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Connecting the dots

By Scott Atran and Marc Sageman

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How do terrorists become radicalized? What motivates them? Who supports them? Who among them is most liable to defect? We don't have reliable answers to these vital questions because of a dearth of relevant data.

Several extensive terrorist databases currently exist. But they are incident-based catalogs of terrorist names and events: who, what, where, and when. Conspicuously absent is the "why." The records illustrate the geographic distribution and frequency of attacks and focus on operations rather than on what drives the terrorists. The U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, for instance, maintains a central repository of 325,000 names of international suspects and people who allegedly aided them. The names, usually harvested from telephone or e-mail intercepts, are important to collect. But names and numbers alone don't indicate why an individual turned to terror. We can collect names and numbers endlessly, but until we understand the reasons behind terrorism, we will be underprepared to fight it.

A database that focuses on the complexities of people, rather than incidents, would be the best way to better understand and predict terrorist behavior. To that end, we have piloted a database that now includes more than 500 people involved in global network terrorism (GNT).

Our database comprises two parts. The first is a detailed categorization of basic biographical and socioeconomic information, including nationality, ethnicity, occupation, and religious upbringing. The second addresses the vast network of connections--the glue that holds the diverse array of terrorists together--and includes data on acquaintances, family ties, friendships, and venues for terrorist training. Such an approach is crucial since the growth of GNT is largely a decentralized, evolutionary process. And, as in any natural evolutionary process,

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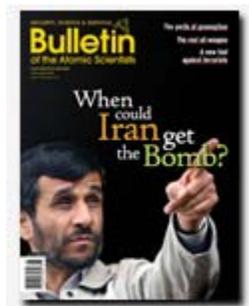
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individual variation and environmental context are the critical determinants of future directions and paths.

Building this database is not without challenges, such as assessing the reliability of available information. We avoid accounts of terrorist attacks reported by the popular media since these are often based on anecdotal evidence that remains uncorrected and "echoes" over time to give error-prone sources a misleading credibility and importance. Instead, we rely as much as possible on legal documents, captured information, and intercepted conversations entered into trial evidence and court transcripts because these are subjected to cross-examination and thus approximate "peer scrutiny" of evidence. Independently corroborated investigative reporting and field interviews are other good sources of data.

Preliminary results from our database already refute the two most common theories about GNT. We find no evidence of specific traits that indicate a personal predisposition toward involvement in GNT; terrorists are as diverse as the general population. Likewise, no broad "root cause" generates terrorists; millions of people are subjected to the same political and socioeconomic conditions, but very few resort to violent activities. Further, we learned that terrorists are very rarely recruited by strangers. Although most individuals enlist in terrorist groups outside their country of origin (about 80 percent), most do so through friendship (about 70 percent) and/or kinship (about 20 percent). The preferred terrorist cell size is eight members, often consisting of friends made during the critical period when a person is between the ages of 15 and 30. This suggests that studying the dynamics of small groups--a sort of "band of brothers"--might best reveal the processes that lead people to kill and to die for causes and comrades.

A more comprehensive database could test these preliminary hypotheses and inform interactive modeling that is more realistic than current models, which are built on incident-based data. Such a database must be freely available to academic, policy, and government communities--public access is critical to the peer review that characterizes science and is essential for quality control. Creating this database would help put terrorism research on a sound empirical footing, allowing future breakthroughs in understanding this phenomenon--and hopefully saving lives in the process.

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