# Terrorist Drop-outs: One Way of Promoting a Counter-Narrative

by Michael Jacobson

### *Abstract*

*The answer to the question whose voice is most effective in terms of delivering a counter-narrative to al-Qaeda's Single Narrative depends on which audience one wants to reach. Arguably, the terrorists themselves (as opposed to segments of their envisaged constituency) are the most difficult audience to reach. However, there is one group that might have special credibility with them – former terrorists. This article explores, by way of examples, how former terrorists and extremists could contribute to reducing terrorist violence.*

As the United States continues to fight militarily to disrupt the efforts of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, the U.S. government has slowly come to the realization that military force alone cannot defeat radical extremism. Countering the ideology that drives this extremism has become a critical element in the effort to prevent and defeat the violence that emerges from it. Focusing on the "softer" side of counterterrorism has become a new and necessary approach of U.S. and its allies alike. One of the main foci in this new battle is the recognition of the importance of the so-called "battle of ideas." Al-Qaeda's ideas and those of like-minded groups must be challenged with a counter-narrative of stronger appeal.

As the United States and other parties have attempted to begin crafting their own narrative to counter that of radical groups in this "battle of ideas," it has become clear that in order to develop an effective message, it is necessary to better understand the radicalization process itself for the factors that cause people to choose this path must be properly understood. If this is not the case, it will be impossible to figure out which messages will resonate among terrorist recruits and which might be effective to counter the radicalization process.

An examination of the reasons why, and the processes by, which individuals are radicalized, has made clear that, as one British government official stated "there is no single path that leads people to violent extremism." The same official noted that "social, foreign policy, economic, and personal factors all lead people to throw their lot in with extremists." Consequently, there might also be more than one 'single narrative' to persuade an individual to join the extremist cause. While al-Qaeda employs a global narrative centered on the West being at war with Islam, Hamas and Hizballah have different narratives to build their following – narratives that rely heavily on their track record of providing needed support to local populations.

As the U.S. has begun to focus on the softer side of counterterrorism, there has been a great deal of attention paid to what a counter-narrative may do to try to prevent radicalization from occurring in the first place. However, an effective counter-narrative will need to address not only those vulnerable to the extremist message, but also those on the path toward radicalization, and those already radicalized. It is clear that the U.S. government and others cannot develop a single, overarching counter-narrative that can be expected to work across the board.

In order to determine what counter-narrative might be effective among those apparently hardened individuals already incorporated in terrorist organizations or those well along the path to radicalization, it is

useful to look at examples of people who have voluntarily walked away from these organizations. Determining the reasons for a change in perspective could help governments craft messages designed to peel people away from terrorist groups; this is one vital element of an effective counter-narrative. Determining who might be best positioned to deliver this 'liberating' message is another key angle from which to view the efficacy of a counter-narrative.

There are several common themes that emerge from an analysis of why various drop-outs left terrorist organizations. Governments may be able to take advantage of this emerging knowledge and discern trends to better formulate appropriate counter-narratives.

"Naming and Shaming," or the undermining of terrorist and extremist leadership should be one part of the approach. For this, crafting messages that significantly detract from leaders' authority and credibility is vital. A general lack of respect for a group's leadership has often been a factor in stimulating the exit of members from terrorist organizations. Essam al-Ridi, an Egyptian veteran of the 1980s *jihad* against the Soviets, testified during the 1998 East African embassy bombings trial that he resented taking battlefield orders from bin Laden and others who lacked military experience during the Afghan jihad.[1] The decisive factor for al-Ridi's change of perspective occurred in a battle in which many jihadis died—in his view needlessly—as a result of inept leadership. In that particular battle, al-Qaeda nevertheless declared victory. Al-Ridi, however, stated, "My judgment as a person living here, not in the hereafter, is that this is pure killing. If you don't know what you're doing, you are killing your people… I became more angry and more opposing [to] what's happening in Afghanistan and what's happening to Osama and how he became a leader of his own."

Another example: Ziad Jarrah, one of the 9/11 hijackers, was unhappy with Mohammed Atta's leadership while the 19 plotters were in the US; the two often clashed.[2] Jarrah had been on his own for most of his time in the United States before 9/11 and strongly resisted Atta's attempts to exert more direct control. At least in part due to his problems with Atta, Jarrah appeared to be contemplating dropping out of the plot during the summer of 2001.

The United States has tried this approach of undermining the leadership of terrorist organizations more than once. For example, the US made efforts to undermine al-Qaeda in Iraq's leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi by showing captured video footage that made clear that he did not know how to handle a gun. This was potentially effective in deterring would-be jihadists to serve under him. More generally, taking steps that might help avoid the building up of reputations of terrorist leaders also has potential merit. For example, before 9/11, President Clinton said that he tried to avoid mentioning bin Laden's name too often in order not to make him a bigger hero in some parts of the world than he already was. Based on the evidence available, this strategy appears to have merit.

An effective counter-narrative should also strive to demonstrate civilian and Muslim suffering at the hands of the terrorists. Showing the resulting deaths of Muslims and focusing on the hypocrisy of an ideology that purports to defend Muslims but kills them instead is a worthwhile endeavour. A review of further cases of terrorist drop-outs does indicate that this tactic has potential. Disillusionment with the terrorists' strategy and ideology has, historically, been a major reason why militants have left their groups. Some of them simply felt that their groups' fellow members or its leader had finally gone too far.

One example is Omar bin Laden, Osama's fourth son. He had spent nearly five years living in Afghan training camps. Yet following 9/11, Omar quit al-Qaeda and called the attacks "craziness," according to journalist Peter Bergen. He continued, "Those guys are dummies. They have destroyed everything, and for nothing. What did we get from September 11?"

Nazir Abbas, one of the top commanders in *Jemaah Islamiyah* (JI), left his organization for similar reasons.[3] He trained hundreds to become terrorists in the JI camps that he had helped to establish. He

later questioned a bin Laden *fatwa* in 2000, which said that killing Americans and Jews everywhere is the highest of act of worship and good deeds.  He alone among the JI commanders refused to carry out an ordered attack.  His view was that *jihad* was to be fought only on the battlefield in defense of Islam as he had always been taught that the killing of civilians had nothing to do with "holy war."

Abbas felt that his fellow members in JI had an incorrect understanding of the JI mission.  *Jihad*, to Abbas, was warranted in Afghanistan and the Philippines, countries facing an enemy attacking a Muslim community. Since he dropped out of JI, Abbas has turned against the organization and has been cooperating with the Indonesian government and even testifying against the group's leadership.

Interestingly, Abbas did not think that attacking a repressive government was wrong; his qualms with JI and other terrorist organizations' actions extended only to their use of violence against civilians.  In his own words: "I couldn't understand that exploding bombs against innocent civilians was jihad.  That was the difference that made me escape from the group."  Abbas' cooperation with the Indonesian government and his public criticism of his former organization has been invaluable.

In the same way, and for similar reasons, al-Ridi began assisting the US government, explaining that he wanted to cooperate because "I told them I have an interest in helping you because I think Osama has ruined the reputation of Muslims."  A counter-narrative that emphasizes the terrorist groups' hypocrisy might resonate with those having similar doubts in terrorist organizations.

Related to this, painting terrorists as common criminals may help demonstrate the impurity of the ideology.  Terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda, are increasingly getting involved in all types of criminal activities, including drug trafficking.  The US should take advantage of this fact and portray them as hypocritical.

A further theme in a counter-narrative should be a focus on the reality of life as a terrorist.  If people are joining a terrorist organization because it appears glamorous or because they believe they are fulfilling some larger purpose, demonstrating the harsh reality of life in the underground will help to dispel such myths.  Terrorist recruits are, in fact, often treated badly by their own organizations.  If this message can be promulgated, the counter-narrative would certainly be strengthened.  There needs to be a platform for former members to speak out about their unsatisfying lives as members of a terrorist organization, hopefully emphasizing that it does not live up to the hype. We know for a fact that the tough reality of life as a terrorist constantly on the run has often helped drive people out of these organizations.

In fact, more broadly speaking, it is surprising that a number of seemingly trivial, petty factors can drive apparently fully committed terrorists away from their cells and groups.  Through studying the personal stories of terrorist drop-outs, it can be discerned that perceived lack of respect was, for individual operatives, often influential in their decision to break away from the radical group. L'Houssaine Kherchtou, a Moroccan who trained to serve as bin Laden's personal pilot, grew bitter after a bin Laden aide turned down his request for $500 to cover the costs of his wife's Caesarean section.  He grew livid when al-Qaeda subsequently paid the expenses for a group of Egyptians to renew their passports in order to travel to Yemen.  "If I had a gun," Kherchtou later testified, "I would shoot [bin Laden] at that time."  When the organization moved to Afghanistan, Kherchtou said that he refused to accompany them, thus violating his oath.  From then on, he no longer considered himself to be a member of al-Qaeda.

Others have also bailed out for financial reasons – often regarding low wages as a sign that they were not being treated with adequate respect. Jamal al-Fadl, a Sudanese radical, fumed over his salary while al-Qaeda was based in Sudan.[4] He began embezzling funds and stole approximately $100,000 from bin Laden, according to his own testimony in the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings trial.  When bin Laden got wind of al-Fadl's theft, he ordered him to repay the money.  Al-Fadl, after handing back about $30,000, fled from al-Qaeda, fearing retribution.  Khertchou, as well, grew bitter after bin Laden ordered

his followers to cut back on their spending. He felt that bin Laden—a notoriously rich Saudi—was being stingy.

A counter-narrative should also focus on the fear factor and make graphically clear why an individual should be afraid to be a suicide bomber. Given the fact that some have abandoned a planned attack even at the last minute, a fear-awareness approach could have some impact. This factor appears to have been significant in the case of Sajid Badat, a British citizen who was trained in Afghanistan and Pakistan to serve as the other "shoebomber." In a letter he had sent earlier to his parents he spoke of his "sincere desire to sell my soul to Allah in return for Paradise." Later, he dropped out because, as he told prosecutors, he wanted to "introduce some calm to his life."

Mohammed al-Owali fled the scene of the 1998 embassy bombing in Nairobi before he could carry out what was supposed to be another component of the suicide attacks. While he did not drop out of al-Qaeda, his fleeing from the scene is significant in considering what could be done in influencing those who do not follow through on their assignments to commit suicide attacks. In the failed July 21, 2005, attacks in London, one of the bombers, Manfo Kwaku Asiedu, a 32-year old British Ghanian, abandoned his bomb in a West London park. While not much is known about him at this point, it can be presumed that fear was an important factor in this last-minute decision.

Another important element for governments to consider is the fact that they are not always the most effective messengers for the counter-narrative. There is certainly a role for the US government and other governments to play. There are many cases, however, where other actors may make more effective messengers than governments.

Former terrorists and extremists are one obvious party to consider when it comes to transmitting counter-narrative messages. Their messages would resonate particularly strongly compared to that of unknown government officials. They could deliver forceful messages about the reality of life as a terrorist and their disillusionment with the cause. Moves in this direction have already occurred organically to some extent. The UK-based Quilliam Foundation is the best known of non-governmental organizations challenging the extremist ideology, describing itself as the first "counter-extremism think tank."

Led by two former members of *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, the Quilliam Foundation aims to undermine the ideological foundation of radical extremism by refuting its premises. Quilliam argues that the ideology must be criticized and refuted "wherever it is found," a process that includes developing an effective counter-narrative to rebut the message put forth by radical extremist organizations. Addressing local grievances is also critically important in Quilliam's view to ensure that the terrorists' and extremists' global narrative does not resonate in individuals' minds. Another prominent figure who has spoken out against terrorist and extremist groups is former Egyptian *Islamic Jihad* head Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (also known as Dr. Fadl).[5] Al-Qaeda often cited his previous treatises as ideological justification for its actions. Dr. Fadl has since renounced bin Laden and written a new book rejecting al-Qaeda's methods and tactics.

What is also important, the US. government in particular must better understand who can wield influence in the Muslim communities throughout the world. These potential messengers can include activists, entrepreneurs, business people, media personalities, and students, among others. The US embassies should play a leading role in trying to identify who these people are, and then to determine how most effectively incorporating them into any overall efforts to make their voices heard.

The families of terrorists could also play an important role in trying to persuade individuals to leave these organizations. Ties and renewed contacts with family members have been major factors that have caused militant individuals to reconsider their membership in a terrorist organization. A number of people who left their families to join organizations returned home, often as a part of their plot's plan. Yet after renewed contact with their families, they subsequently decided to abandon the plots they had been selected to participate in. Illustrating this phenomenon, this included two individuals who had been selected for the 9/11 plot: they reconsidered participation when returning for a visit to their homes in Saudi Arabia.

In conclusion, the bottom line is that the issue of countering the terrorist narrative with a counter-narrative is a complicated one, with no easy solutions. Broadly speaking, in order to break this disturbing cycle of radicalization, the United States and its allies must stimulate competition for the would-be "radicalizer" - loosely defined to include al-Qaeda and like-minded groups that engage in global jihadist propaganda efforts, influential extremist clerics, and local-level recruiters. At least at this point, the US. and other countries are starting to address the issue of radicalization and understand its importance. This represents progress in itself. The United States should deepen its efforts to counter the extremist narrative, both by better using its existing mechanisms and by increasingly relying on, and partnering with, those who can effectively transmit the messages. Understanding that there is no single, simple, overarching solution to becoming a member of a terrorist organization has been the most important first step.

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*About the Task Force:* The focus of the Task Force included democracy promotion, reform in Arab countries, public diplomacy and strategic communication, as well as an exploration of the specific counterradicalization programs being developed by governments throughout Europe and the Middle East. The Task Force concluded that the Obama administration could make a number of key strategic, functional, and organizational changes to the Bush administration's approach. The Task Force recommended that the Obama administration expand its focus from violent to nonviolent extremism, devote increased attention to identifying and empowering mainstream Muslim voices, and to prioritize its efforts to address local grievances, which often are at the root of why al-Qaeda's global narrative resonates in individuals' lives. Additionally, the Task Force concluded that while democracy promotion should be de-linked from counterterrorism policy, democracy promotion in the Arab world should still be a focus for the new administration. Promoting political and economic reform and the development of civil society in this troubled area of the world should be a key part of the Obama administration's overall strategy. As a strategic response to extremism, the US and its allies must offer a viable and attractive political alternative to the dark vision offered by radical extremist groups. Prosperous democratic societies that respect the rights of their citizens are more resilient and less susceptible to political instability and radicalization. Likewise, highlighting the weaknesses of al-Qaeda and similar groups and exploiting existing fissures within these organizations will also help reduce these dangerous organizations' appeal - a key element of success.

**NOTES**:

[1]Essam al-Riddi was born in Egypt; he later moved to the United States, where he married and lived in Texas. In 1982, he fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan where he became acquainted with Osama Bin Ladin. Al-Riddi, a trained pilot, later purchased a plane for Bin Ladin in the US and flew it to Sudan, where al Qaeda was based at the time. However, in 1987 he grew disillusioned and returned to the U.S. He testified for the US government in the Kenyan-Tanzanian US embassy bombing trial.

[2]Ziad Jarrah was a Lebanese national who participated in the 9/11 plot, piloting United Airlines Flight 93 until its crash in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. Jarrah was a member of the so-called "Hamburg cell" in Germany, where he had lived for several years before coming to the US for flight instruction.

[3]Nasir Abbas was an important member of Jemaah Islamiyya, a Southeast Asian affiliate of Al-Qaeda. Abbas claimed to oppose the killing of civilians in the course of jihad and was distraught when he learned that militants trained in Afghanistan perpetrated the Bali bombings, which caused a high civilian death toll. When he was interrogated regarding the bombings, he cooperated with the authorities; he also helped to find and arrest his former colleagues. In September 2008, the UN removed Abbas from its list of terrorists tied to al Qaeda and the Taliban.

[4]Jamal al-Fadl moved to the United States from Sudan in 1986 and lived primarily in Brooklyn, N.Y., where he attended and worked for the Farouq mosque to help send money to Afghanistan. He later travelled to Pakistan and subsequently Afghanistan for weapons training. There he met Osama bin Laden and became a member of al-Qaeda upon its formation. Later he defected from the organization after having embezzled more than $100,000. Al-Fadl was a key witness for the US government in the Embassy bombing trial.

 [5]Dr. Fadl, also known as Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, was born in Egypt and later met Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's "No. 2," after attending Cairo University for medical studies.  He later led the former Egyptian *Islamic Jihad* and wrote both a field guide for jihadis as well as an extensive account of what is required of a perfect Muslim.  He severed ties with the Egyptian *Islamic Jihad* in 1994 after a disagreement with al-Zawahiri, and was, after 9/11, imprisoned.  Since 2004 he is serving a life sentence in Egypt.