

CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE

This column incorrectly identified researcher Eli Berman as a political scientist at the University of California at Santa Barbara. He is an economics professor at UC-San Diego.

How Terrorist Organizations Work Like Clubs

By Shankar Vedantam

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Days before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, [Osama bin Laden](#) left his compound in Kandahar in Afghanistan and headed into the mountains. His driver, [Salim Ahmed Hamdan](#), traveled with him. As U.S. and Northern Alliance forces stood poised to capture Kandahar a few months later, bin Laden told Hamdan to evacuate his family. Hamdan's wife was eight months pregnant at the time, and Hamdan drove her and his infant daughter to the Pakistani border.

It was on his way back that Hamdan was captured by Northern Alliance warlords, said Jonathan Mahler, an author who has pieced together the events in his upcoming book, "The Challenge: Hamdan v. Rumsfeld and the Fight Over Presidential Power." Hamdan's captors found two surface-to-air missiles in the trunk of his car. They turned him over to the Americans and pocketed a bounty of \$5,000.

Hamdan recently became the first detainee at [Guantanamo Bay](#) to face trial. Government and defense lawyers are arguing about Hamdan's significance in [al-Qaeda](#) and the extent of his knowledge of the group's activities, but it is the facts the lawyers agree on that raise an interesting question for anyone who studies terrorist groups.

Hamdan joined bin Laden after his plan to go to join a jihad in Tajikistan hit a snag. For years, he ferried al-Qaeda's leader to camps and news conferences and was often bored, according to the testimony of his interrogators. Mahler, who interviewed Hamdan's family and attorneys, his [FBI](#) interrogators, and the man who recruited Hamdan for jihad, said bin Laden's driver was not particularly religious -- for a poor man from Yemen, jihad was a career move as much as a religious quest.

The interesting question is why Hamdan and other minor cogs in terrorist groups who have access to information that the United States would gladly pay for rarely come forward to share it. Dozens of other Hamdans today probably have leads on the whereabouts of bin Laden and other terrorist leaders. Given that some of these potential informers are bound to be poor and uneducated, why don't they defect, take the money and run?

"The generic problem is the question of why people having useful knowledge can't be bribed to reveal it," said David Laitin, a political scientist at [Stanford University](#) who has studied why terrorist groups that specialize in suicide attacks are so rarely undermined by defectors and turncoats.

Along with Eli Berman, a political scientist at the [University of California at Santa Barbara](#), Laitin has developed a theory to explain why the Hamdans of the world tend to stay loyal to the bin Ladens.

Laitin and Berman argue that it is because a group such as al-Qaeda is really an exclusive club.

Most people think of clubs as recreational groups, but Laitin and Berman are using a more subtle definition. Clubs are groups that tend to be selective about their members. Unlike political parties and book-reading groups, which allow anyone to join, clubs make it difficult for people to sign up. And once admitted, members must make personal sacrifices to stay. In the case of an exclusive golf club, the sacrifice might involve paying

sizable dues. In the case of some religious orders, would-be members might have to go through lengthy periods of initiation.

The "club model" of terrorism explains why cogs such as Hamdan stay loyal. Across all kinds of clubs, when members make sacrifices, they are much more likely to become intensely loyal to fellow members. Berman and Laitin think this is because the sacrifices that members make to join a club reduce their value outside the club. If you devote years to learning a religious text, that knowledge can give you social cachet within your club, but your effort counts for little outside the club.

"If you have to spend your life reading the Talmud, you are not very good at software," Laitin said. "The sacrifices get you social welfare, but if you took a bribe, your value outside of that club would be minuscule."

Whereas software engineers who "defect" from one company to another carry their value with them -- the skills are transferable -- al-Qaeda foot soldiers might enjoy high regard within that club but be worthless outside it. This may help explain why religious cults and organized-crime syndicates reward members for acquiring arcane cultural, scriptural and linguistic skills -- these are skills that cannot be easily transferred to the outside world.

In a detailed analysis of terrorist attacks in Israel, Laitin and Berman showed that the degree of "clubbiness" of terrorist groups predicted how violent they would be, especially when it came to suicide attacks: Elite organizations demanded greater sacrifices and elicited greater loyalty, and it was these groups that could plan and carry out the most lethal attacks with little fear of betrayal.

The political scientists are not suggesting for a second that clubs are inherently violent -- most, in fact, are harmless. But what Laitin and Berman are suggesting is that clubs offer the kind of organizational structure that happens to provide the secrecy and loyalty needed to run a terrorist group.

What does this research mean for counterinsurgency efforts and fighting terrorism? Laitin argued that nations that compete with terrorist organizations to provide social benefits make it less likely that their citizens will be willing to make great sacrifices to join clubs that seek to destroy them.

When your software industry takes off, in other words, fewer people need to seek out the social welfare benefits that joining the local terrorist club offers.

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