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# Al-Qaida: Terrorist Selection and Recruitment

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**S**eptember 11 was, obviously, a seminal event for al-Qaida. Historically, terrorists' and insurgents' successes have had two kinds of effects on recruiting: the positive effects of the action, measured in more recruits and approbation by state sponsors; and the negative effects of the reaction, measured in arrests, compromise of intelligence assets, etc. Thus when there is a significant development in a terrorist or insurgent campaign, there are almost always significant changes in recruiting. Al-Qaida and its affiliates have had to adapt since September 11 and since the loss of their training base in Afghanistan, and to incorporate new and more clandestine methods of recruitment.

A priority of the American-led campaign against global terrorism is to move beyond responding to attacks and threats and take proactive steps to cripple al-Qaida. One prong of this proactive strategy is to diminish the ability of al-Qaida and its affiliated terrorist organizations to recruit new members. Manpower for carrying out attacks and sustaining operations is a critical resource for terrorist organizations; therefore, hindering recruitment strikes a blow at their ability to function.

A first step toward hindering al-Qaida's recruitment is to understand how it works—where al-Qaida recruits, what tools it uses, whom it targets, and why. A clearer picture of this recruitment process could help the United States and its allies develop strategies

and interventions to counter terrorist groups' ability to replenish and increase their numbers.

This chapter focuses on the structure of the recruitment process; models al-Qaida may be using to attract new members; approaches to recruitment; characteristics of potential recruits; and *nodes*—centers of activity, such as mosques, universities, and charities—where al-Qaida's recruiters seek new members and where potential recruits<sup>1</sup> are likely to become acquainted with the radical jihadist worldview.

## **A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY**

To better understand who al-Qaida and its affiliated organizations are recruiting as well as what types of individuals are attracted to al-Qaida, we examined the social-psychological and sociological literature on recruitment into extremist and totalist organizations to identify recruitment models al-Qaida may be using in various regions. We then looked at the persuasive instruments that al-Qaida uses to attract potential recruits, whether through the media or personal contacts in a closed setting, such as a prison or paramilitary training camp. Finally, we examined various recruitment nodes that may be used for recruiting by al-Qaida and its affiliated groups. This chapter does not include any data that comment empirically on whether or not al-Qaida is actually using these particular strategies or models to recruit new members. Most of our conclusions are drawn from open-source, academic, and journalistic accounts of how al-Qaida has sought recruits in the past and an assessment of those who seek to join al-Qaida.

## **THE STRUCTURE OF THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS**

It has long been known that effective recruitment “pitches” are tailored to the audience and its cultural, social, and historical context. For example, encouraging a youth to leave home and join a military or paramilitary organization can be (1) couched in patriotic terms if the youth's family is a member of a privileged class, or (2) framed as a step in social advancement if the family is immigrant and struggling, or (3) characterized as a revolutionary act of self-discovery if the

family is disapproving and must be circumvented. These are simple generic examples of “tuning” the pitch to the psychographic<sup>2</sup> and demographic<sup>3</sup> particulars of the audience and its environment. This tuning is especially necessary for marginal or illicit groups, whose recruiting is often undertaken in the teeth of governmental or other opposition. There is little room for error, and the consequences of failure can be severe. Less well appreciated than tuning is how these groups alter or adapt their own shape and patterns of activity to facilitate recruitment. For instance, when religious terrorist<sup>4</sup> groups are banned from evangelizing on school campuses, they may disguise their activities by changing their names, dress, meeting places, use of language, types of activities, and timetable to avoid interference from authorities and yet maintain access to the target population. This organizational adaptation occurs across both regions and nodes<sup>5</sup> (e.g., prisons, schools, direct-mail solicitations).

Two guiding principles follow directly from the preceding discussion. First, there is no single, uniform recruitment process for a group; rather, there are as many recruitment processes as there are distinct regions and nodes in which the group operates. While there may be overlap and similarity between the recruitment techniques in one location and those in another, there will as often be stark differences. For example, in one forum (e.g., a training camp) recruiters may enjoy open, public access to the target population while in another (e.g., a prison) they may have to operate more clandestinely. Moreover, the characteristics of any regional or nodal recruitment process will change over time, as circumstances warrant.

Second, and correspondingly, the recruitment efforts of a group will not be mitigated, shaped, hindered, or halted by a one-size-fits-all prescription. Different recruitment patterns will necessitate different counterrecruitment interventions. Some counterrecruitment methods may be effective in more than one locale, but just as often what works in one situation will prove ineffective (or counterproductive) in another. Thus breaking up prayer meetings and discussion groups with armed force might be an effective intervention if the potential recruits are enlightenment-seekers (as is the case with many new recruits to al-Qaida) but may polarize and strengthen the will of antigovernment revolutionaries [as might be the case with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in Sri Lanka].

## MODELS OF RECRUITMENT

The specific characterization of any recruitment process may be called its *shape*—a combination of overall pattern and specific descriptors. As suggested above, counterrecruitment interventions should be matched to the pattern and descriptors.

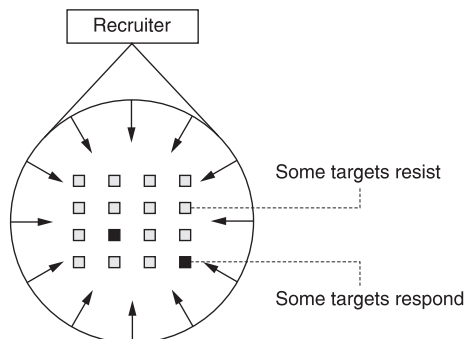
What kinds of patterns are there? How much variety is there in the overall pattern? There is tremendous variety, but a review of the empirical literature on terrorist groups' recruiting reveals a few common structures.<sup>6</sup> Some examples follow.

### The Net

In the "net" pattern a target population may be engaged equitably (for example, every member of a congregation may be sent a videotape or every student invited to a weekend retreat). Some members will respond positively, others negatively; but in general the whole population is viewed as primed for recruitment. See Figure 5-1. More specifically, the target audience is viewed as homogeneous enough and receptive enough to be approached with a single undifferentiated pitch. This is often the approach used when there is little serious opposition to the group in the audience's environment, or in conjunction with other approaches (e.g., beginning with the net and moving on to the "infection"). Among the key variables to be investigated in this model are geography (where is the net cast?) and demographic-psychographic similarities and contrasts among

**FIGURE 5-1**

The net.



members of the targeted audience (Who is caught? Who slips out of the net?).

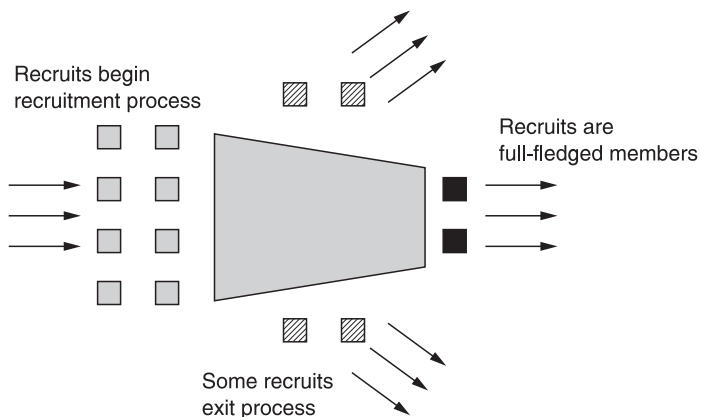
An example of a node where this approach may work best for al-Qaida is a mosque headed by an imam widely recognized as “radical.” Those who attend are ready to receive the recruiting pitch without additional preparation. Regionally, this model would be most effective in locations such as the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan, which is known to have a population widely sympathetic to al-Qaida.

## The Funnel

A recruiter may use an incremental, or phased, approach when he or she believes a target population is ripe for recruitment yet requires a significant transformation in identity and motivation. As the term *funnel* implies, potential recruits start at one end of the process and are transformed, after some culling<sup>7</sup> along the way, into dedicated group members when they emerge at the other end. See Figure 5-2. This approach can be characterized by milestones such as hazing rituals and group identity-building exercises or, in the case of al-Qaida, validation of commitment to its principles through the recruits’ demonstrated knowledge of radical Islam and the use of violence to achieve its goals. These milestones capitalize on a wealth

**FIGURE 5-2**

The funnel.



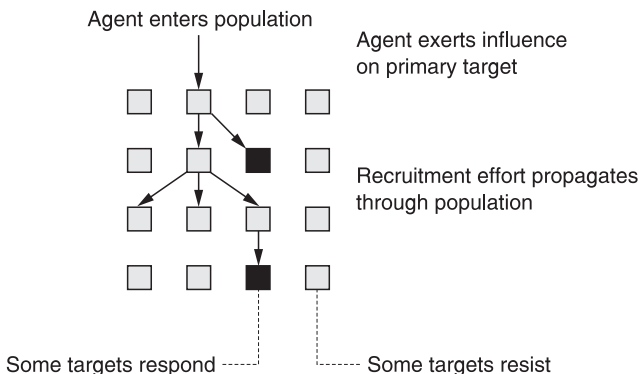
of techniques well studied in cognitive, social, and clinical psychology. These techniques can result in radically polarized and altered attitudes among those who successfully navigate them, usually along the lines desired by the recruiting group. Even those who fall out of the process can still be affected in ways beneficial to the recruiter: for example, by developing a positive outlook toward the group and serving as intermediaries for further recruitment.

### The Infection

Frequently a target population is so insular or so difficult to reach that the most effective method is to recruit from within. A trusted agent can be inserted into the target population to rally potential recruits through direct, personal appeals. This method leverages the significant persuasive strength of (1) source credibility, (2) social comparison and validation,<sup>8</sup> and (3) specifically tailored appeals. At least in its early stages, this method of recruiting suits groups that are actively opposed by governments, lending itself to clandestinity and operational security. See Figure 5-3. As recruits rally, the reach of the recruiting effort grows, as does its ability to exert conformational pressure.<sup>9</sup> Among the most critical variables to be investigated in this type of recruiting is time. How long does it take to insert an agent into the target population, and how long does it take for the infection to spread to a level hazardous to the body politic?

**FIGURE 5-3**

The infection.



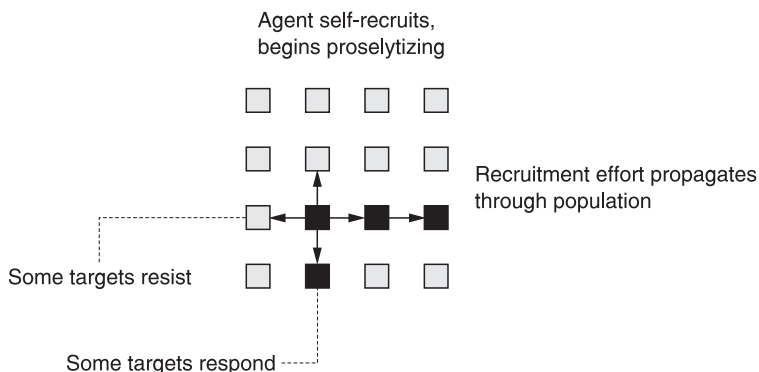
Infection is likely to be most successful for a terrorist group in an organization such as the police or the military, where most members are not extremists. In this case, an infiltrator may be able to convert selected members who are dissatisfied with their jobs or have a grudge against the police or military organization, or the government. Regionally, it may be most successful in an environment such as Kenya or Tanzania where the majority of the population is unsympathetic to al-Qaida's cause, but selected individuals could be recruited for al-Qaida operations.

### The Seed Crystal

Often a target audience is so remote or so inaccessible that a trusted agent cannot be put into it, nor can a media net be cast over it (see Figure 5-4). In this case recruiters may seek to provide a context for self-recruitment. This may be compared to lowering the temperature of a glass until the water inside it cools and then ice crystals form as the seeds of a complete freeze. Once individuals emerge within the population as new recruits, they will often follow the pattern of the infection. In "seed crystal" recruitment, critical variables include the type of environmental forces being used to "chill the glass," and the durability of the "freeze." (In other words, how long must the environmental manipulation be applied in order to produce self-recruitment? Or does the process occur inevitably once it is initiated?)

**FIGURE 5-4**

The seed crystal.





In terms of al-Qaida, the seed crystal approach may be most successful in diasporas or populations where open recruiting is difficult or impossible—as with the plotters of September 11 who constituted the Hamburg cell.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of patterns. It merely serves to illustrate that common patterns of recruiting can be quite different in their details, and those differences imply different responses for counterrecruitment efforts. Moreover, these shapes should be taken as simplified hypotheses to be investigated in collecting intelligence rather than foregone conclusions or analytic straitjackets.

## RECRUITMENT APPROACHES

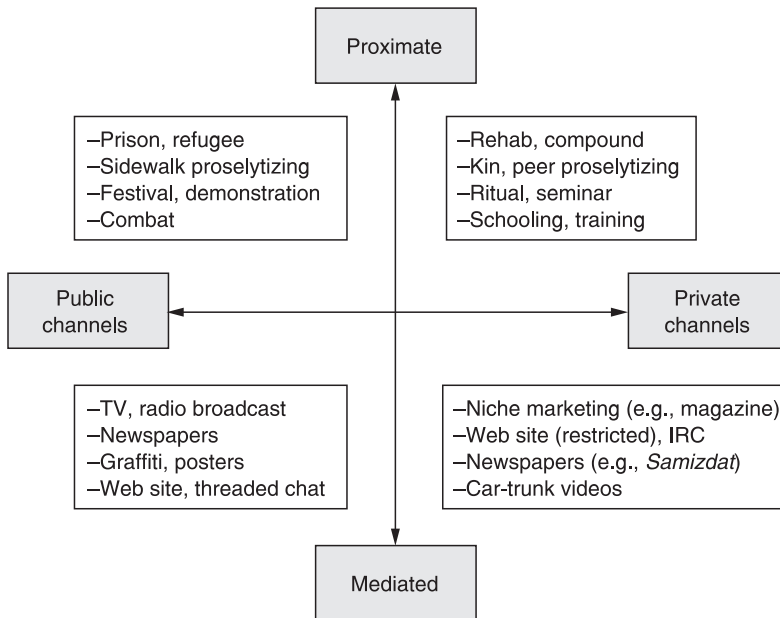
Any attempt at recruitment makes use of persuasive instruments, direct (e.g., a face-to-face invitation to participate in paramilitary training) or indirect (e.g., political pronouncements and exhortations posted on a Web site). These instruments include every form of mass media in use today (e.g., newspapers, radio, television, and the Web) as well as interpersonal social influence (e.g., sermons, rumors, education, and training). Often a group with some reach and resources will use several instruments in concert for added effect, such as writing textbooks that support the ideology of the group and then creating a school in which those textbooks may be made required reading.

How can the vast space of possible instruments be usefully bounded, and what can be gained by such an exercise? One sociologist<sup>10</sup> observed two cardinal dimensions along which recruiting communications can be measured at any given time (keeping in mind that this is a snapshot in time, and the recruiting pattern will evolve):

1. *Public versus private forums*: Is the interaction taking place in or out of the public eye? Clearly the prevailing laws of the region, rules of the local institutions, and attitudes toward the group will all greatly affect where recruitment efforts fall on this spectrum.
2. *Proximate versus mediated contact*. Is the source of the recruitment effort physically close to the target audience? Cultural norms, available technology, and socioeconomic

**FIGURE 5-5**

One perspective on types of communication in recruiting.



status are just three of the variables that will dictate how the persuasive message can be passed to the intended target audience.

When these two dimensions are placed at right angles, a simple but useful figure is generated that can put common recruitment vectors into distinct quadrants (see Figure 5-5). A brief discussion of each quadrant will illustrate the actionable differences among various forms of recruiting instruments.

### Public and Proximate

Recruiting in this quadrant is conducted face to face or in small groups, in a setting visible to the general public or authorities. Prisons, refugee camps, and large-scale wartime experiences (e.g., life during an occupation) are prime examples of this setting. Recruiters commingle with the population and target individuals or small

groups that they deem ripe for recruitment. This activity takes place irrespective of (or despite) any opposition by authorities—often because of political sensitivity, insufficient legislation, or fear of negatively polarizing the audience’s attitudes. With regard to the shapes of recruitment, this quadrant is most amenable to infection-type efforts because the recruiter has face-to-face access to the audience, with few restrictions. For the purposes of counterrecruiting, the work does not end once the terrorist is arrested and put in prison. Recruitment can occur in the prison setting and can negate the success of the arrest by creating a number of new recruits.

### **Public and Mediated**

In this quadrant recruiting tends to be broader, more akin to propaganda than to a sales pitch. Mass media is used, including those within the reach of legislation and government (e.g., television) as well as the more illicit media (e.g., graffiti). Media channels can include Web sites that are not password-protected and whose domain name is not a secret. The target for these media efforts is usually some stratum of the regional demographic or psychographic, such as young, single men gathering in a particular café, or devout members of a particular religious congregation. The indirectness of this quadrant of communications may be necessary because physical immediacy is not possible or sustainable. Though such indirectness sacrifices the persuasive power of more intimate, tailored appeals, it does have a much broader reach. As regards the shapes of recruitment, this quadrant very much suits a net or seed crystal approach because personal access to the target audience is not available, but communication is still relatively unrestricted. For example, al-Qaida periodically releases jihadist or martyrdom videos and makes statements to various newspapers in the Arab world decrying the United States and its role in Iraq and Israel. These demonstrate how the organization uses public channels to prime specific segments of the population for recruitment.

### **Private and Proximate**

Communication techniques in this quadrant are used out of the public eye and in intimate settings, as a rule. Individuals recovering from addictions in private clinics, attending prayer sessions in a

neighbor's living room, attending a paramilitary training program (such as potential al-Qaida recruits attending training camps in Afghanistan), or receiving vocational instruction from a tutor are all examples of venues where these types of recruiting are undertaken. This suits those groups who are operating out of sight or in opposition to local authorities. Moreover, these techniques rely heavily on personal appeals tailored specifically for a targeted individual or small group. They often use peers, including relatives, in making the pitch. This strategy effectively leverages the influential power of conformity (peer pressure) and related phenomena. This quadrant suits an infection or funnel approach because the power of one-on-one persuasive communication is brought to bear at an individual level, and new recruits can be directly manipulated.

### **Private and Mediated**

Recruitment in this quadrant combines a mass-media approach with intimacy or clandestinity. Techniques include producing dissident literature on someone's basement printing press and circulating it covertly to a broad audience. In terms of more recent technology, this quadrant includes password-protected Web sites, restricted Internet chat groups, and the clandestine propagation of digital video.

Since September 11, al-Qaida has made use of these new technologies to recover from the loss of private and proximate channels provided, for example, by the training camps in Afghanistan and the experience of building personal networks through fighting various jihads in Chechnya, Iraq, etc. Al-Qaida's use of password-protected Web sites and restricted Internet chat groups has led policy makers to describe these methods as "virtual jihad," and has made it more difficult for intelligence and law enforcement to track their activities and understand who is moving into and out of the organization. These methods are often very effective when aimed at a population that is already primed to accept al-Qaida's message, because a large number of people can be affected at once, while at the same time counterpersuasion (such as government propaganda) is excluded and the environment can be controlled. It is difficult, however, to measure how virtual jihad affects the number of recruits that al-Qaida and like-minded terrorist groups are able to attract. It is probably best used to maintain the current membership rather than

to recruit new personnel. The techniques in this quadrant would best serve net approaches because large audiences are reached, although the communication is largely out of the sight and control of adversarial authorities.

Why does classifying recruitment techniques along these axes matter? There are two simple reasons. First, an appreciation of the variety, necessity, and utility of different recruitment techniques in general will lead to an improved understanding of any specific recruitment effort. It will result in a more empirical, systematic approach to both collection and analysis. The quadrants can be used as a basis for organizing the collection effort, and filling in the quadrants is the equivalent of mapping the psychological battlefield of recruitment and counterrecruitment. This is much more useful and timely than understanding the recruitment process of an adversary retrospectively (e.g., through interrogations). Second, a more detailed understanding of the recruitment process will make counterrecruitment more precise and more effective. To take another simple example, if a target population is seen as insular and more receptive to persuasion by peers than persuasion by the mass media, then countering the recruitment of an adversary group such as al-Qaida among that population should rely on infiltrators and credible proxies, not radio and television ads extolling the virtues of the United States.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF THOSE TARGETED FOR RECRUITMENT AND HOW THEY ARE MANIPULATED**

There is surprisingly little rigorous, scientific study on the vulnerability of individuals to recruitment by terrorist groups.<sup>11</sup> There is empirical work on the operational side (e.g., collection and analysis by the intelligence community), but this tends to focus on demographic variables, primarily because they are the easiest to collect. The science of changes in attitude and of group dynamics suggests that demographics are less important than other variables. What empirical studies have been conducted find that the variables which seem to matter most in the success or failure of recruitment are psychographic variables<sup>12</sup> and “state” variables.<sup>13</sup> Attitudes, ideas, reasoning, and physical experiences of individuals

weigh more heavily in their ability to resist recruitment than do such factors as their age, profession, and gender.<sup>14</sup> Here is a synopsis of some psychographic and state variables:<sup>15</sup>

A high level of current distress or dissatisfaction (emotional, physical, or both)

Cultural disillusionment in a frustrated seeker (i.e., unfulfilled idealism)

Lack of an intrinsic<sup>16</sup> religious belief system or value system

Some dysfunctionality in family system (i.e., family and kin community exert “weak gravity”)

Some dependent personality tendencies (e.g., suggestibility, low tolerance for ambiguity)

These data suggest that efforts to map (i.e., collect against) a group’s recruitment structure will need to measure far more than just plain demographics to truly understand, within a given population, who is at risk, who is likely to join, and who is likely to become radicalized. This level of collection is all the more necessary in counterrecruitment—which usually involves manipulating variables similar or identical to those affecting recruitment. That is, if a recruiter attempts to weaken targets’ family or community bonds in order to get them to join (e.g., by emphasizing a religious duty to go to war), an effective countermeasure is to strengthen or preserve those social networks (e.g., by emphasizing the religious imperative to protect and preserve one’s family).

One example of someone recruited into al-Qaida who had many of the aforementioned characteristics was Richard Reid, the “shoe bomber,” who attempted to bring down an American Airlines flight in December 2001 by detonating explosives hidden in his shoes. Since his incarceration in January 2003, it has come to light through various police and intelligence investigations into his life that Reid had at least four of the five characteristics listed above. According to his father, Reid did not receive adequate attention at home as a child because the father was incarcerated for most of that time, and his parents separated when he was young—this suggests some level of dysfunctionality in the family system. Reid also felt a sense of cultural disillusionment living in the United Kingdom as a person of mixed race in an all-white family and attending all-white schools where he felt that he did not fit in.<sup>17</sup> He lacked an intrinsic value system, falling

into a life of petty crime before he converted to Islam in prison in his twenties. According to the imam at the mosque he attended in the United Kingdom, Reid was a “weak character” and “very, very impressionable.”<sup>18</sup> Finally, one could argue that because of his experiences—a life of crime, imprisonment, a broken family, and a sense of being part of an outgroup because of his mixed race—Reid was undergoing severe distress or dissatisfaction.

Though vulnerability to recruitment is not a fully understood phenomenon, there are common techniques used by terrorist groups to induce the psychographic or state variables necessary and sufficient in encouraging (1) an initial contact between potential recruit and recruiter resulting in subsequent and more intense contacts, and (2) subsequent contacts leading to identity transformation by the recruit (i.e., joining the group as a self-identified member). The common theme of all these techniques is that they exploit or create physical and mental trauma to produce a dissociative state in the target individual—a condition in which identity, memory, consciousness, awareness, and rational thought are in flux. Coupled with that dissociation is the creation of a new identity and new thought processes—a transformation—along the lines sought by the recruiter. A full discussion of the process of identity transformation (also known as thought reform or brainwashing) is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is the logical next step after the forced dissociation.<sup>19</sup>

## **CHALLENGES IN IDENTIFYING AND MITIGATING AL-QAIDA’S RECRUITMENT**

A serious limitation to any detailed understanding of how new members come to al-Qaida is the confusing and sometimes contradictory definitions of what al-Qaida is and who is affiliated with it. This definitional predicament makes it challenging to distill recruitment patterns and trends that transcend regional dynamics. Having a more disciplined understanding of what al-Qaida is and who the adversaries are in each specific region, based on an assessment of the terrorist threat posed in that region to the United States’ interests, will help the U.S. government and its allies craft a more accurate and focused counterrecruitment plan. If the United States is uncertain who its adversaries are in a specific region, using general counterrecruitment techniques—as opposed to developing a targeted,

region-specific counterrecruitment plan—may not work, and could even backfire. Moreover, using the models of recruitment discussed above to understand the types of individuals that al-Qaida and related organizations are trying to recruit, and the tools and models they are using for recruitment, could serve to reveal gaps in information that need to be filled in each region where al-Qaida and its affiliates are operating.

## CONCLUSION

In general more data need to be collected on the types of recruits al-Qaida and related organizations are seeking, how al-Qaida is using specific nodes to recruit new members, and what precisely is the nature of the relationship between al-Qaida and other Islamic extremist organizations. This empirical effort can be usefully married to the scientific literature on recruitment, changes in attitude, conversion, and radicalization in crafting more effective countermeasures to combat al-Qaida's recruitment.

## NOTES

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1. For the purposes of this chapter recruits are considered to be individuals who have gone beyond exposure to terrorist messages and have been both indoctrinated and incorporated into the organization, whereas potential recruits—the primary focus of this chapter—are either those who are assessed by terrorist organizations as ripe for recruitment or those who self-select for terrorism on the basis of various personal and environmental factors.
2. Measurements of attitudes, opinions, emotions, perceptions, interests, etc.
3. Measurements of education, race, gender, occupation, etc.
4. In this chapter, we use the phrase *terrorist groups* to refer to violent groups or institutions such as al-Qaida that are totalist: that is, they seek to completely transform and dominate the lives of members. Our examination of the literature focused on the most destructive and demanding totalist groups (e.g., Aum Shinrikyo, the People's Church, and Chinese "thought reform" of American POWs during the Korean War) for illustrative patterns. Al-Qaida is at the high end of the spectrum of totalism.
5. We will use the term *node* to refer to the context of recruitment. This may be a prison, a school campus, a medical clinic, a religious center, the living room of the recruiter's home, or any other milieu used as a stage by the recruiting organization.
6. These are shorthand models to characterize the recruitment process. For ease of reference we have given them descriptive names, but these are not meant to be rigid or comprehensive categorizations.



7. Culling or weeding-out usually enhances the reputation of the group and its members by giving them elite status.
8. Individuals tend to model themselves on or seek guidance from those like them, not alien outsiders.
9. Surrounding potential recruits with peers who are already established recruits.
10. E. Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).
11. Good studies include: P. Zimbardo and C. Hartley, "Cults Go to High School: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis of the Initial Stage in the Recruitment Process," *Cultic Studies Journal* 2:1 (1985): 91–147. J. Lofland and R. Stark, "Becoming a World Saver," *American Sociological Review* 30 (1965): 862–875. I. Yalom and M. Lieberman, "A Study of Encounter Group Casualties." In Sager, Singer, and Kaplan (eds.), *Progress in Group and Family Therapy* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1972), pp. 223–254. S. Moscovici, "Toward a Theory of Conversion Behavior," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 13 (1980): 209–239.
12. For example: opinions, attitudes, emotions, preconceptions, motivation, self-efficacy, stereotypes.
13. For example: sickness, fear, disorientation, depression, hunger.
14. S. Ash, "Cult-Induced Psychopathology, Part One: Clinical Picture," *Cultic Studies Journal* 2:1 (1985): 31–90. A. Bloomgarden and M. Langone, "Preventive Education on Cultism for High-School Students: A Comparison of Different Programs' Effects on Potential Vulnerability to Cults," *Cultic Studies Journal* 1:2 (1984): 167–177.
15. S. Ash, 1985; M. Zerlin, 1982. "The Pied Piper Phenomenon: Family Systems and Vulnerability to Cults," unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Fielding Institute, Santa Barbara, Calif.
16. Self-chosen and strongly held as part of identity.
17. Keme Nzerem, "At School with the Shoe Bomber," *Guardian Unlimited* (February 28, 2002). Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,3604,659184,00.html>.
18. BBC News, "Who Is Richard Reid?" (December 28, 2001), Available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1731568.stm>.
19. We are implying not that every recruit to al-Qaida is brainwashed or coerced, but rather that many techniques used in classic, predatory thought reform are used by al-Qaida. Moreover, most of the recruiting techniques used by predatory totalist groups (e.g., cults) are shared by al-Qaida.

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