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The Making of a Terrorist: A Need for Understanding from the Field

Testimony before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

Washington, DC, March 12, 2008

Chairman Price, Ranking Member Rogers, distinguished members of the House Appropriations

Subcommittee on Homeland Security, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify.

I am an anthropologist who has done fieldwork for the last 35 years in many cultures around the world (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scott_Atran). I have experimented extensively on the ways scientists and ordinary people categorize and reason about nature, on the cognitive and social psychology of religion, and on the limits of rational choice in political and cultural conflict (<http://www.scottatran.com>). Ever since 9/11 I have interviewed and studied terrorists and wannabes, as well as their families and supporters, in communities from remote Indonesian Islands to North Africa, and in places scattered through Pakistan, Palestine, and the suburbs of European cities. My colleagues and I have discussed this research (funded by the [Air Force Office of Scientific Research](#) in conjunction with [John Jay College](#), and the [National Science Foundation](#) in conjunction with the [University of Michigan](#)) in numerous briefings to NSC and HSC staff at the White House, and to counter-terrorism officials in various branches of our government and other governments around the world. I have come to the conclusion that the only way to effectively intervene in the radicalization process to violence and terrorism in a way that is sustainable in the long

term is through field-based scientific research. Approaches based on “gut feelings,” or on theories that are not systematically built or tested on data from the field, will not prevent the next and future generations of youth from taking a path to political violence, no matter how effective may be law-enforcement and military measures in the short term.

Soccer, paintball, camping, hiking, rafting, body building, martial arts training and other forms of physically stimulating and intimate group action create a bunch of buddies, which becomes a “band of brothers” in a simple heroic cause. It’s usually enough that a few of these action buddies identify with a cause, and its heroic path to glory and esteem in the eyes of peers, for the rest to follow even unto death. Humans need to socially organize, to lead and be led; however, notions of “charismatic leaders” and Svengali-like “recruiters” that “brainwash” unwitting minds into joining well-structured organizations with command and control is exaggerated. Viewed from the field, notions of “cells” and “recruitment” - and to a degree even “leadership” – may reflect more the psychology and organization of those analyzing terrorist groups than terrorist groups themselves (see Marc Sageman’s *Leaderless Jihad*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

Takfiris (from *takfir*, “excommunication”) are rejectionists who disdain other forms of Islam, including *wahabism* (an evangelical creed preaching Calvinist-like obedience to the state) and most fundamentalist, or *salafi*, creeds (which oppose fighting between co-religionists as sowing discord, or *fitna*, in the Muslim community). They tend to go to violence in small groups consisting mostly of friends, and some kin (although friends tend to become kin as they marry one another's sisters and cousins - there are dozens of such marriages among militant members of Southeast Asia's [Jemaah Islamiyah](#)). These groups arise within specific "scenes": neighborhoods, schools (classes, dorms), workplaces and common leisure.

Consider 4 examples:

1. In [Al Qaeda](#), about 70 percent join with friends, 20 percent with kin. At a meeting organized last month by Saudi Arabia's Ministry of the Interior, counter-terrorism officials in Riyadh showed us recent data on captured terrorists that replicated these numbers. Interviews with friends of the 9/11 suicide pilots reveal they weren't "recruited" into Qaeda. They were Middle Eastern Arabs isolated even among the Moroccan and Turkish Muslims who predominate in Germany. Seeking friendship, they began hanging out after services at the Masjad al-Quds and other nearby mosques in Hamburg, in local restaurants and in the dormitory of the Technical University in the suburb of Harburg. Three wound up living together as they self-radicalized (Mohammed Atta, Ramzi Binalshibh, Marwan al-Shehhi). Their friends told us they wanted to go to Chechnya, then Kosovo, only landing in a Qaeda camp in Afghanistan as a third choice.

2. Five of the seven plotters in the [11 March 2004 Madrid train bombings](#) who blew themselves up when cornered by police grew up in the tumble-down neighborhood of Jemaa Mezuak in Tetuan, Morocco. In 2006, at least five more young Mezuaq men went to Iraq on "martyrdom missions." All 5 attended a local elementary school, the same one that Madrid's Moroccan bombers attended. And 4 of the 5 were in the same high school class. They played soccer as friends, went to the same mosque (Masjad al-Rohban of the Dawa Tabligh), mingled in the same restaurants, barbershops and cafes. "They gave one another courage to go to Iraq," said another friend who dropped out, not because he thought their cause wrong but because he found a different way through community work "to help Muslims."

3. [Hamas](#)'s most sustained suicide bombing campaign in 2003-4 involved several buddies from Hebron's Masjad (mosque) al-Jihad soccer team. Most lived in the Wad Abu Katila neighborhood and belonged to the al-Qawasmeh hamula (clan); several were classmates in the neighborhood's local branch of the Palestinian Polytechnic College. Their ages ranged from 18 to 22. At least 8 team members were

dispatched to suicide shooting and bombing operations by the Hamas military leader in Hebron, Abdullah al-Qawasmeh. On [February 4, 2008](#), two friends who were members of the Masjad al-Jihad soccer team, staged a suicide bombing at a commercial center in Dimona, Israel. The mother of one of these young men told us that her son “loved soccer and those boys [who had died in 2003].” Although Hamas claimed responsibility for the Dimona attack, politburo leadership in Damascus and Beirut was not aware at first of who initiated and carried out the attack .At the Knesset last month, Israeli officials told us that Mahmoud Zahar, the Hamas leader in Gaza, and Ahmed Al Ja’abri, the military commander of the [Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades](#), probably wanted to launch an operation after Zahar’s son was killed in an Israeli raid and Hamas breached the border wall between Gaza and Egypt. Al-Ja’abri, who is originally from Hebron, called upon his clan ally, Ayoub Qawasmeh, to do an operation. Ayoub Qawasmeh then tapped into the young men on the soccer team who had been earnestly waiting to do something for their comrades and their cause.

4. The “[Virginia Jihad](#)” Network involved a diverse group of 12, mostly middle-class, young men based in Washington, DC suburbs, affiliated with an Islamic educational center in Falls Church, Virginia. Several formed a band of paintball buddies that eventually focused on waging violent *jihād* in Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Chechnya. Seven members of the network traveled to Pakistan in 2000 and 2001 and obtained military training from a *Lashkar-e-Taiba*, an Al-Qaeda ally that was then waging *jihād* against Indian forces in Kashmir. Three members subsequently assisted LET in procuring advanced electronic technology for use against India. Federal prosecution resulted in the most convictions by the United States Department of Justice in any single terrorism case to date. Nevertheless, after discussing details with a former federal prosecutor in the case, it was evident that there was little investigation into sociological factors and little, if any, institutional precedent for acquiring information into the social background and personal history of how and why these people go to violence.

The ultimate mission of a robust national program of field-based research is more effective intervention strategies based on sound science. The aim is to refine the way the U.S. intervenes around the world so that the “rare events” (individuals who become motivated into actually committing an act of political violence) become even rarer. Such research should enable interventions that increase the range and exposure of options to individuals who are showing up in these rare events. The goal of modeling and predicting which ones of the tens of thousands of youth that “seem alike” will commit acts of political violence is not promising. But the goal of designing and assessing political, economic and social developments that enable young people to dream other dreams that give meaning to their lives and those of their friends and community is attainable. As our recent discussions with leaders of the FBI’s community outreach suggests, in order to imagine a different future as affirmative actors in a more enlightened world requires sensitivity to details of local contexts and input from local communities (including those created in chat rooms): in short, detailed and context-sensitive field-based research.

Apart from a very, very few specific projects, current terrorism-related programs and centers have no field-based research focus, training, skill set (practical or theoretical) or capacity commensurate with the task at hand. Rather than simply try to add on field-based research initiatives to current programs and centers that have no actual experience in the field, efforts should concentrate on expanding research capacity and training based on the few successful field-based projects that currently exist. This holds promise for saving national treasure and lives.

THE MADRID TRAIN BOMBINGS, MARCH 11, 2004

Through a series of unplanned events, two young North African immigrants bonded to plot an attack in Spain. One, a Tunisian (Serhane Fakhet) would-be intellectual who spun into increasingly extremist circles, the other (Jamal Ahmidan), an extremely violent Moroccan drug dealer: they lived in separate worlds - the criminal underworld and religious extremism - until their paths crossed six months before the bombing. A detailed attack plan only began to coalesce in late December 2003, shortly after the internet tract "Iraqi Jihad, Hopes and Risks" circulated on the Zarqawi-affiliated website, Global Islamic Media Front. The tract called for "two or three attacks... to exploit the coming general elections in Spain in March 2004."

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Disputes between Serhane Fakhet & friends and the M-30 mosque imam over the 9/11 attacks made attending taboo

Student Firebrand Serhane & Friends

Tetuan (Mezuak) Connection: Madrid 3-11 Bomb Attacks

In late 2001, Serhane & friends began having informal « takfiri » meetings with a police informant, CARTAGENA, in attendance

7 members of the merged group holed up in a flat in Leganes since the attack blew themselves up when cornered by authorities; 5 were from the Mezuak barrio in Tetuan, Morocco

M-11 Bomb Attacks 2004

Allouch's Apt. in Villavede. Site of takfiri Meetings

Ahmidan Drug Gang

Explosives Group

Ahmidan & Serhane Merger

Network Closure

Between 2000 and 2003, Moroccan drug dealer Jamal Ahmidan, admired and feared, is in an out of Spanish and Moroccan prisons

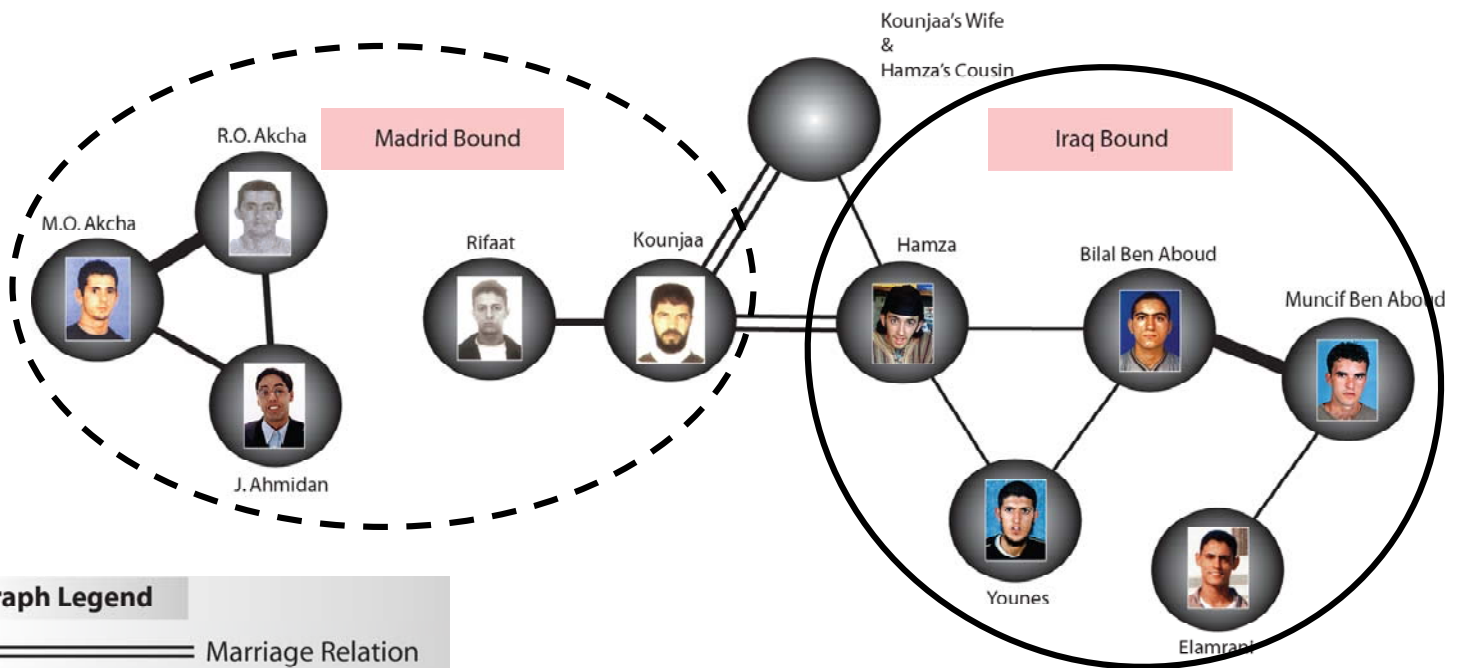
Plaza Cabasteros, Lavapiés neighborhood, Madrid, where J. Ahmidan & Friends dealt drugs

Before meeting up with the hands-on Ahmidan group, Serhane planned and played jihad at picnics

Business connections and past incarceration helped the Ahmidan group to add force to Serhane's rhetoric, which soon led to the exchange of drugs and money for the explosives necessary to finally attack

Morata Farmhouse, Site of Bomb Preparation

The Jamaa Mezuak Connection:
 After the Madrid plotters from Mezuak blew themselves up (April 3, 2004), friends in the neighborhood began contemplating their own “martyrdom actions” in Iraq (beginning in summer 2006)



Graph Legend

- ==== Marriage Relation
- Friendship Tie
- Mentor-Mentee Tie
- Filial Tie



Jihadi Nest or Just a Normal Community: A Surveying of the Mezuak Neighborhood in Morocco

Al-Rohban, the *Dawa Tabligh*, mosque in Mezuak where Kounjaa first preached *takfiri* ideology and where the other young men came to pray. The Imam collected *zaqat* charity to send them to Iraq.

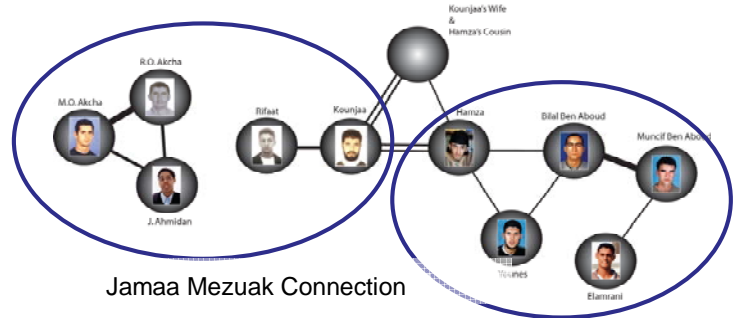


Down a littered hill from al-Rohban mosque, kids play the favorite neighborhood sport, soccer. All of Mezuak's Madrid plotters and wannabe martyrs for Iraq were avid players



Students leaving for home from the Abdelkrim Khattabi Primary School, which all of Mezuak's Madrid plotters and wannabe martyrs for Iraq attended.

Tetuan (Jamaa Mezuak neighborhood) Connection: Madrid 2004 to Iraq 2006



Confused by the deaths of the Madrid plotters that they had known since childhood, a group of friends self-radicalize and begin to leave for "martyrdom missions" in Iraq in the summer of 2006

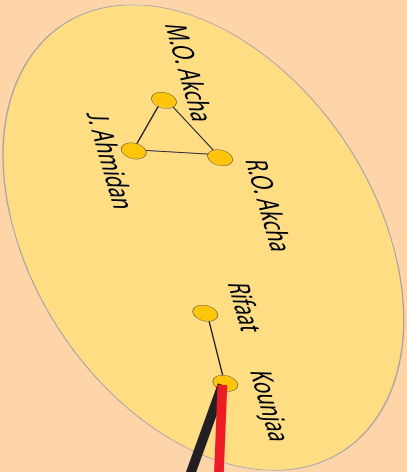


Cafe Chicago, a once popular hangout is located on Mamoun Stret, Mezuak's main thoroughfare. Like many other cafes, it boasts a large television that remains tuned to *Al Jazeera*



The Would-Be Martyrs of Jemaa Mezouak: Out of Tetuan, Morocco

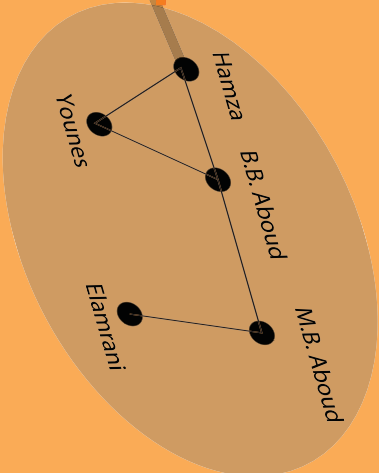
March 11, 2004
Madrid Plotters /
Suicides



Abdelkrim Khattabi
Primary School



Fall 2006
Bound for Iraq



THE HAMAS AL-JIHAD MOSQUE SOCCER TEAM ATTACKS

In February 2008, we interviewed members of the families of suicide bombers Mohammed Herbawi and Shadi Zghayer, shortly after an attack in Dimona, Israel. This was the first suicide attack claimed by Hamas since December 2004, when Hamas declared a unilateral truce on martyrdom actions across the Green Line. These two friends were members of the same Hamas neighborhood soccer group as several others who died in 2003, the Masjad al-Jihad team. Herbawi's mother, Basma Harmoni (she's divorced), said her son loved all those boys.

Hamas 'Soccer Team' Suicide Attacks, March 5 & 7, May 17 & 18

5

Following the lead of Muhssein and their other teammates, two more al-Jihad players from Wad Abu Katilia and one from Harat e-Sheikh coordinate efforts with the local Hamas leadership to do a series of suicide bombings in Jerusalem and Hebron

Destruction in Jerusalem

Scene from one of the successfully detonated bombs in Jerusalem

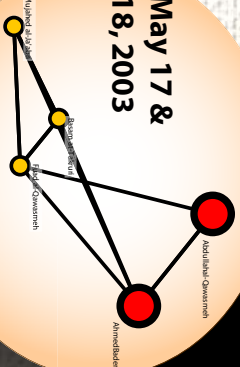
A large funeral procession for a Jewish couple

Tragedy in Kiryat Arba

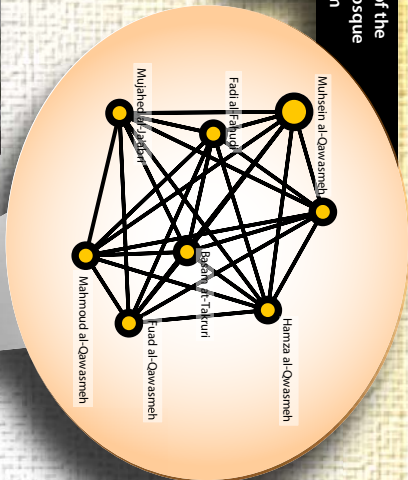
Assisting the wounded in Kiryat Arba

A bystander attends to one of the many wounded

May 17 & 18, 2003



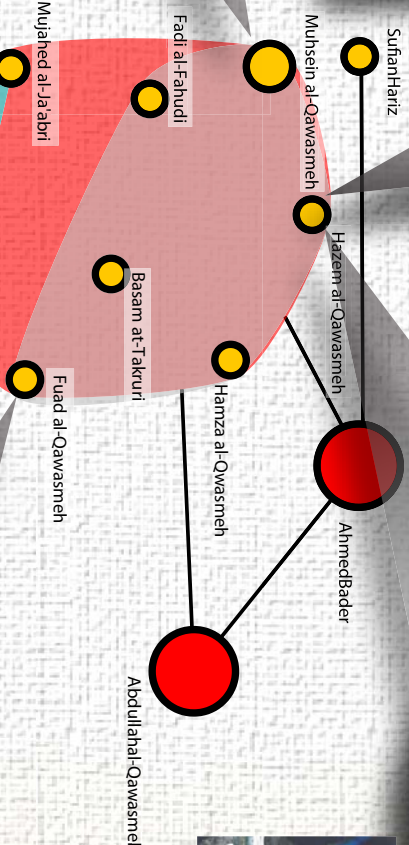
1 Members of the al-Jihad Mosque soccer team



Masjad al-Jihad Mosque in Hebron boasts a popular soccer team and a long list of martyrs

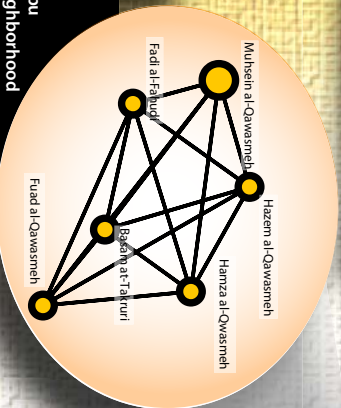
Community Icon & Focal Point for Self-Organization

Playing pickup soccer in the streets of Hebron, these boys illustrate the principle of self-organization around a common interest



2

al-Jihad players that lived in Wad Abu Katilia neighborhood



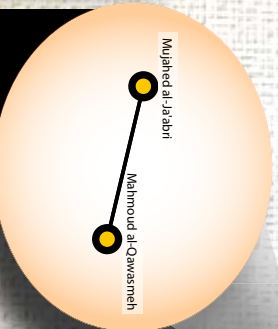
In Need of Development



In the Wad Abu Katilia neighborhood, where a number of the al-Jihad players turned suicide attackers lived, trash and decrepit infrastructure mar the landscape

3

Two al-Jihad teammates that lived in Harat e-Sheikh



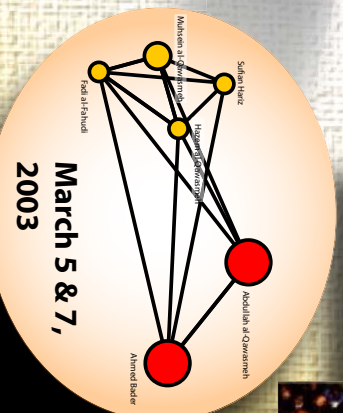
Partially rebuilt homes are the norm in the Harat e-Sheikh neighborhood after Israeli forces leveled it in response to terror attacks

Still Rebuilding...



4

March 5 & 7, 2003

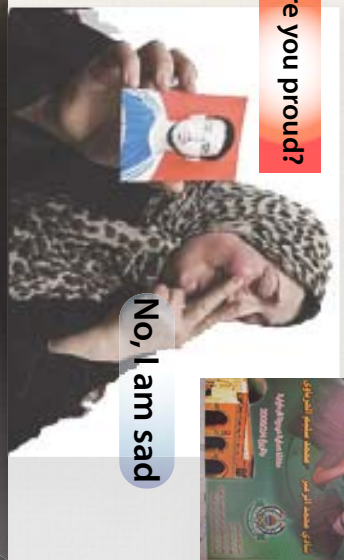


Culprits in the coordinated suicide-mission gun assaults against the inhabitants of the Kiryat Arba and Gevohor settlements

Hamas' Soccer Team's Suicide Bombings, February 4, 2008

Herbawi's mother crying with his photo in hand.

Are you proud?



No, I am sad

4



Ahmed al-Jabri

Ayoub Qawasmeh

Mahmoud Zahar

Mohammed Herbawi

Deadly Equation 1

Graffiti at Ibrahim al-Dabab soccer field commemorates the suicide bomber Raed Missak who detonated a bomb on a Jerusalem bus August 19, 2003

Championship of the Martyr Raed Missak

"People do not kill and die just for a cause; they do it for each other."

Action Buddies (soccer, paintball, camping) + A Strong but Simple, Morally Outraging Cause + Resonance with Personal Experience = Radical Social Identity + Group Violence

3

The attack

Moving around the suicide bomber, police sort through the debris and wreckage in the aftermath of the attack



A Zaka paramedic service volunteer cleans blood from the scene of the bombing



2

Funeral for Hamas militants killed by Egyptian forces in Rafah

Killed in clashes



A relative of a militant to the left grieves on a side street

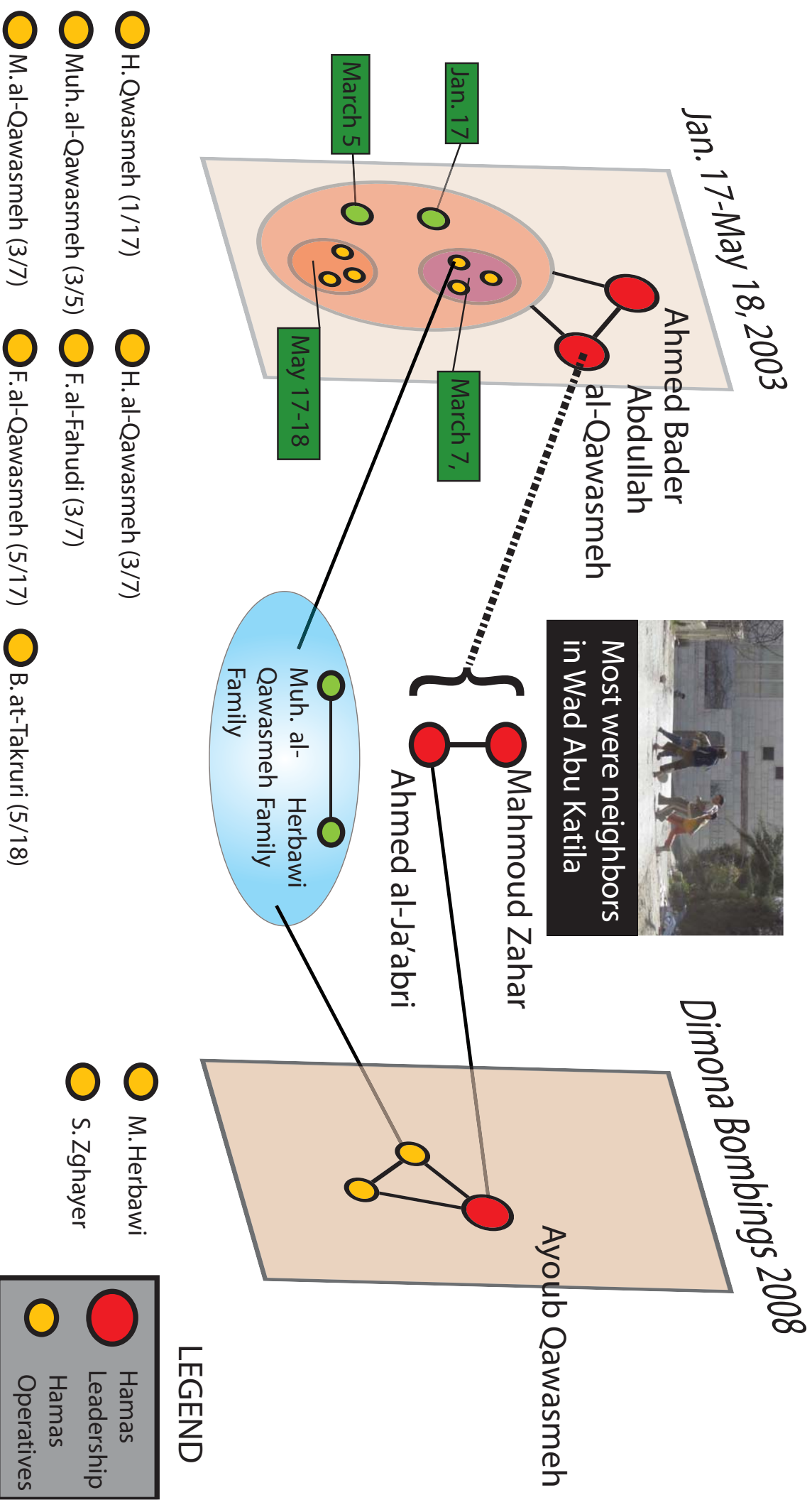
Stemming the tide..



A crane and suspended cargo container block migrant flows at a crossing in Rafah along the Gaza-Egyptian border





The Hamas al-Jihad Soccer Team Attacks: Out of Hebron, West Bank




THE VIRGINIA JIHAD & PAINTBALL NETWORK

On the night of 9/11, DC native Ali al-Timimi, a doctoral student in cancer research at George Mason University in Fairfax, VA, spoke at the Dar al-Arqam, an educational center in Falls Church, VA, saying the attacks should not be condemned. Thereafter, al-Timimi was banned from speaking at Dar al-Arqam (much as Tunisian *Takfiri* Serhane Fakhret was expelled from the M-30 mosque in Madrid). But al-Timimi was supported by members of a paramilitary group that trained for Jihad by playing paintball (a game where one team tries to eliminate players on the opposing team by shooting them with capsules of water-soluble dye from air-powered guns). Beginning in 2000, several in the group traveled to Pakistan and obtained military training from Lashkar-e-Taiba, an Al-Qaeda ally fighting in Kashmir. Seifullah Chapman, a Caucasian convert and former U.S. Marine, who returned from Pakistan in August 2001, acted as 'drill sergeant'. After 9/11, the plan was to engage U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

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Paramilitary games – Paintball used as training for fighting jihad

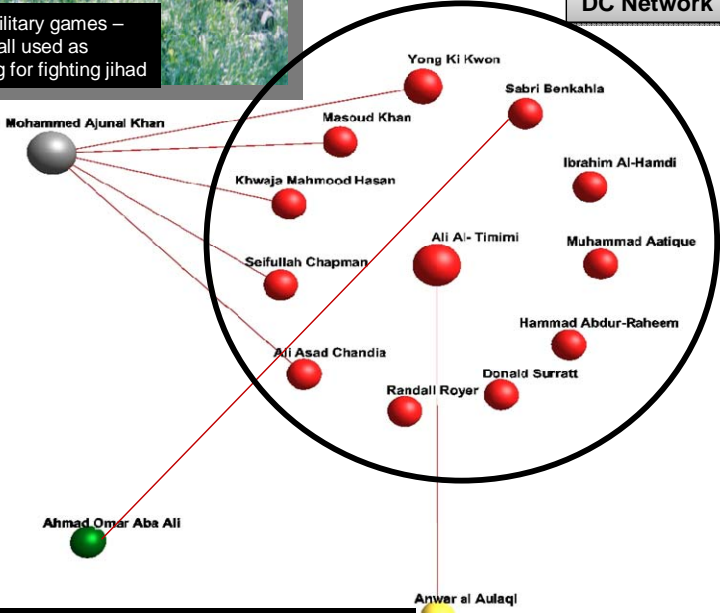





Three members served in the U.S. Military, imparting military tactics to other members

The Virginia Jihad & Paintball Network





DC Network







Surratt Aatique Al-Timimi




Al-Hamdi Benkahla


Royer AbdurRaheem



Hasan Kwon

Chapman Chandia M.Kahn

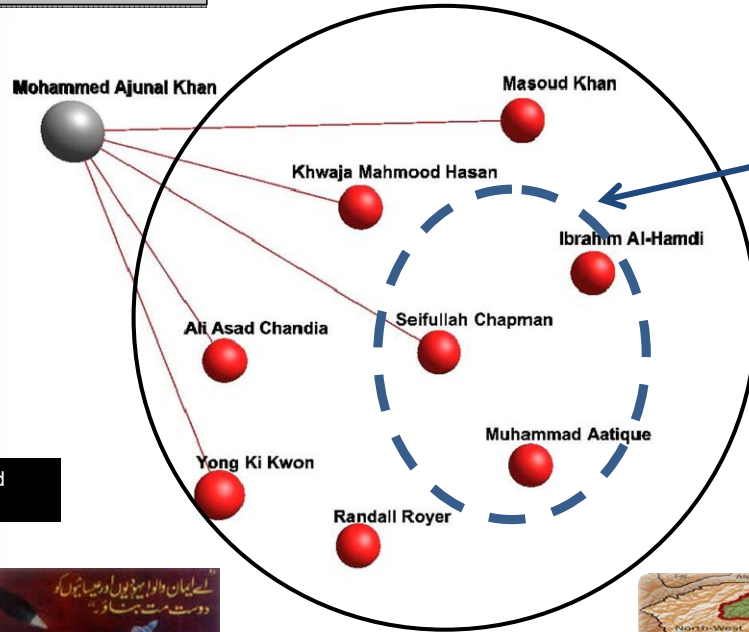


Mostly Middle-class young men, many attended the top Universities in the DC area

Conspiracy to assist Lashkar-e-Taiba, a Pakistani terrorist group fighting in Kashmir & allied with Al-Qaeda

Virginia Links to Lashkar – e – Taiba (LET) Pakistan



Procured military equipment for LET



Several members trained in paid their own way to train in Pakistan – many others donated money to the cause



Pakistan POC- Mohammed Khan



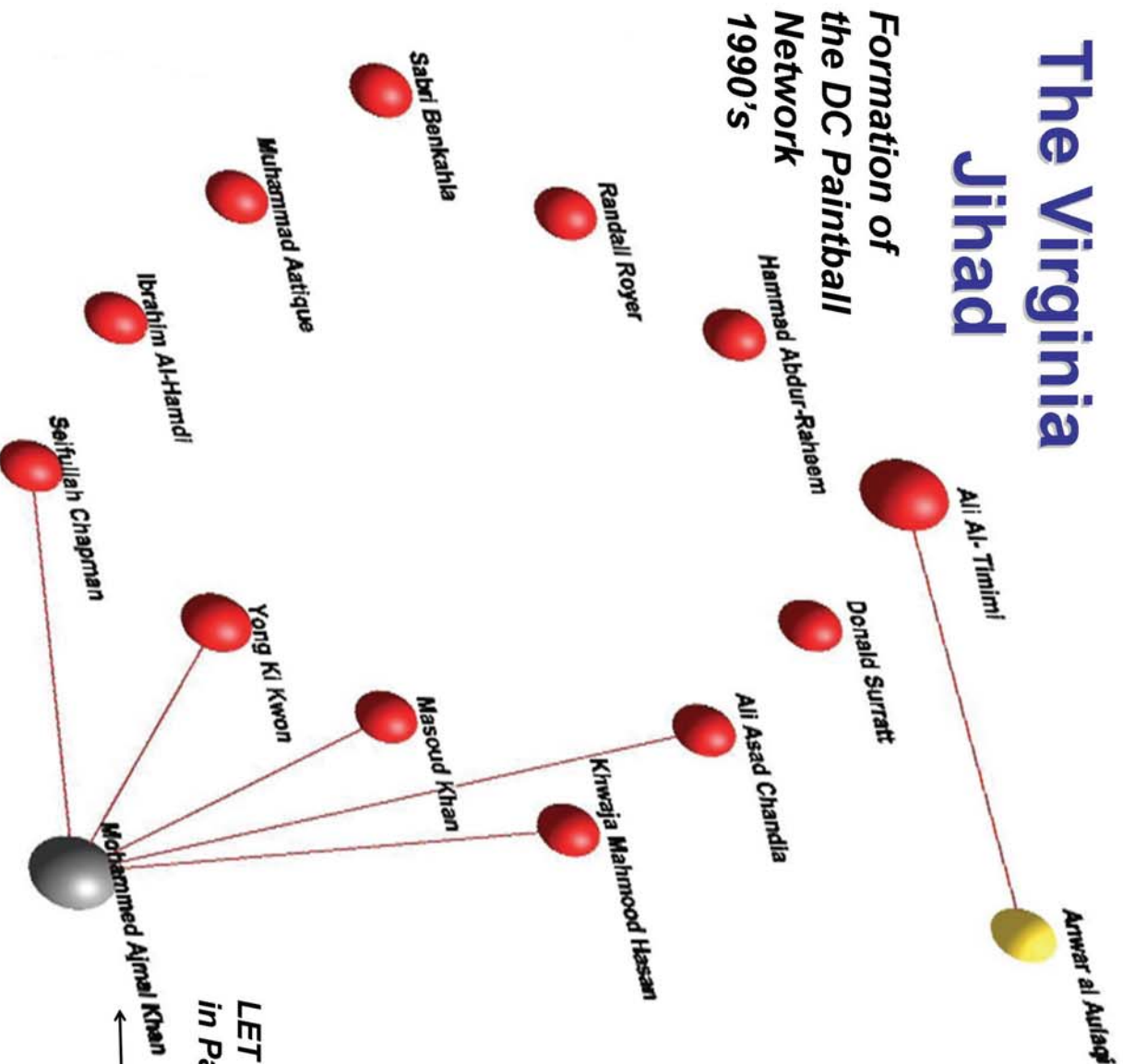
LET Propoganda Poster



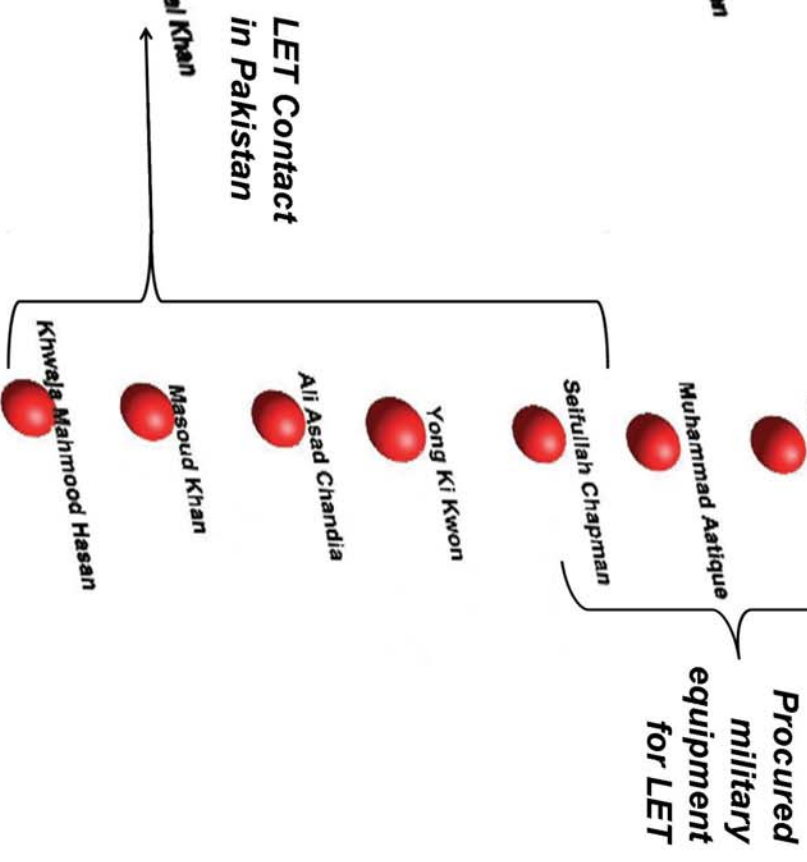
The Virginia Jihad

Lashkar – e – Taiba (LET) Pakistan

Formation of the DC Paintball Network 1990's



Attended LET military training camps between 2000-2001



The Need for Field-Based Research into Sacred Cultural Values

Most current risk management approaches to countering terrorism often assume that adversaries model the world on the basis of rational choices that are commensurable across cultures. From interviews and psychological experiments with terrorists and those who inspire and care for them, we have learned that individuals who join the jihad, especially would-be martyrs (suicide bombers), often seem motivated by non-instrumental values and small-group dynamics that trump rational self-interest. Such “sacred” values comprise the core of cultural morality and social identity. They differ from material or instrumental values by incorporating moral beliefs that drive action in ways dissociated from prospects for success.

Field studies, including surveys designed as experiments rather than simple probes of attitudes, indicate that such values do not generate standard calculations regarding cost and benefit, sensitivity to quantity, tradeoffs across moral categories (e.g., family vs. God), or commensuration between different cultural frames. This means that traditional calculations of how to defeat or deter an enemy - for example, by providing material incentives to defect or threatening retaliation against supporting populations - may not succeed. For negotiators, policy makers and others who must interact with unfamiliar cultures, it is important to understand sacred values in order to know which social transgressions and offers for tradeoffs are likely to remain morally taboo. Planning and acting in ignorance or disregard of different value frameworks may exacerbate conflict, with grievous loss of national treasure and lives.

Our research tells us that when there is a confrontation involving sacred values, then offers to give up or exchange sacred values for material incentives is taken as a deep insult, which only increases disgust and the moral outrage that inspires violence. According to the U.S. Quadrennial Defense Review, the chief

aim of counterterrorism efforts is to “minimize U.S. costs in lives and treasure, while imposing unsustainable costs on the enemy.” To a significant degree, however, terrorists do not respond to a utilitarian cost-benefit analysis. The conspirators in the summer 2006 plot to blow up airliners with liquid chemicals smuggled aboard knowingly chose the targets most watched; in fall 2007, plotters in Ulm, Germany knew they were under surveillance and flaunted this knowledge in a display of costly commitment to their cause. Committed terrorists respond to moral values, and are more than willing to die for the cause. Rather than “minimizing” the appeal and effect of Jihad by raising their costs in lives, each death inspires many more young Muslims to join the cause. Indeed, our utilitarian position actually plays into the hands of terrorists who turn it around to show that America and its allies try to reduce people to material matter rather than moral beings

Almost no prior research has been conducted investigating value judgment and decision making in the domain of political violence and terrorism that is field-based. Most speculations are extrapolated from studies of Western college students, business negotiators and politicians. Models of individual and group based choices have tended to assume that theories of bounded rationality can explain choices to commit oneself or one’s group to acts of political violence and terrorism. However, based on our research among Palestinian members of Hamas, members of radical madrassah’s in Indonesia, and radical Israeli settlers, we find that decisions to commit oneself or one’s community to political violence are driven by moral intuitions rather than cost-benefit calculations of *realpolitik*, the marketplace or “business-like” negotiations. The implication is that in order to understand, model and predict terrorism and political violence we need to apply our emerging understanding of moral decision-making to a broader cross-cultural field investigation of the cognitive and emotional processes involved in decisions to engage in acts of political violence and terrorism.

B ACKGROUND MATERIALS IN SUPPORT OF TESTIMONY

1. WHO BECOMES A TERRORIST TODAY? A FIELD-BASED APPROACH

Atran, S., “Who Becomes a Terrorist Today? *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. II, issue 5, March 2008; available online at <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/>.

Atran, S. Magouirk, J. & Ginges, J. “Radical Madrasas in Southeast Asia.” *CTC Sentinel* (Combating Terrorism Center, West Point), vol. I, issue 3, February 2008; available online at <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/CTCSentinel-Vol1Iss3.pdf>.

2. SACRED VALUES AS BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION (Israel-Palestine and other seemingly intractable disputes)

Atran, S., Axelrod, R. & Davis, R. “Sacred barriers to conflict resolution.” *Science*, vol. 317, August 24, 2007; available online at http://sitemaker.umich.edu/satran/files/atran_et_al_science_mag_240807.pdf.

Ginges, J., Atran, S., Medin, D. & Shikaki, K. “Sacred bounds on the rational resolution of violent political conflict.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA*, vol.104, April 25, 2007; available online at http://sitemaker.umich.edu/satran/files/pnas_sacred_bounds.pdf.

3. EXAMPLE OF COST-EFFECTIVE GROUND-TRUTHING FROM THE FIELD (e.g., non-state actor nuclear terrorism)

Risk in the wild: Reassessing terrorist threats from the field. Presentation to the “Risk and Society” Panel, Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, St. Louis, February 2006.