



Organizational Learning and Islamic Militancy

by Michael Kenney

Law enforcement may be able to exploit terrorists' inexperience to deter attacks.

Like other forms of criminal deviance, terrorism requires expertise that combines knowledge with practice.

Terrorists with knowledge and practical experience are more likely to carry out “successful” attacks than those lacking both of these essential qualities. However, some extremists are more informed — and experienced — than others.

Well-educated people do not necessarily make good terrorists. The medical doctors behind the failed 2007 car bombings in London and Glasgow, Scotland, lacked the bomb-making skills of the petty criminals who killed 56 people in the London Tube and bus bombings two years before. Terrorism is a craft involving its own particular set of skills and knowledge that practitioners must

develop to be good at it. This begs an important yet little understood question: How do terrorists get the experience — and expertise — they need to carry out acts of political violence?

To answer this question, I carried out five months of fieldwork on Islamic militancy in Britain and Spain, home to two of the most devastating terrorist attacks since Sept. 11.¹ I interviewed many militants, including former Guantánamo Bay detainees and members of al-Muhajiroun. I also interviewed dozens of law enforcement officials and intelligence analysts from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the London Metropolitan Police Service, the Spanish Civil Guard and other agencies. I complemented these interviews with news reports, studies and court documents from criminal proceedings in Britain and Spain.

While terrorists gain knowledge of their craft through formal study and practice, the method of diffusion depends on the knowledge being gained. Abstract technical knowledge, what the ancient Greeks called “*techne*,” can be codified in documents and communicated in “small, explicit, logical steps.”² Islamic terrorists gain the *techne* involved in bomb making and weapons handling by reading manuals and other documents that provide detailed, systematic instructions. Alternatively, they attend training camps where experienced practitioners teach these clear, logical and deadly steps as part of their curriculum. This technical knowledge is universal; it does not vary across local settings. Would-be terrorists may gain abstract knowledge for carrying out attacks at a training camp in Waziristan, Pakistan; a farmhouse outside Madrid, Spain; or from an online training manual.

Not all knowledge can be gained in this manner. Practitioners of a specific tradecraft, such as medicine, law enforcement or terrorism, often rely on intuitive, practical knowledge, what the Greeks called “*métis*.” Practitioners develop *métis* gradually, by engaging in the activity itself, rather than by formal study. Terrorists may learn the *techne* involved in building bombs, shooting weapons and other activities by studying manuals or receiving formal instruction. However, to develop hands-on competence they must put the book down and practice. Practice may not make perfect, but it does build skills. To become a competent terrorist, one must build bombs, fire guns or survey targets, gaining the practical “know-how” that is essential for carrying out successful attacks. Unlike *techne*, *métis* is not “settled knowledge”; it varies across local contexts.³ What works in one location may not work in another. Street smarts in London are different from “cave smarts” in

Afghanistan. The tradecraft needed to succeed in urban terrorism in the West is not easily gained from training in guerrilla warfare, even as taught at the best al-Qaida camps.

In fact, Islamic terrorists are often short on *métis*; the experiential knowledge needed to carry out attacks in local settings is far removed from their training sites. Even battle-hardened militants typically develop their violent *métis* by taking part in one or more jihads in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq or Kashmir. Militants’ combat knowledge, however useful in those locales, is essentially limited to

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guerrilla warfare. Such *métis* does not necessarily translate into effective urban terrorism in Western countries, where success requires local knowledge, street smarts and a talent for clandestine operations.

The Sept. 11 attacks provide a striking and diagnostic case. The hijackers Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar were veteran jihadists who trained in Afghanistan and fought in Bosnia. For all their training and combat experience, both militants were unprepared for their original roles as pilots in the operation. Renting an apartment in southern California, let alone learning English and completing pilot training,

proved a daunting task, requiring the help of English-speaking residents who knew the area. Not coincidentally, those recruited to replace the duo, Mohammed Atta, Marwan al Shehh and Ziad Jarrah, lived in Germany for years before joining al-Qaida. These “educated, technical men ... did not need to be told how to live in the West;” they already knew how.⁴ Atta and his colleagues drew on their English-speaking skills and experience from living in Germany to perform satisfactory, if imperfect, tradecraft in the operation.

Unlike the Sept. 11 hijackers, Mohammed Siddique Khan and his co-conspirators in the 2005 London bombings grew up in the country they attacked. Their knowledge of British culture and society and their natural command of English were instrumental in carrying out their suicide bombings. Two of the bombers, Khan and Shehzad Tanweer, received training in Pakistan. Yet any *techne* they gained there merely complemented the *métis* they already had from living in Britain for so long. The London bombers drew on their local knowledge and experience to move around the country and get the explosive materials they needed without being disrupted by law enforcement.

Similarly, the Madrid train bombers drew on their own *métis*, gained from living in Spain for many years, to carry out their attacks in 2004. Many conspirators, such as Jamal Ahmidan and Serhane ben Abdelmajid Fakhret, were originally from North Africa. Yet they settled permanently in Madrid and were fluent in Spanish, which helped them prepare for the operation. Other key participants, including José Emilio Suárez Trashorras, the former miner who provided access to the explosives, were natural born citizens who had lived in Spain their entire lives.

Related Research

A number of NIJ-funded studies have contributed to our understanding of how terrorists learn:

Brian Jackson led a team of RAND Corp. researchers who examined how several terrorist groups gather information and develop tactical innovations in their attacks.⁵ The study suggests that counterterrorism efforts become more effective as law enforcement officers assess and anticipate terrorists' efforts to change how they operate.

Mark Hamm drew on court documents from the American Terrorism Study and criminological literature on social learning to explore how terrorists carry out violent attacks.⁶

The study examined how certain opportunities and skills contributed to terrorists' ability to commit crimes. In other cases, events or lack of skill prevented planned crimes.

Other scholars have explored how terrorists train their supporters in the tactics and techniques of guerrilla warfare and terrorism.⁷ Combined with earlier literature on terrorism contagion⁸ and recent scholarship on suicide bombings,⁹ these studies are helping us develop more effective counterterrorism policies and practices, providing clues to short-circuit terrorists' learning process.

Ahmidan, Trashorras and others had another critical source of *métis*: criminal experience in drug trafficking. Ahmidan was a veteran hashish and Ecstasy smuggler who had previously killed a man. Rafa Zouhier was an experienced drug dealer who provided Ahmidan the connection to Trashorras, who had a history of hashish trafficking. All of these criminals drew on their contacts and practical knowledge of drug trafficking and explosives to play essential roles in the bombings.

As in the United States after Sept. 11, today in Britain and Spain it has become increasingly difficult for would-be terrorists to acquire the *métis* they need to carry out attacks. Counterterrorism agencies have cracked down on militants following

the London and Madrid bombings and other incidents. In recent years, law enforcement and intelligence officers in all three countries have created a hostile environment for Islamic terrorists, intercepting their communications, arresting them and disrupting their plots. Unlike *techne*, which can be gained from knowledge-based artifacts, *métis* is learned by doing. This presents militants with a dilemma. To develop hands-on knowledge for carrying out attacks, they must practice building bombs, using firearms and performing related activities. Yet in doing so, they expose themselves to potential surveillance and disruption by security officials.

The most important lesson is that terrorists' chance of exposure grows

as the counterterrorism environment around them becomes increasingly vigilant. The reason is simple: Lack of practice leads to a lack of *métis* that in turn leads to mistakes that alert law enforcement officers can detect. To remain below the radar of police officers and suspicious neighbors, militants have adopted security-enhancing measures. They may

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wait until the last day of training before allowing students to fire their weapons or detonate their bombs. These precautions help preserve security, but they do not allow participants to practice what they have learned. Yet gaining a feel or knack for terrorism comes from repeated practice and direct experience, not from abstract knowledge codified in documents, no matter how detailed their instructions and accurate their recipes.

Terrorists are not the only ones who rely on their practical knowledge of local areas. Law enforcement officers

draw on their own *métis*, developed from patrolling community beats, to identify and disrupt illicit activity. Law enforcement officers have detailed knowledge of local resources of interest to potential terrorists, including fertilizer suppliers, explosives manufacturers and gun dealers. Their routine policing activities and their contacts in the communities they serve also provide opportunities to note suspicious behavior among potential militants.¹⁰

Because they know when something is amiss in the neighborhood, local law enforcement officers play a critical role in counterterrorism. To improve their skills, officers must be able to recognize the warning signs of terrorism-related surveillance and other preparatory acts, such as building explosives. Dead flowers outside the covered window of an inner-city

apartment, the gradual lightening of a young man's hair color or apartment trash littered with empty containers of hydrogen peroxide are subtle signals. To the untrained eye these signs may not mean much, but to the knowing observer they can provide clues for identifying bomb-making laboratories. Law enforcement officers who can recognize and act on

these warning signs will make a valuable contribution to counterterrorism in the months and years ahead.

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For More Information

- Learn more at NIJ's terrorism Web page: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/topics/crime/terrorism/welcome.htm>.
- Read an *NIJ Journal* article about how domestic terrorists prepare for their attacks. See <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/journals/260/terrorist-behavior.htm>.



Terrorism studies was a topic at the 2009 NIJ Conference. To listen to the panel go to: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/journals/media.htm>.



Watch a short video of the author discussing his findings at the annual NIJ Conference: <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/journals/media.htm>.

Notes

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