Other scholars prefer the term *fundamentalist*, which implies either literalism

or reversion to some historical form of practice. That only adds confusion. Fundamentalism suggest reversion to the historical fundamentals of a religion, which is *not* what most religious radicals do. Denominations often labeled as religious fundamentalists, such as radical Islamists and ultra-Orthodox Jews, are anything but: compared with the historical practices of coreligionists, their current norms are far more stringent.

Having defined the term, let me restate more precisely the critical discovery of sociologists of religion: regardless of religious denomination and history, radical religious Christians and Jews offer mutual aid and other community services extremely effectively to members. One of my objectives in this book is to demonstrate that this finding applies to radical religious Muslims as well, providing insight into how radical Islamic communities function by viewing those communities through the lens of existing scholarship on Christian and Jewish religious radicals. I will then extend that approach to examine religious terrorism, and show that radical religious communities with strong mutual aid provision have the potential to be potent providers of coordinated violence, including terrorism, should they so choose.

This approach to religion will surprise many readers. It wasn't in your high school textbook because it hadn't been discovered yet. We have known only since the 1980s how important social service provision is to radical religious communities. An early hint came from studies by sociologist Rosabeth Moss Kanter, who demonstrated in the 1970s that nineteenth-century utopian communes were more successful if they demanded sacrifices of members.<sup>14</sup> By the 1980s Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge showed the same result for radical Christian communities.<sup>15</sup> In the early 1990s economist Laurence Iannaccone explained how religious sacrifices contribute to cohesive communities by improving social service provision, using analysis precise enough to allow his conjectures to be tested using survey data—and confirmed.<sup>16</sup> My own research on ultra-Orthodox Jews began in the mid 1990s. Luckily, Israeli data describing ultra-Orthodox Jews is much more extensive than what Iannaccone had available on radical Christians. With the additional data I had available, I managed to extend Iannaccone's analysis—which economists call the "club" model<sup>17</sup>—to explore the educational choices that religious radicals make for their children, and even how many

children they choose to have. That research reinforced the evidence for Iannaccone's "club" approach.<sup>18</sup>

People of faith, even economists of faith, often object to this way of thinking about religion and religious radicals. First, it seems dismissive of faith and theology, emphasizing instead the social and economic aspects of life in religious communities. Second, it draws parallels between religious organizations whose ethics some readers might embrace on the one hand, and those that commit murderous terrorist acts on the other. As an individual, I empathize with those feelings.

Yet science requires putting our emotional biases aside for a moment in order to discover underlying patterns of human behavior. An objective examination of numerous successful communities of faith reveals that they often stand on two pillars. The first is their ability to meet the spiritual needs of their members, providing a sustaining theology. The second pillar is an ability to provide more tangible services, social and economic, generally through a system of cooperative charity (i.e., mutual aid). Distinguishing between those two functions is often difficult, but the distinction is critical. Regardless of the strength of a member's faith, and regardless of the salience of a theology, an organization that can *limit shirking* will be more successful at mutual aid. No matter what beliefs motivate a member's sacrifice, the act of sacrifice signals that the member will not shirk, creating the potential for productive mutual aid activity in that community. That potential is often realized, so that welfare services, education, healthcare, and other social services are provided to those religious communities. That's why social service provision and spiritual service provision so often appear together in communities, making it difficult to distinguish commitment to beliefs from commitment to community, for community members and outside observers alike.

To be sure, we should be disturbed by the ethical contradiction between a theology that holds human life to be sacred (as do all major religions) and an active policy of targeting innocent civilians. Yet that contradiction should not paralyze analysis. The organizational ability to carry out acts of terrorism stems not from theology but from the organizational strength of a mutual aid society, religious or secular. To illustrate that fact, I will examine some purely secular organizations quite adept at

coordinated violence, though they lack theology altogether. What the Sicilian Mafia, street gangs, and the *Palmach* (the military force organized within the kibbutz movements of prestate Israel) have in common with frightening religious cults like the *Aum Shinrikyo* is a combination of coordinated provision of social services on the one hand, and sacrifices that indicate commitment on the other.

### What's Coming?

This book will cover a lot of ground, collecting insights and data from scholars in many fields, several countries, and a number of centuries, so an overview of what's coming may be useful. I will start with the puzzle raised already: With so many angry people in the world, why there are so few resilient terrorist organizations? My discussion will draw on the history of the Taliban, Hamas, and Hezbollah to explain the sensitivity of terrorist groups to defection and information leaks, arguing that this is the central organizational problem that terrorists face. The discussion will be broad, touching on insurgencies in Malaysia and Iraq as well.

The next question is why, among the few resilient terrorist organizations, so many are made up of religious radicals. The answer requires a long detour through the world of nonviolent religious radicals, to understand what makes these communities so resilient. So we will take a break from violence and explore the benign provision of mutual aid within exotic radical religious communities, such as the Amish, Hutterites, Mennonites, and ultra-Orthodox Jews. These groups might be familiar to many readers through personal experience or from popular culture. The tension between the very restrictive lifestyles of religious radicals and the norms of mainstream American culture has provided some fertile material for scriptwriters. Actor Harrison Ford fell in love with an Amish widow at a barn raising in the 1985 movie *Witness*. Melanie Griffith (somehow) went undercover among Hassidim in New York in *A Stranger among Us* (1992), falling in love with a Talmudic scholar before solving the crime. Amish teenagers confronted the attractions of secular culture for a few seasons on the reality show *Amish in the City*, and the irrepressible Rabbi Shmuley critiqued secular parenting and relationship

norms while offering advice to anyone who would listen on his reality show *Shalom in the Home*.

Most people are initially struck by the exotic beliefs of radical Christian and Jewish communities. Despite their disparate beliefs, we will see how similar radical religious communities of different faiths are to each other in their daily lives: they share generous mutual aid networks and religious norms that distance community members from mainstream culture and market economies. The very survival of these communities has puzzled economists for the same reason that *Amish in the City* drew viewers: Who can resist the attractions of modern technology and market economies? Why use mules rather than tractors, forbid the Internet—or even computers—in the home, and sometimes even refuse modern medical care for your children?

That puzzle was elegantly addressed by economist Laurence Iannaccone, who showed that those seemingly counterproductive social norms are in fact critical to the survival of a community based on mutual aid. I will explain Iannaccone's insight, examining the evidence and showing how it can explain the common social and economic structures of Christian and Jewish radical religious communities. I also use his approach, the "club" model mentioned above, to show how religiosity and lifestyles, including choices as intimate as a woman's fertility, are affected dramatically by government policy toward religious radicals. The club model is not the only way experts have approached the puzzling behavior of religious radicals. I'll also sketch and compare alternative theories drawn from the sociology and psychology of religion, letting the reader judge which does the best job of explaining the data.

Will club analysis help us understand radical Islam? It turns out that radical Islamic communities, although their religious practices are diverse and different from those of either radical religious Christians or radical religious Jews, share a common pattern of well-organized mutual aid within communities as well as norms that distance members from mainstream culture and markets. We will see how radical Islamic communities in Indonesia used mutual aid to mute the effects of an economic crisis in the late 1990s. As in the case of radical Christians and Jews, those mutual aid networks are sometimes observed directly but are often latent, observed only in the effects they have on fertility and educational

choices. The tension between traditional and modern lifestyles is felt particularly by *women* in radical Islamic communities, who face strict norms governing how they may dress, whether they may work outside the home, how they may raise their children, and which schools the children may be sent to.

Studying radical Islamic communities is hard slogging. Dress codes and restrictions on work are easy to gather anecdotal evidence about but hard to measure systematically. On the other hand, fertility and school quality are readily observable in survey data. I'll describe research on several countries that checks whether Iannaccone's club model fits radical Islamists. The answer is positive; we observe distinctly club-like behavior among radical Islamists. Members of radical Islamic communities tend to have larger families than their Muslims neighbors. Not only that but, like ultra-Orthodox Jews, they tend to send their children to religious schools that provide poor training for employment after graduation, even though better public schools are usually available.<sup>19</sup> Why would mothers and fathers sacrifice their children's futures by choosing inferior schools for them? I will offer the same answer that explained the behavior of radical Christians and ultra-Orthodox Jews: sacrifice allows communities to weed out the cheaters who would undermine mutual aid.

Sacrifice is also the key to answering the central question of this book: *Why are religious radicals such effective terrorists?* I will look at radical religious organizations that turn to violence and explore what it is about religious communities who are adept at providing social services that makes them effective militias and terrorists, if they choose that path. The Taliban, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Sadr's Militia will be reexamined in some detail, examining their common social service provision base. I will also add to the mix a *failed* religious terrorist organization, the "Jewish Underground," which will illustrate that organizational structure rather than theology is critical to effectiveness.

Suicide attacks are the deadliest weapon in the terrorists' arsenal, and so suicide attacks by religious radicals will get special attention. Examining international data on suicide attacks since the early 1980s, we will first ask under what conditions terrorists choose suicide attacks over rocket attacks, roadside bombs, and other tactics of terrorism and



insurgency. The answer, which comes from joint research with political scientist David Laitin of Stanford, is that the single best predictor of suicide attacks has surprisingly little to do with theology; it is the “hardness” of the target that matters—how difficult it is to destroy. As governments present terrorists with better and better defended (i.e., harder) targets, terrorists respond by switching to the tactic that is the most difficult to defend against: the suicide attack. Suicide attacks come at a high cost for the terrorist organization—the certain loss of the attacker—so terrorists almost always use less costly tactics when the chosen target can be destroyed without losing the attacker in a suicide attack.

This view of terrorists as thoughtfully choosing tactics may strike some readers as odd, given their media characterization as irrational. Yet recent scholarship paints a picture of thoughtful, instrumental, goal-oriented organizations. Political scientist Lindsay Heger, for instance, has shown that terrorists choose both tactics and targets in a way that reflects their goals and constraints. They are more likely to attack civilians in democracies—apparently because democratic governments are more sensitive to civilian casualties—and are less likely to attack civilians when they have a politically engaged affiliate, such as the Irish Republican Army had in Sinn Fein.<sup>20</sup> *What* the goals of terrorist organizations are is a separate question and beyond the scope of this book. Two points are worth noting, though. First, terrorist organizations have strong incentives to overstate their goals, in order to attract hopeful followers, so that their actual goals may not be knowable. Second, as far as the major terrorist organizations discussed in this book are concerned, they all seem to be using terrorism as an instrument to achieve some political objective.

If it is just a matter of tactics and targets, why then do radical religious terrorists use suicide attacks so often? The short answer will be: because they can. A conflict where targets are well enough defended to require suicide attacks is a harsh environment for rebels. Most rebel organizations will not survive there at all. Radical religious groups, with the benefit of their club structure, might be the only organizations potent enough to operate in an environment where targets are so hard that suicide attacks are the only feasible tactic.

What does all this imply about how to counter terrorism? One goal of this book is to make new research on religious radicals and terrorism accessible to interested readers. Another goal is to explain the tactics and strategies suggested by these new findings to practitioners of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. Radical religious rebels currently challenge governments in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa; they also threaten civilians in much of the world. Knowing that radical religious terrorists draw their strength from organizations that provide social welfare services through mutual aid suggests that competing provision of particular social services will be an effective tool in the struggle against terrorist violence. That approach, which is inherently nonviolent, would undermine radical religious organizations without endangering civilians, disturbing freedom of religious practice, or dignifying violent Jihadist rhetoric with a debate. I contrast this approach with traditional development economics on the one hand, and traditional counterinsurgency on the other, and examine why recognizing these differences is critical to implementing effective policies. The proposed tools have worked well in places as diverse as Malaysia and Egypt and are a key component of modern counterinsurgency theory, as it is being developed on the fly in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The final challenge is the biggest, to put it all in context. Eight years after 9/11, is it possible to step back and view radical Islamic terrorism within a broad historical context? While terrorist acts can launch wars, forestall peace, and cause tremendous human suffering, I will argue that they are symptoms rather than causes of the underlying forces that shape human development. Radical religious traditions have a long history, and are also a symptom of deep societal change. Christian sects have survived at the fringes of European culture since the Protestant Reformation, despite persecution by the dominant denominations—persecution that was often violent. The Anabaptist tradition, which is today continued by the Amish, Hutterites, and Mennonites, dates back to sixteenth-century religious communities in Switzerland and the Rhineland that arose in a period of particular religious and political turmoil. Radical religious Jewish communities date back at least as far as the Essenes, who hid the Dead Sea Scrolls in the first century. They were a sect not unlike today's Amish—a functioning commune. The Essenes were one

of many first-century sects that arose out of the deep societal change of the time—the collapse of the Israelite caste system. Drawing on the Essenes and early Anabaptists, we'll try to see what historical Jewish and Christian experiences with sects can teach us about where today's religious radicals fit in the broad sweep of history.

We know from Western history that market economies and functioning democracies have an empowering and liberating effect. Yet in celebrating that progress we often forget that empowerment and liberation are societal changes that threaten traditional societies. Imagine a traditional European or Middle Eastern town. When serfs, peasants, minorities, and women first had the opportunity to earn decent wages in the market, travel freely, and eventually even vote, they must have felt liberated as individuals. Yet their emancipation was a mixed blessing for communities: members with strong outside options were freed of their dependence on community-based institutions such as mutual aid networks for support and protection. But what about the community members left behind, who still depended on those institutions—now depleted by the defection of the most talented? In that sense, the arrival of markets and political upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries posed a challenge to traditional societies. Since many of the institutions of traditional communities are religious, markets and democracy challenge the religious order when they challenge the social order.

That challenge to the traditional structure of communities implies that a transition to markets, democracy, and secular governance requires particular attention to traditional structures threatened by the process. Historically, a key component of the European and American transition has been the eventual separation of church and state. The lack of that separation in younger nation-states is relevant today. Religious radicals seeking political power challenge governments from the Philippines to Algeria, and sometimes manage to take control. Understanding why these radical religious organizations succeed suggests a strategy that will not only undermine their potential for effective use of violence but can also limit the unique advantages that religious radicals have at political organization, leveling the political playing field. Comparing the approaches of different countries to religion and state, the analysis in the final chapter suggests some political ground rules that could limit the

abuse of power by radical religious governments. Better yet, it would reduce the incentives for religious radicals to organize politically or seek power through violence in the first place. That argument explains why political-religious parties are largely absent in the most stable and economically successful countries of the world but thrive and seed political dysfunction in much of the Middle East and Asia, including Israel—an otherwise very Westernized country.

In closing, I will consider the analogy of that very Western history to political and economic development in the modern Muslim world. In the Middle East, attempts at Western-style governance have been largely unsuccessful, and the transition to modern market economies has been uneven. Many scholars argue that the rise of Islamist politics is a reaction to that failure.<sup>21</sup> Yet we shouldn't forget that in the West, where markets and democracy are today quite successful, the transition from feudalism, monarchies, and state religions was neither rapid nor bloodless. Europe experienced a long period in which nascent governments were poor providers of services and pockets of radical religious reaction flourished. As we will see, Anabaptist Christians in the sixteenth century and ultra-Orthodox Jews in the nineteenth century can be understood as a natural protective reaction by traditional societies to the threats posed by markets and political emancipation. In that sense, the rise of radical Islam looks like the twentieth-century version of a familiar story, a predictable reaction of traditional communities to the slow incursion of market economies and political emancipation into their lives. Keeping in mind the tremendous potential benefits of that process, for residents of those countries and for their neighbors and trading partners, the final chapter asks what our role in the West could or should be. How can Western governments and NGOs balance support for the natural incursion of markets, emancipation, and democracy into traditional societies, while dealing with the radical, sometimes violent, traditional backlash?