

**PATHWAYS TO AND FROM VIOLENT  
EXTREMISM: THE CASE FOR SCIENCE-BASED  
FIELD RESEARCH Statement Before the Senate  
Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats &  
Capabilities, March 10, 2010**

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► **To cite this version:**

Scott Atran. PATHWAYS TO AND FROM VIOLENT EXTREMISM: THE CASE FOR SCIENCE-BASED FIELD RESEARCH Statement Before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats & Capabilities, March 10, 2010. 2010. ijn\_00505380

**HAL Id: ijn\_00505380**

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Preprint submitted on 23 Jul 2010

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**PATHWAYS TO AND FROM VIOLENT EXTREMISM: THE CASE FOR SCIENCE-BASED FIELD RESEARCH** [3.10.10]

By Scott Atran

**Statement Before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats & Capabilities**

March 10, 2010

**"Pathways to and From Violent Extremism:  
The Case for Science-Based Field Research"**

**A Statement by**

**Scott Atran**



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**[Scott Atran's Edge Bio Page](#)**

## **PATHWAYS TO AND FROM VIOLENT EXTREMISM: THE CASE FOR SCIENCE-BASED FIELD RESEARCH**

Chairman Nelson, Ranking Member LeMieux, and Senators, I appreciate your letting me, an anthropologist, relate my views on the U.S. government's strategy and efforts to counter violent extremism and radicalization and the military's role in these efforts. I've been with would-be martyrs and holy warriors from Morocco's Atlantic shore to Indonesia's outer islands, and from Gaza to Kashmir. My field experience and studies in diverse cultural settings inform my views.

This an apt moment for such a hearing, given the recent uptick in homegrown terror activities, the failed Christmas Day airliner attack, and further rooting of Al Qaeda's viral social movement in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, the Maghreb, and the worldwide web.

### **First of all, there is a deep lack of Field-Based Scientific Research on Pathways to and from Political and Group Violence. To be specific:**

- At present, we spend tens of billions of dollars to equip and protect our service members, but only fractions of that are spent on understanding the pathways to and from violent extremism, which maybe even more important for keeping our country safe and our service men and women out of harm's way.
- The concept of science-based field research — embedded in potential hotspots and open to public verification and replication, with clear ways and means to falsify what is wrong — is often misunderstood in Washington. Most legislators and policy makers think that we have a great deal of this type of research being undertaken and funded. We don't.
- If you want to be successful in the long run where it counts — in stopping the next and future generations of disaffected youth from finding their life's meaning in the thrill and adventure of joining their friends in taking on the world's mightiest power; if this committee is to be truly relevant in solving the radicalization problem that it poses, then you have to understand these pathways that take young people to and from political and group violence. Then, knowing these pathways, you can do what needs to be done.
- Quality field-based scientific research can help save lives and treasury. Here is how it works. With assistance from the Air Force Office of Scientific Research, Air Force Research Lab, the Army Research Office, the Office of Naval Research and the National Science Foundation, my associates and I put anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, mathematicians, and sometimes even physicists and chemists into interdisciplinary teams in a conflict region. We then begin to explore the nature of the conflict with leaders, community members, and youth. We follow up with an experimental design — which allows ready replication of initial results or falsification of our hypotheses — to understand pathways to and from violence.

### **Here are a few of our general findings on recent changes in paths to violent extremism:**

- As my colleague Juan Zarate described in his January 27 testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, as a result of formidable

U.S. military and intelligence efforts, Al Qaeda is on the ropes globally, faced with ever dwindling financial and popular support, and drastically diminished ability to hook up with other extremists worldwide, much less command and control them for major operations against us.

- The main security concern no longer comes from any organization, or from well-trained cadres of volunteers who typically had some advanced education, often in engineering and medical studies. The threat today is from a Qaeda –inspired viral social and political movement that abuses religion in the name of defending a purist form Sunni Islam, and which is particularly contagious among Muslim youth who are increasingly marginalized — economically, socially, politically — and are in transition stages in their lives, such as immigrants, students, and those in search of friends, mates and jobs.
- Economic globalization, which has led to greater access by humankind to material opportunity, has also led to a crisis, even collapse, of cultures, as people unmoored from millennial traditions flail about in search of a social identity. Today's most virulent terrorism is rooted in rootlessness and restlessness. This gives an opening for embrace by the radical fraternity that preaches the jihadi cause, whose oxygen is the publicity provided by global media. The Qaeda movement is largely a diaspora phenomenon of people who enlist, rather than are recruited, outside their country of origin.
- The widespread notion of a "clash of civilizations" along traditional historical "fault lines" is woefully misleading. Violent extremism represents a crash of traditional territorial cultures, not their resurgence. Individuals now mostly radicalize horizontally with their peers, rather than vertically through institutional leaders or organizational hierarchies. They do so mostly in small groups of friends — from the same neighborhood or social network — or even as loners who find common cause with a virtual internet community.
- Entry into the jihadi brotherhood is from the bottom up: from alienated and marginalized youth seeking out companionship, esteem, and meaning, but also the thrill of action, sense of empowerment, and glory in fighting the world's most powerful nation and army. In an ongoing study for the Army, my colleague Marc Sageman finds that popular jihadi Internet Imams, like Anwar al-Awlaki, are important not because they brainwash, command, or even guide others to actions and targets. Rather, popular radical Imams serve as "attractors" whose message and presence draws into line a searching soul who has already pretty much chosen his own path. Maj. Hassan, for example, sent over a score of email messages to Awlaki but received only two back, with no operational implications.
- Gallup and Pew surveys indicate that perhaps 7 percent of the world's Muslim population — nearly 100 million people — sympathize with jihadi aspirations. But of those many millions, only a few thousands actually commit to violence. Our data show that a reliable predictor of whether or not someone joins the Jihad is being a member of an action-oriented group of friends. It's surprising how many soccer buddies join together.
- The boundaries of the newer terrorist networks are very loose and fluid, and the internet now allows anyone who wishes to become a terrorist to become one, anywhere, anytime. More and more, terror networks are intertwined with petty criminal networks: drug

trafficking, stolen cars, credit card fraud, and the like. This development is in part an unintended consequence of two of our successes: financial policing forced would-be terrorists to rely on local, low-cost, informal, underground methods of financing; and disruption of their organizations meant that terrorists would have to find new clandestine means for acquiring weapons and managing logistics.

- Although lack of economic opportunity often reliably leads to criminality, it turns out that some criminal youth really don't want to be criminals after all. Given half a chance to take up a moral cause, they can be even more altruistically prone than others to give up their lives for their comrades and cause. This is one indication — and our research reveals others — that economic opportunities alone may not turn people away from the path to political violence. (Indeed, material incentives, whether "carrots" or "sticks," can even backfire when they threaten core values, as our recent research has shown for Israel, Palestine, Indonesia, and Iran). Rather, youth must be given hopes and dreams of achievement, and plausible means to realize such hopes and dreams.

- Therefore, a coherent program to counter extremist violence should focus on peer-to-peer efforts, not elders trying to teach youth about moderation or the Koran. It will take mobilizing the purpose-seeking, risk-taking, adventurous spirit of youth for heroic action. Today, "Happiness is martyrdom" can be as emotionally contagious to kids in a forlorn urban African neighborhood or to a lost youth on the Internet as "Yes, we can." That is a stunning and far-reaching development that we must learn to steer in the right direction.

#### **Why Present U.S Efforts to Counter Radicalization Abroad Fall Short:**

- For two main reasons: We are fixated on technology and technological success, and we have no sustained or systematic approach to field-based social understanding of our adversaries' motivation, intent, will, and the dreams that drive their strategic vision, however strange those dreams and vision may seem to us.

- On the intelligence side, the Christmas Day bombing attempt was a deep failing caused, in part, by too great a reliance on technology to the detriment of social intelligence. Computers, and the stochastic models and algorithms they use, are not particularly well suited to pick up the significance of the almost unimaginable psychological effort it took for one of the most respected men in a nation to swallow his pride and love of family and walk into an American embassy to say that his son was being dangerously radicalized. Widgets — for which there are billions of dollars — cannot do the job of socially sensitive thinkers — for whom there is relatively little concrete support — in creating alliances, leveraging non military advantages, reading intentions, building trust, changing opinions, managing perceptions, and empathizing (though not necessarily sympathizing) with others so as to understand, and change, what moves them to do what they do.

- On the military side, career advancement in the armed forces privileges operational prowess and combat experience, which are necessary to gain victory in battles. But different abilities also may be necessary for winning without having to fight, or for ending a war in Lincoln's definitive sense of destroying enemies by making them into friends. After all, as George Marshall well understood, that is what American efforts at democratization abroad are ultimately about.

Soldiers continue to be trained and rewarded as operators and combat organizers, but they are not as adequately trained for the political mission they are now being asked to carry out, which requires cultural and psychological expertise at being social mediators, managers and movers. As one Air Force General said to me: "I was trained for Ds — defeat, destroy, devastate — now I'm told we have responsibility for the Rs — rebuild, reform, renew. Well, I was never trained for that, so what the Hell am I supposed to do? Destroy in just the right way to rebuild?"

- A serious problem in our cooperation with intelligence and military counterparts in several countries — for example, Morocco, Egypt, Uzbekistan — is that they have trouble even recognizing they have homegrown problems of radicalization that are not due to the West or to some nebulous "Jihad International."
- We're winning against Al Qaeda and its associates in places where antiterrorism efforts are local and built on an understanding that the ties binding terrorist networks today are more about social connections than political or ideological. I recently argued in the *New York Times* ("To Beat Al Qaeda, Look to the East," Dec. 13, 2009) that using knowledge, friendship, kinship and discipleship has been very successful in Southeast Asia, and shows promise for Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in its January 20, 2010 report on "[Al Qaeda in Yemen and Somalia](#)" also recommends, as part of U.S. strategy, the understanding that I outlined, although I believe that more research is needed there to support that recommendation.

**At home, efforts by intelligence and law enforcement to counter radicalization have been minimally disruptive of society and effective, and could better inform efforts abroad.**

- Success at home is greatly facilitated by the fact that the overwhelming majority of Muslim immigrants into the United States, unlike in Europe, become rapidly and thoroughly integrated into mainstream American society. Immigrant Muslims generally buy into the American dream and succeed in education, in the economy, and in maintaining a strong, composite sense of both Muslim and American identity.
- The approach of the NYPD, informed by its fine intelligence analysis unit and keen sensitivity to the city's diverse cultural makeup, is exemplary. Recent proposals by the FBI's Community Relations Unit hold reasonable promise for preventing radicalization by building resilience in potential hotspot communities. I have asked the FBI to provide a summary of its program to you, and it is has been made available as a handout.
- Recent community outreach programs in the UK, the Netherlands, and Denmark are trying to build resilience within their Muslim communities to radicalization, and they are experimenting with a variety of different local initiatives to see what works best. A drawback is that in some cases they use anti-democratic interlocutors (Salafis and Wahhabis) to reach out and bring back would-be jihadis into the non-violent fold. That has given Islamist groups prestige in the community and validated them to some degree.
- Yet, in some Muslim countries, like Indonesia and Saudi Arabia,

Salafi and Wahhabi initiatives have been the most effective at drawing young Muslims back from violence.

- Turkey's approach, like that of Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, treats jihadi terrorism more as an issue of public health and community responsibility than as a criminal or military matter. That approach appears to be producing positive results.

### **Involve Social Scientists, but Not In Theater**

- There is a pressing need for fieldwork by social scientists in actual and potential conflict zones. There is also compelling case for involving social scientists in helping to form cultural and social awareness in the military theater. Nevertheless, social scientists should not be directly embedded with military units in theater.

- For example, I do not think that efforts like the Human Terrain System experiment in Afghanistan are all that promising. It is the infantry units themselves that should be trained before they go in theater to be culturally sensitive, and not have to rely on temporarily embedded "combat ethnographers" who move from unit to unit, thus undoing the personal connections that may have made them effective with the local population by providing medical aid and other needed non military services.

- More important for our nation, such efforts as these, small as they are, are potentially quite counterproductive. They only further alienate most social science academics from the military or, indeed, from any involvement in U.S. policy decision making that involves projection of power or conflict. The military and cultural reality of the terrain may favor having embedded social scientists be uniformed and armed (in part, because unarmed Western civilians would more likely draw fire as high-value targets). But the possibility that social scientists themselves would have to fire their weapons and perhaps kill local people — indeed, the mere sight of armed and uniformed American social scientists in a foreign theater — is guaranteed to engender academia's deep hostility.

- Ever since the Vietnam War, there has been mutual antipathy and antagonism between most academic social science — at least at the outstanding universities — and U.S. military operations and military-related policymaking. But unlike the case with the Vietnam War, many social scientists today believe that violent extremism is a danger that needs to be dealt with. Training and rewarding soldiers for being culturally knowledgeable and socially savvy — which goes beyond learning a language or studying a checklist of cultural preferences and habits — could be so much more effective for achieving our country's political and military mission. Moreover, involvement of top social scientists in deliberations such as these, and in publicly transparent field projects, could help heal the divide between some of our best thinkers and policymakers and operators.

### **A Coherent Program to Counter Violent Extremism Should Focus On:**

- Preventing radicalization to violence — especially among youth and the next generation.
- Countering radicalization that has progressed to violence, by de-

coupling the Qaeda movement from the local and cultural grievances and national movements that Qaeda tries to co-opt. For example, the Taliban and Somalia's Islamic Courts, unlike Al Qaeda, are interested in their homeland, not ours, and all need to be dealt with very differently.

- De-radicalizing those who have committed to violence. Although a "public health" approach to radicalization would be hard to legally implement in the USA, it has been part of the apparent success of the de-radicalization program initiated by General Douglas Stone in Iraqi prisons, which gives families and communities responsibility for keeping former detainees out of trouble. In a reversal of the policies that led to the abuses of Abu Ghraib, that program has seriously addressed the cultural sensitivities of detainees and respect for their persons.

### **Summary: De-radicalization, like Radicalization, is Better from Bottom Up than Top Down**

When you look at young people like the ones who grew up to blow up trains in Madrid in 2004, carried out the slaughter on the London underground in 2005, hoped to blast airliners out of the sky en route to the United States in 2006 and 2009, and journeyed far to die killing infidels in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen or Somalia; when you look at whom they idolize, how they organize, what bonds them and what drives them; then you see that what inspires the most lethal terrorists in the world today is not so much the Koran or religious teachings as a thrilling cause and call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends, and through friends, eternal respect and remembrance in the wider world that they will never live to enjoy.

Our data show that most young people who join the jihad had a moderate and mostly secular education to begin with, rather than a radical religious one. And where in modern society do you find young people who hang on the words of older educators and "moderates"? Youth generally favors actions, not words, and challenge, not calm. That's a big reason so many who are bored, underemployed, overqualified, and underwhelmed by hopes for the future turn on to jihad with their friends. Jihad is an egalitarian, equal-opportunity employer (at least for boys, but girls are web-surfing into the act): fraternal, fast-breaking, thrilling, glorious, and cool. Anyone is welcome to try his hand at slicing off the head of Goliath with a paper cutter.

If we can discredit their vicious idols (show how these bring murder and mayhem to their own people) and give these youth new heroes who speak to their hopes rather than just to ours, then we've got a much better shot at slowing the spread of jihad to the next generation than we do just with bullets and bombs. And if we can de-sensationalize terrorist actions, like suicide bombings, and reduce their fame (don't help advertise them or broadcast our hysterical response, for publicity is the oxygen of terrorism), the thrill will die down. As Saudi Arabia's General Khaled Alhumaidan said to me in Riyadh: "The front is in our neighborhoods but the battle is the silver screen. If it doesn't make it to the 6'oclock news, then Al Qaeda is not interested." Thus, the terrorist agenda could well extinguish itself altogether, doused by its own cold raw truth: it has no life to offer. This path to glory leads only to ashes and rot.

In the long run, perhaps the most important anti-terrorism measure of all is to provide alternative heroes and hopes that are more enticing and empowering than any moral lessons or material offerings. Jobs that relieve the terrible boredom and inactivity of immigrant youth in Europe, and with underemployed throughout much of the Muslim world, cannot alone offset the alluring stimulation of playing at war in contexts of continued cultural and political alienation and little sense of shared

aspirations and destiny. It is also important to provide alternate local networks and chat rooms that speak to the inherent idealism, sense of risk and adventure, and need for peer approval that young people everywhere tend towards. It even could be a 21st-century version of what the Boy Scouts and high school football teams did for immigrants and potentially troublesome youth as America urbanized a century ago. Ask any cop on the beat: those things work. But it has to be done with the input and insight of local communities or it won't work: de-radicalization, like radicalization itself, best engages from the bottom up, not from the top down.

In sum, there are many millions of people who express sympathy with Al Qaeda or other forms of violent political expression that support terrorism. They are stimulated by a massive, media-driven global political awakening which, for the first time in human history, can "instantly" connect anyone, anywhere to a common cause — provided the message that drives that cause is simple enough not to require much cultural context to understand it: for example, the West is everywhere assaulting Muslims, and Jihad is the only the way to permanently resolve glaring problems caused by this global injustice.

Consider the parable told by the substitute Imam at the Al Ouds Mosque in Hamburg, where the 9/11 bomber pilots hung out, when Marc Sageman and I asked him "Why did they do it?"

"There were two rams, one with horns and one without. The one with horns butted his head against the defenseless one. In the next world, Allah switched the horns from one ram to the other, so justice could prevail."

"Justice" ('adl in Arabic) is the watchword of Jihad. Thunderously simple. When justice and Jihad and are joined to "change" — the elemental soundbite of our age — and oxygenated by the publicity given to spectacular acts of violence, then the mix becomes heady and potent.

Young people constantly see and discuss among themselves images of war and injustice against "our people," become morally outraged (especially if injustice resonates personally, which is more of a problem abroad than at home), and dream of a war for justice that gives their friendship cause. But of the millions who sympathize with the jihadi cause, only some thousands show willingness to actually commit violence. They almost invariably go on to violence in small groups of volunteers consisting mostly of friends and some kin within specific "scenes": neighborhoods, schools (classes, dorms), workplaces, common leisure activities (soccer, study group, barbershop, café) and, increasingly, online chat-rooms.

A key problem with proposals on what to do about radicalization to violent extremism is lack of field experience with the context-sensitive processes of selection into violence within these scenes. To understand and manage the local pathways to and from violent extremism requires science-based field research that is open to public verification and replicable, with clear ways and means to falsify what is wrong so as to better and better approximate what is truly right.

I am at your disposal to work with you on understanding how these processes and pathways to radicalization operate in the field in potential conflict regions around the world.

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