

THE SOCIOLOGY OF JIHAD:

How Rational People Commit Atrocities

By John Andrews

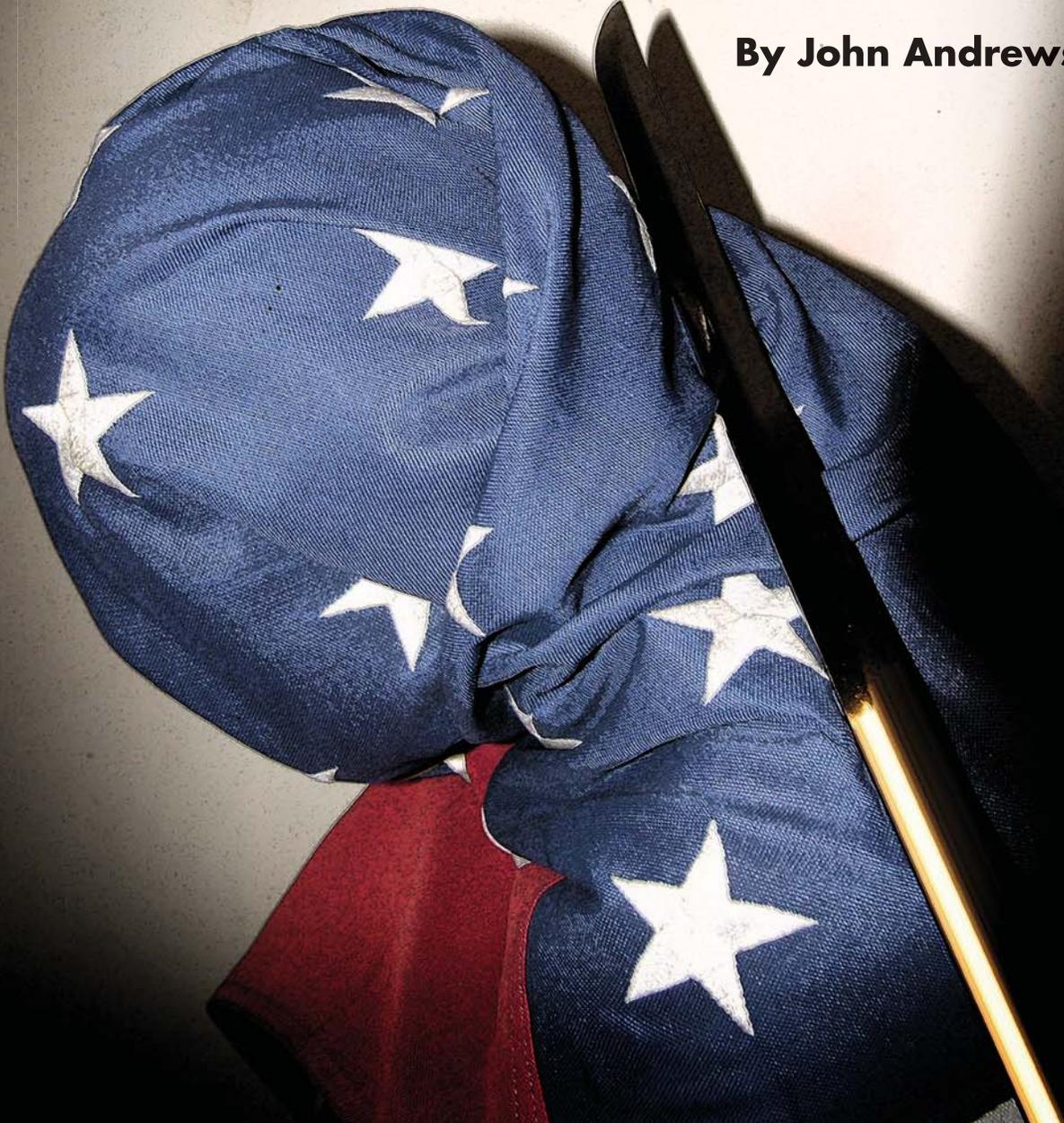


Photo: Scott Morrison

Salafism is an Islamic system of belief which states that the glory and grandeur of Islam took place during its Golden Age when the Prophet Mohammed and his companions practiced it. Islam subsequently became decadent and strayed from its righteous path, which sapped the strength of the righteous Umma and led to the rise of the West and its beliefs, at the expense of Islam. During the Golden Age the ancient ones achieved perfection through Islam. All this was possible because those who established Islam in the form of a state, a system of laws and regulations, first established it in their hearts in the form of faith, character, worship and human relationships. This state of perfection pleased God (Qutb, N.D. 21).



The Salafists believe that only Jihad can reestablish a true Muslim state that will abolish all injustice from the earth and bring people out of the servitude to others and into the servitude of God. It is the duty of Islam to destroy all political systems which prevent people from freely choosing it and experiencing universal freedom (56). The sword (Jihad) must clear the way for the preaching and destroy those elements which limit mankind to living in a world of evil and chaos (62). This sword would be carried by a restored Caliphate based on the traditions of the Prophet. The Caliphate would be a leader the masses could trust, understand and follow. He would provide a simple message well-suited to Muslims, not well-

schooled in traditional Muslim teachings. This message is liberating the Umma from its external enemies, the infidels and Jews (al-Zawahiri, 2001: part 11).

It is difficult to generalize about the characteristics of the Salafist. Most of these individuals, approximately 80 percent, went to secular schools as children. Over 60 percent had some form of college, many attending in the West, and most were trained in the sciences, not philosophy or religion. However, a majority considered themselves religious as children; 73 percent were married and most had children. The majority were from overprotected families with doting parents and stable households. They did not suffer from any major mental disorders. If they had antisocial personalities, they would have been weeded out

because of their inability to work well in an organization and their lack of dedication, perseverance and ability to sacrifice for the cause. The 9/11 hijackers are perfect examples. They were not hostile, violent or macho throughout their year-long stay in the U.S. However, when the moment came they killed enthusiastically. They were able to do so because of their social networking and group morality, which was developed over years. These

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individuals were not predisposed to do harm individually, but did not hesitate to perform monstrous acts collectively (Sageman 2004: 74-82).

This original group joined the Jihad in their mid-twenties in a country where they had not grown up. Although they were, for the most part, religious as children, they became considerably more devout immediately before joining the Jihad (92). The subsequent group of Salafists were second- or third-generation Muslims living in the West. Many of these individuals felt excluded from the society they grew up in, had no discipline in their lives, and pursued petty crimes, drank and took part in drug use. They grew up with little or no religious training (100-101). We will go into greater detail later on this second group, but for

now it is important to note a similarity between both groups prior to joining the Jihad. They felt alienated in their current society. This was true for the first group who had immigrated to another country and the second group who felt alienated in the country of their birth. They both sought a cause that would give them emotional relief, social community and spiritual comfort (97). They eventually drifted towards like-minded local individuals. The original group sought out the mosque in the foreign country where people from their homeland were. These prospective converts may initially have had strong reservations about the group’s doctrines, but began developing strong ties of friendship with members of the group. There they began to form networks of friendships that solidified over a period of time. Sub groups were formed within the mosque where the intensity of their beliefs spiraled upward in an apparent game of one-upmanship. They found rules and structure that went beyond religion and became psychological and personal (108-109). They became embedded in a socially disembedded network, which, because of its lack of anchor to any society, is free to follow abstract and apocalyptic notions of a global war between good and evil (151). Instead of a top-down process of recruitment, it became a bottom-up process of young people volunteering to join the organization. They joined as a group, not as individuals. The East African embassy bombings and the Lackawanna Six involved individuals were close friends prior to joining the Jihad. Most of these relationships go back to childhood or are familial in nature, including in-laws and spouses. The crucial element is that social bonds predated formal recruitment into the Jihad. (110-113)

This process is rarely a fully conscious one. These sub-groups do not start out



as terrorist groups. They evolve in that direction as their mutual relationships deepen, in a spiral of greater loyalty, mutual devotion, self-sacrifice and intimacy. They begin to believe that their actions are taken on behalf of God. Although outsiders focus on their willingness to kill, the insiders focus on their willingness to die. Their awareness of their own readiness to transcend their own self-interest fosters a special view of themselves and others like them that increases the value of friendship within the group and diminishes outside relationships. These feelings may compete with, and even be stronger than, those of love. Ziad Jarrah's fiancé testified about her progressive loss of her fiancé's love to the Hamburg terrorist cell which planned and carried out the 9/11 attacks. The loss of love to this type of friendship demonstrates its powerful bond. Positive emotions motivate people to carry out horrific acts more easily than negative emotions. Killing in defense of family, friends or country is acceptable and encouraged. Perhaps the 9/11 perpetrators carried out their horrendous actions out of in-group love rather than out-of-group hate (155-157). As was previously stated, the Jihad strives in the cause of God to abolish all injustice from the earth in order to bring people to the worship of God alone and to bring them out of servitude to others--to abolish those oppressive political systems which prevented people from freely choosing Islam.

Islam is one of the most communal of all religions, with many orchestrated, shared rituals. Salafi Islam is very strict in its code of conduct and prescribes dress, diet and conduct. The elegance and simplicity of its interpretations attract many who seek a single solution devoid of ambiguity. Salafi Islam uses tactics developed by other totalitarian ideologies, such as fascism and communism. It promotes

a visual apartheid to distinguish its adherents from the rest of society. The specific uniform consists of beards, shirts falling down to the knees, and baggy pants with a cloth cap. They also carry worry beads. Women cover their hair, avoid bright colors, and, in some instances, wear the burqa, which is head-to-toe covering. They have simple answers to complicated problems, and they divide the world into good Islam and bad non-Islam (116).

There is another subtle factor that makes Islam attractive. Traditional masculine roles are well-preserved in Islam. Western men find it difficult to express their "manhood" in increasingly neutered societies. Islam possesses what are seen as masculine virtues from the seventh century when men walked the earth, sword in hand, accepting no insult, and conquering infidel neighbors. In comparison to Christianity, which states "turn the other cheek and pray for those who persecute you," Islam comports more closely with man's primordial lusts for war, booty and women (Ibrahim, 2006).

People will often seek a new religious or social affiliation after some significant change disrupts their old social networks, e.g., a new country, imprisonment, and alienation from friends and family. There is a period of social isolation in which the existing social and emotional ties are called into question and loosened until finally there is a total negation of everything that existed before (Sageman 2004:116). The religious revivalist organization possesses superior attractiveness over a secular political group. The Salafist emphasizes brotherhood, mutual sharing and spiritual support, which becomes the functional equivalent of an extended family. New adherents progressively accept the new faith because it makes sense in their new interpretation of the world and their role in it. This learning process involves intense social interaction and



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introspection. The adherents distance themselves from their original network of friends and family or are rejected by them because of their new, highly-visible behavior. The mastering of their friends' beliefs comes after a long period of intense day-to-day interaction with them. In many cases they begin living an isolated lifestyle, which intensifies the social bonds of the members. This leads to a spiral of further isolation from the outside world, the development of a collective identity, and total commitment to the group. Muslims may engage in the Jihad because they share certain norms, values and world views which are shaped under the guidance of a Salafi imam preaching the benefits of the global Jihad. Social interactions at these mosques build and reinforce ideological commitments to the Jihad, which these new friends further encourage (117-121).

This social jihadism has worked with second- or third-generation Muslims and new immigrants as well. This development is a paradox to many sociologists, who figured that radical Islam was confined to newcomers who brought it with them. With time, the theory went, immigrants and their children would moderate their views. Instead, it is Europe's second- and third-generation Muslims who are the most radical. Many of these individuals believe their European society is against them. They are growing up in a world of high unemployment and lack of integration in their homeland. Some begin drinking, doing drugs, becoming members of youth gangs and engaging in crimes with no moral compass or goal in life. They then become introduced to an individual who talks to them about the world, their place in it, and the religion of their ancestors. They are provided with audio and videotapes of preachers who advocate a stripped-down form of Islam that emphasizes the culture's past

glories and a handful of simple religious regulations. Soon they are meeting with like-minded contemporaries, getting rid of jeans, t-shirts, drugs and alcohol and wearing the white gowns, skullcaps and beards. They become indoctrinated into political Islam, which preaches a Utopian view of society where all citizens are part of a just and fair Umma. There is no separation of church and politics. Life centers on the mosque not just for religious instruction, but for everything. Society should be founded on Islam, and all those who are different are held in contempt. Inside the mosque talk isn't of integration, but rather how to protect oneself from harmful European society. Those members of the mosque who do not agree with this political Islam are shunned or forced out. The group dynamics change alienated young men into terrorists. Basically, these individuals, with the help of their friends, recruit themselves. They do not necessarily attend terrorist camps or have experience on the battlefields (Johnson and Carreyrou: 2005). Their source of knowledge and indoctrination comes from the Internet. The Internet both appeals to and fosters disembeddedness. On the one hand, it appeals to isolated individuals by easing their loneliness through connections to people sharing some commonality. On the other hand, it leads them to spend more time with this virtual community at the expense of interaction with the immediate social environment. The chat rooms are egalitarian and appeal to those with limited theological background. It is a perfect compliment to the elegant simplicity and clarity of Salafism. The virtual community is not tied to any nation but to the abstract concept of the mythical umma of Salafism. This community is just, egalitarian, full of opportunity, unified in Islam, purged of national peculiarities, and devoid of corruption. It is the ideal

world that Jihad strives for (Sageman, 2004: 161-163).

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Were they really decent fellows? They would never commit a murder or crime of any kind for personal gain or self interest. Their ideology convinced them that the murders were committed for a good purpose. They were committed for the sake of a societal vision of building a good and just world. They are not unlike the SS during the Third Reich. Heinrich Himmler told a group of SS leaders: “Most of you know what it means to see a hundred corpses lying together, five hundred or a thousand. To have gone through this and yet--apart from a few exceptions which are examples of human weakness--to have remained decent fellows, this is what has made us hard. This is a glorious page in our history that has never been written and shall never be written...”

These people are not raving maniacs. We must go beyond calling them terrorists and examine their ideology. They do not perform these acts in a vacuum. They are building a society and will use any means to achieve it. They do so not because they are sociopaths who hate people, but because they are true believers who want to save people. And so we are continually surprised when they turn out

to be nice guys after all. Decent fellows. Like the SS (Spenser, 2007).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr. Andrews served as a Special Agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation for twenty-three years. He conducted international terrorist investigations for nine years, serving as a national case agent and coordinating with the United States Foreign Intelligence Court in order to initiate extraordinary investigative techniques in complicated terrorist investigations. He operated numerous Middle-Eastern assets. Mr. Andrews currently serves as an Adjunct Professor at Florida State University and Troy University conducting seminars on Islamic Fundamentalism and International Terrorism and Conducts police training throughout the United States for Benchmark Professional Seminars and Unitech on Homeland Security and Terrorism.

