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# The Missing Martyrs

*Why There Are So Few  
Muslim Terrorists*



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## CHAPTER 1



# Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists

The rental car rolled onto the sidewalk behind the registrar's office and drove slowly down the brick path between a dining hall and the English Department, a few steps from my office. "Beyond Time," an upbeat German dance song, played in the car's stereo. The driver, Mohammad Taheri-Azar, had just graduated from the University of North Carolina three months earlier, so he knew the campus well. Beyond the dining hall was a plaza known as the Pit, where students were hanging out at lunchtime on a warm winter day in early 2006. Taheri-Azar planned to kill as many of them as possible.<sup>1</sup>

He brought no weapons except a knife, some pepper spray, and the four-wheel-drive sports utility vehicle he had rented in order to run people over without getting stuck on their bodies. When he reached the Pit, Taheri-Azar accelerated and swerved to hit people as they scattered out of his way. His fender clipped several students, and several more rolled over his hood and off the windshield. One of them happened to be a graduate instructor on his way to teach the university's course on national and international security. Taheri-Azar turned left at the end of the plaza, hit another

couple of students in front of the library, then sped off campus just beneath my office window.

On Franklin Street, Taheri-Azar slowed down and merged into city traffic. He drove a mile to the east, down the hill that gave Chapel Hill its name, and thought about heading for the highway. Instead, he pulled over in a calm residential neighborhood, parked, and called 911 on his cell phone. "Sir, I just hit several people with a vehicle," he told the operator. "I don't have any weapons or anything on me, you can come arrest me now." Why did you do this? the operator asked. "Really, it's to punish the government of the United States for their actions around the world." So you did this to punish the government? "Yes, sir." Following the operator's instructions, he placed his phone on the hood of the car and put his hands on his head as police officers arrived.<sup>2</sup>

Before leaving his apartment that morning, Taheri-Azar had left a letter on his bed explaining his action more fully, along with a computer memory card "so the police could have an electronic version":

Due to the killing of believing men and women under the direction of the United States government, I have decided to take advantage of my presence on United States soil on Friday, March 3, 2006, to take the lives of as many Americans and American sympathizers as I can in order to punish the United States for their immoral actions around the world.

In the Quran, Allah states that the believing men and women have permission to murder anyone responsible for the killing of other believing men and women. I know that the Quran is a legitimate and authoritative holy scripture since it is completely validated by modern science and also mathematically encoded with the number 19 beyond human ability. After extensive contemplation and reflection, I have made the decision to exercise the right of violent retaliation that Allah has given me to the fullest extent to which I am capable at present.

I have chosen the particular location on the University campus as my target since I know there is a high likelihood that I will kill several people before being

killed myself or jailed and sent to prison if Allah wills. Allah's commandments are never to be questioned and all of Allah's commandments must be obeyed.<sup>3</sup>

From prison, Taheri-Azar wrote that "I turned myself in so that the American public would know exactly why the attack took place—with the higher goal of encouraging them to force the United States government to leave all Islamic territories in the Middle East to take care of themselves and hence unoccupy the territories of Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Afghanistan by completely removing any military presence of United States forces from those territories and any other Islamic territories not mentioned, including those in Africa."

Nine people suffered broken bones and other injuries that day. Fortunately, Taheri-Azar didn't kill anybody, though the toll might have been higher if Taheri-Azar's earlier plots hadn't fallen through. Initially, he planned to join insurgents in Afghanistan or Iraq but was discouraged by visa restrictions on travel to those countries. Then he looked into joining the air force and dropping a nuclear bomb on Washington, D.C., but he realized that his eyesight was too poor to qualify to be a military pilot. Turning closer to home, Taheri-Azar considered shooting people randomly at the university—his letters from prison indicate that he thought about targeting the dining hall where I often eat lunch.

In the weeks before his attack, Taheri-Azar test-fired a laser-sighted handgun at a nearby shooting range but was told that he couldn't buy it without a permit. Taheri-Azar could have purchased a rifle on the spot, if he had completed some federal paperwork, but he had his heart set on a Glock pistol. Later, at his apartment, he started to fill out the permit application—then gave up when he found that he would need three friends to attest to his good moral character. "The process of receiving a permit for a handgun in this city is highly restricted and out of my reach at the present," Taheri-Azar complained in the letter he left on his bed

for the police. Months later, in prison, he rationalized his decision. “The gun may have malfunctioned and acquiring one would have attracted attention to me from the FBI in all likelihood, which could have foiled any attack plans.” Taheri-Azar could be the only terrorist in the world ever deterred by gun-control laws.<sup>4</sup>

Taheri-Azar’s incompetence as a terrorist is bewildering. Surely someone who was willing to kill and die for his cause, spending months contemplating the attack, could have found a more effective way to kill people. Why wasn’t he able to obtain a firearm or improvise an explosive device or try any of the hundreds of murderous schemes that we all know from movies, television shows, and the Internet, not to mention the news? And once Taheri-Azar decided to run people over with a car, why did he pick a site with so little room to accelerate?

Even more bewildering is the fact that we don’t see more terrorism of this sort. If every car is a potential weapon, why aren’t there more automotive attacks? Car bombs have been around since the 1920s, when the first one was detonated on Wall Street in New York City, but they require a fair bit of skill. Drive-through murder, on the other hand, takes very little skill at all. People have been killing people with cars ever since the automobile was invented, and the political use of automotive assault was immortalized in a famous film, *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), which shows two Algerian revolutionaries driving into a bus-stand full of French settlers. Yet very few people resort to this accessible form of terrorism. In the United States, for example, out of several million Muslims, it appears that Taheri-Azar was the first to attempt this sort of attack. He was followed by two possible copycats. In addition to cars, plenty of other terrorist weapons are readily available. One manual for Islamist terrorists, published online in 2006, listed 14 “simple tools” that “are easy to use and available for anyone who wants to fight the occupying enemy,” including “running over someone with a car” (number 14) and “setting fire to homes or rooms at sleep time” (number 10).<sup>5</sup>

If terrorist methods are as widely available as automobiles, why are there so few Islamist terrorists? In light of the death and devastation that terrorists have wrought, the question may seem absurd. But if there are more than a billion Muslims in the world, many of whom supposedly hate the West and desire martyrdom, why don't we see terrorist attacks everywhere, every day?

Islamist terrorists ask these questions too. In their view, the West is engaged in a massive assault on Muslim societies and has been for generations. This assault involves military invasions, political domination, economic dependence, and cultural decadence, and is reaching new heights of aggression each year. Islamists offer a solution: the establishment of Islamic government. Revolutionary Islamists offer a strategy to achieve Islamic government: armed insurrection. Terrorist revolutionaries offer a tactic to trigger insurrection: attacks on civilians. These attacks are intended to demoralize the enemy, build Muslims' self-confidence, and escalate conflict, leading Muslims to realize that armed insurrection is the sole path to defend Islam.

But Islamist terrorists worry that things haven't worked out as planned. Acts of terrorism have not led Muslims to revolt. Leading terrorists wonder aloud, Why aren't more Muslims resisting the onslaught of the West? What more provocations do they need before they heed the call to arms?

The world's most notorious Islamist terrorists have all denounced their fellow Muslims for their passivity. Usama Bin Ladin of al-Qaida, the global terrorist organization, frequently sounded this theme. "Each day, the sheep in the flock hope that the wolves will stop killing them, but their prayers go unanswered," he declared in May 2008. "Can any rational person fail to see how they are misguided in hoping for this? This is our own state of affairs." Bin Ladin and Ayman Zawahiri, the number two leader in al-Qaida, have tried to infuse their statements with a triumphal,

inspirational tone, but their disappointment shows through. “There is no excuse for anyone today to stay behind the battle,” Zawahiri lectured in a video released on the Internet in 2007. “We continue to be prisoners restrained by the shackles of [mainstream Islamic] organizations and foundations from entering the field of battle. We must destroy every shackle which stands between us and our performing this personal duty.”<sup>6</sup>

An al-Qaida recruitment video from 2008 opens with this lament:

My brother in Allah, tell me, when will you become angry?  
If our sacred things are violated, and our landmarks are demolished, and you didn't become angry;  
If our chivalry is killed, and our dignity is trampled on, and our world ends, and you didn't become angry;  
So tell me, when will you become angry?...  
I saw death erected above our heads. And you didn't become angry. So be frank with me, without embarrassment: to which ummah [religious community] do you belong?  
If what you suffer, what we suffer, doesn't make you want revenge, then don't bother.  
Because you're not ours, nor one of us, nor do you belong to the world of man.  
So live as a rabbit, and die as a rabbit.<sup>7</sup>

You are scared like a rabbit, al-Qaida tells Muslims. You are not human if you fail to join us. Other terrorists have issued similar insults in their attempt to goad Muslims into revolutionary activity. “What is wrong with the Muslim Ummah today?” the Pakistani militant group Harakat ul-Mujahideen complained on its website. “When the Kuffar [non-Muslims] lay their hands on their daughters, the Muslims do not raise even a finger to help them!” The local al-Qaida affiliate in Saudi Arabia declared, “We are most amazed that the community of Islam is still asleep and heedless while its children are being wiped out and killed everywhere and its land is being diminished every day, God help us. Islam is the faith of unity and cooperation, and it commands us to assist Muslims whether they are oppressors or oppressed.



Oh, brother in religion, why have you quit supporting Islam and its people?” Abu Musab al-Suri, a widely read strategist of Islamist revolution, called it “regrettable” that so few Muslims, only one in a million, have committed themselves to jihad. Mulla Dadullah, an Afghan Taliban commander, quoted a statement of the Prophet Muhammad in a video interview released by al-Qaida in 2006: “This is what the Messenger (peace be upon him) mentioned about the weakness of the Muslims against the non-believers in the last days. ‘In those days, you are numerous, but you are like the scum of the flood, and the cause of all that is the love of this world and hatred of death.’” This sums up the terrorists’ main challenge: too many Muslims are “scum” who love this world and refuse to risk martyrdom.<sup>8</sup>

Proponents of violent jihad have insulted and guilt-tripped their fellow Muslims for decades. Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian revivalist who inspired a generation of Islamic movements, went so far as to declare in the 1960s that “the Muslim community has been extinct for centuries.” Today’s Muslims do not deserve to be called Muslims, he insisted, because they have veered from the principles of Islam. Only a revolution that establishes Islamic government will entitle Muslims to call themselves “believers.”<sup>9</sup>

Qutb’s exhortations treated revolutionary jihad as a collective duty of the community of Muslims. By the 1980s, however, Islamist militants had honed their religious judgments to a finer point. “Today, jihad is an individual duty of every Muslim,” wrote Abd al-Salam Faraj, chief ideologue of the group that assassinated Egyptian president Anwar Sadat in 1981. This obligation cannot be fulfilled through peaceful means, he asserted, but only through “confrontation and blood.” Abdullah Azzam, one of the chief organizers of the pan-Islamic jihad against the Soviets in Afghanistan, called participation in this battle—actually going to fight, he specified, not just sending money—an individual duty that is “incumbent upon every Muslim on earth until the duty is complete and

the Russians and communists are expelled from Afghanistan. This sin weighs on the necks of everybody.” In 1998, Bin Ladin and colleagues used similar language in declaring war on the United States: “The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies—civilians and military—is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it.”<sup>10</sup>

These revolutionaries do not mind being called terrorists. Azzam defined his activities in these terms in a speech in the 1980s that was included in an al-Qaida recruitment video in early 2001: “We are terrorists, and terrorism is our friend and companion. Let the West and East know that we are terrorists and that we are terrifying as well. We shall do our best in preparing to terrorize God’s enemy and our own. Thus terrorism is an obligation in God’s religion.” Bin Ladin adopted the same approach. “If killing those that kill our sons is terrorism, then let history witness that we are terrorists,” he told an al-Jazeera reporter soon after 9/11. Many Islamist revolutionaries continue to identify themselves as *irhabiyyun*, Arabic for terrorists. One of the myriad “poems for jihadists” circulating on the Internet repeats over and over, “I am a terrorist. I am a terrorist.” Al-Muhajiroun, a British group that allied itself with al-Qaida, declared that “whoever denies that terrorism is part of Islam is *kafir* [that is, not truly Muslim].” An al-Qaida booklet in early 2008 noted that the term “terrorist” is used as an insult against Muslims. Nonetheless, the author concluded, “A fighter [*mujahid*] in the path of God, seeking to exalt the word of God, is indeed a terrorist toward the enemies of God who seek to eradicate the religion [of Islam] and occupy its sacred places, for he terrorizes and scares them and strikes fear in their hearts to prevent their misdeeds and repel them from Muslim lands, for terrorism is a goal, even a duty, of Muslims, because it is among the causes of victory over the enemies.” Not every Islamist revolutionary accepts the label of terrorist, but enough do to justify our use of the term.<sup>11</sup>

For several decades now, Islamist terrorists have called it a duty for Muslims to engage in armed jihad—against their own rulers, against the Soviets, and later against the Americans. Tens of thousands have obeyed, perhaps as many as 100,000 over the past quarter century, according to U.S. government estimates of the size of terrorist groups. This is a significant number of potentially violent militants, even if most of them received little serious training and subsequently dropped out of the militant movement. At the same time, more than a billion Muslims—well over 99 percent—ignored the call to action. This is typical for revolutionary movements of all sorts, of course—few revolutionaries ever manage to recruit more than a small portion of their target populations. Leftist terrorists such as the Weathermen in the United States, the Red Army Faction in West Germany, and the Red Brigades in Italy were even less successful at recruiting, even at their height in the 1970s and 1980s. Among terrorist groups, the most effective recruiters tend to be territorially based movements such as the Irish Republican Army, the Basque Homeland and Freedom group ETA, or the Palestinian group Hamas, whose military wing is said to have grown since its takeover in Gaza to approximately 1 in 100 residents. Global Islamist terrorists have managed to recruit fewer than 1 in 15,000 Muslims over the past quarter century and fewer than 1 in 100,000 Muslims since 9/11.<sup>12</sup>

Recruitment difficulties have created a bottleneck for Islamist terrorists' signature tactic, suicide bombing. These organizations often claim that they have waiting lists of volunteers eager to serve as martyrs, but the scale of these waiting lists appears not to be very large. Al-Qaida organizer Khalid Sheikh Mohammed made this point unintentionally during a 2002 interview, several months before his capture by American and Pakistani forces. Mohammed bragged about al-Qaida's ability to recruit volunteers for "martyrdom missions," as Islamist terrorists call suicide attacks. "We

were never short of potential martyrs. Indeed, we have a department called the Department of Martyrs.” “Is it still active?” asked Yosri Fouda, an al-Jazeera reporter who had been led, blindfolded, to Mohammed’s apartment in Karachi, Pakistan. “Yes it is, and it always will be as long as we are in jihad against the infidels and the Zionists. We have scores of volunteers. Our problem at the time was to select suitable people who were familiar with the West.” Notice the scale here: “scores,” not hundreds, much less thousands—and most of them were not deemed suitable for terrorist missions in the West. After Mohammed’s capture and “enhanced interrogation” by the Central Intelligence Agency—using methods that the U.S. government had denounced for decades as torture—federal officials testified that Mohammed had trained 39 operatives in all for suicide operations and that the 2001 attacks involved only 19 hijackers “because that was the maximum number of operatives that Sheikh Mohammed was able to find and send to the U.S. before 9/11.” According to a top White House counterterrorism official, the initial plans for 9/11 called for a simultaneous attack on the West Coast of the United States, but al-Qaida could not find enough qualified people to carry it out. Mohammed’s claim that al-Qaida was “never short of potential martyrs” seems to have been false bravura.<sup>13</sup>

Since 9/11, with al-Qaida and its allies under pressure all over the world, the scale of terrorist recruitment has been further reduced. During five years of Taliban rule, 10,000 to 20,000 recruits passed through terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, according to U.S. officials. Since 9/11, the scale of terrorist training has dropped by 90 percent. The largest concentration of terrorist camps in the world, in the frontier regions of northwestern Pakistan, has trained fewer than 2,000 militants. The biggest single camp in the region consisted of approximately 250 recruits, who were featured in a “graduation ceremony” covered by Pakistani television stations that had been invited by the local Taliban. Other

Taliban have spoken of an early camp, disbanded in late 2002, that trained as many as 200 militants. However, U.S. and Pakistani intelligence officials say that most of the camps in the region consist of only one dozen to three dozen men. If the camps were any larger, they would be easy targets for American satellite surveillance and missile attacks. In Somalia, another site of terrorist training, intelligence officials place the number of foreign fighters at even lower levels, from a few dozen to a few hundred in total.<sup>14</sup>

Islamist terrorists have found it especially hard to recruit in the United States. Al-Qaida's leaders have encouraged American Muslims to attack the United States from within, and the American government has identified the possibility of domestic Islamist terrorism as a serious threat. In early 2003, for example, Robert Mueller, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, told Congress that "FBI investigations have revealed militant Islamics [*sic*] in the US. We strongly suspect that several hundred of these extremists are linked to al-Qaeda." ("Islamics" is a law-enforcement term for Muslims.) Alarmists outside of government have implied that the number of Muslim terrorists in the United States is even larger, perhaps in the thousands. However, all of these estimates must be regarded as exaggerations. By the U.S. Department of Justice's own accounts, approximately a dozen people in the country were convicted in the five years after 9/11 for having links with al-Qaida. During this period, fewer than 40 Muslim-Americans planned or carried out acts of domestic terrorism, according to an extensive search of news reports and legal proceedings that I conducted with David Schanzer and Ebrahim Moosa of Duke University. None of these attacks was found to be associated with al-Qaida. A month after Taheri-Azar's attack in Chapel Hill, Mueller visited North Carolina and warned of Islamist violence "all over the country." Fortunately, that prediction was wrong.<sup>15</sup>

To put this in context: out of more than 140,000 murders in the United States since 9/11—more than 15,000 each year, down

from 24,000 in the early 1990s—Islamist terrorists accounted for fewer than three dozen deaths by the end of 2010. Part of the credit for this good fortune is due to the law-enforcement officers and community members who have worked to uncover plots before they could be carried out. But the number of disrupted plots is relatively small—fewer than 200 Muslim-Americans have been involved in violent plots since 9/11, most of them overseas—so credit for the low level of violence must be due primarily to the millions of Muslims who have refrained from answering the call to terrorism.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, more terrorists may still be in hiding, or under surveillance, or deported or jailed for other offenses. There is no way to know how many—so there is no way to debunk paranoid fears about massive secret threats. In any case, even a single violent plot is too many, and I do not doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world, to paraphrase the adage that is often attributed to anthropologist Margaret Mead. Islamist terrorists are likely to continue to kill and maim thousands of people around the world each year for the foreseeable future.<sup>17</sup>

However, terrorism accounts for only a tiny proportion of the world's violence. Every day, according to the World Health Organization, approximately 150,000 people die, all around the world. The U.S. government's National Counterterrorism Center calculates that Islamist terrorism claims fewer than 50 lives per day—fewer than 10 per day outside of Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. By way of comparison, approximately 1,500 people die each day from civilian violence, plus an additional 500 from warfare, 2,000 from suicides, and 3,000 from traffic accidents. Another 1,300 die each day from malnutrition. Even in Iraq, while it was suffering the world's highest rate of terrorist attacks, terrorist bombs caused less than one-third of all violent deaths. In other words, terrorism is not a leading cause of death in the world. If we want to save lives, far more lives would be saved by diverting a

small portion of the world's counterterrorism budgets to mosquito netting.<sup>18</sup>

Yet terrorism dominates the headlines far out of proportion to its death toll. Terrorists are grimly successful at attracting public attention. Of the thousands of violent incidents that occur around the globe each day, the world media efficiently sifts for hints of terrorist motivations, then feeds these incidents over the wire services and satellite networks to news consumers who may not realize how rare terrorism really is. In this way the media are accomplices to terrorism. They bring the perpetrators' message to vast audiences; without these audiences, the terror would only be felt locally. Indeed, if a terrorist act occurred and nobody heard about it, it would be a failure. The media is just doing its job in reporting terrorist violence—if a terrorist act occurred and journalists didn't cover it, we would consider the media to have failed. But the result is that media consumers, ordinary folks who try to keep up with world affairs, get a skewed picture of the prevalence of terrorism.

Even without incidents of violence, mass media stoke fears of terrorism by reporting hugely inflated estimates of alleged threats. These stories, often citing unnamed government officials, create the false impression that "sleeper cells" are ready to wreak havoc. In the United States, Fox News has made a name for itself by repeatedly trumpeting alarming information such as "a growing body of evidence pointing to the presence of suspected members of terrorist sleeper cells operating on U.S. soil" and secret reports that "Mexican drug cartels are teaming up with Muslim gangs to fund sleeper cells right here in the U.S. and abroad." None of these allegations has been borne out by judicial investigations. Fear-mongering about Islamist terrorism is not limited to the United States. India, for example, has also experienced media frenzies, such as the flurry of baseless stories about a suspected "terror hub" in Karnataka state, where "operatives have infiltrated into the

region and are acting as sleeper cells, spreading messages [and] brainwashing youths." No terrorism ever emerged from these so-called sleeper cells.<sup>19</sup>

The media's fascination with terrorism coincides with terrorists' interest in the media. Media-savvy terrorists such as Bin Ladin admit that they use news coverage for recruitment. That is why Bin Ladin granted interviews to international reporters in Afghanistan, despite prohibitions by Taliban leader Muhammad Umar: he considered it the most efficient way to reach a global audience of potential conspirators. (On tensions between the Taliban and al-Qaida, see chapter 3.) Bin Ladin explained to an Arab journalist that international media—especially Arab satellite television channels—unintentionally helped recruit militants by broadcasting news of the Palestinian uprising and Islamist activities around the world. Yet Bin Ladin's media strategy was controversial even among other terrorists, two of whom wrote to Bin Ladin in 1999 to inquire whether he had "caught the disease of screens, flash[bulb]s, fans, and applause," according to e-mail stored on a computer in Afghanistan that was later purchased by American reporters. Another al-Qaida official complained that Bin Ladin was "obsessed" with media attention. After al-Qaida's training camps in Afghanistan were overrun by U.S. and allied troops in the fall of 2001, electronic media became even more central to Islamist terrorism. Instruction manuals that had previously been distributed in photocopies in Afghanistan are now digitized and posted on the Internet. One pamphlet from 2003, itself distributed online, listed "electronic jihad" as one of 39 ways to participate in the struggle: "the Internet [is] a blessed medium that benefits us greatly by making it possible for people to distribute and follow the news. It also allows us to defend the mujahidin and publicize their ideas and goals." Even hostile news coverage may make terrorists look appealing to some viewers (see chapter 2 on "radical sheik"). Scholarly discussions of terrorism,



too, may indirectly help recruit potential conspirators. Taheri-Azar, for example, learned about al-Qaida's ideology at his university library.<sup>20</sup>

Mohammad Taheri-Azar grew up in Charlotte, North Carolina, where his parents settled after emigrating from Iran when Mohammad was a toddler. In his "meditations" from prison, as he called them, Taheri-Azar wrote that he had been outraged by the foreign policies of the U.S. government since the Gulf War of 1991, when the United States and its allies liberated Kuwait from republican Iraq and returned it to the al-Sabah monarchy. Taheri-Azar was seven years old at the time. In the following years, he was "secretly happy to see U.S. interests attacked as I grew up, seeing the Oklahoma City Bombing [1995], the Columbine High-School massacre [1999], the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, etc." In high school, he was more interested in fast cars and raunchy videos. In the summer of 2001, he graduated and moved to Chapel Hill for college.

"The 9/11 attacks revived my anger towards the U.S. government because it distressed me to see the nineteen hijackers lose their lives this way because of the military decisions of the United States and Israel in the Middle East since the 1950s," Taheri-Azar wrote. "I decided then and there that I would most likely engage in some attack of my own against U.S. interests." At that point, according to Taheri-Azar's account, he was not particularly religious. In fact, he had had no religious education of any sort. "It is dangerous to raise a child without a religious upbringing, as my parents did," Taheri-Azar later reflected. "As long as the child perceives that they won't be caught by their parents, the school, or the police, the child is likely to perform all kinds of mischievous actions." It was not until 2003 that a friend introduced him to the Quran. For two years they read it together and increased their observance of pious rituals.

Incrementally, Taheri-Azar began to combine his hatred of U.S. government policies with his newfound interest in Islam. In the summer of 2004, he decided to drive his car more carefully, in keeping with the methods of Pakistani terrorists he read about in the *Atlantic Monthly*: “The trained martyrs, called the ‘armored corps’ of jihad, return to their homes and jobs to live normally until summoned. While they wait, they are under strict orders to shun beards and traditional clothes; to maintain a neat, inconspicuous appearance; to have their documents (real ones issued under fake names) in order and to carry them at all times; and to do nothing illegal or out of the ordinary. They are forbidden even to run a red light.” In the summer of 2005, “on a leisurely visit to Davis Library” at the University of North Carolina, Taheri-Azar discovered the ideology of al-Qaida. He found it in an anthology of writings about terrorism and guerrilla warfare compiled by one of the United States’ most respected experts on terrorism, Walter Laqueur, a Jewish refugee from Germany whose parents perished in a Nazi death camp. The chapters by al-Qaida so captivated Taheri-Azar, according to his account, that he “decided to become less open about my religious views,” even with the friend who had introduced him to the Quran. Taheri-Azar read further, including books about Timothy McVeigh, who was convicted and executed for bombing a government building in Oklahoma City, and the sarin poison-gas attack that killed 12 subway riders in Tokyo in 1995. “After reading these books I decided that I wanted to join an insurgency force in Afghanistan or Iraq as soon as possible.” He changed his phone number and shut off almost all contact with his family, who didn’t see him again until they visited him in jail.<sup>21</sup>

Taheri-Azar was a volunteer to the cause of revolution. Nobody recruited him. No organization welcomed him. No comrades swore him to a bond of solidarity. Taheri-Azar encountered Islamist terrorism solely through the prism of the global media, but that was enough to convince him to sacrifice his life.<sup>22</sup>

It didn't matter that his knowledge of Islam was limited and extremely confused. Taheri-Azar apparently didn't know the difference between Sunni and Shia Islam, or that al-Qaida and other Sunni militants would consider him non-Muslim because he is Shia. Taheri-Azar called Muhammad Atta of al-Qaida his "role model," but he willed his belongings to the theocratic Shia government of Iran, which al-Qaida and its allies repeatedly deride. He also asked to be transferred to Iranian custody, "since Iran hasn't declared war on an Islamic country"—an odd claim, since Iran fought a bloody war in the 1980s with Iraq, one of the Islamic countries that Taheri-Azar wanted to liberate from U.S. occupation. Taheri-Azar knew no Arabic, and in his handwritten letters from prison he misspelled al-Qaida as "al-Quaeda." The "e" is a legitimate English transliteration of Arabic script, but the "u" is simply wrong—it appears to come from Microsoft Word's auto-correct function, which Taheri-Azar apparently trusted more than any Islamic source. Taheri-Azar drew his Quranic justifications from an English edition translated by Rashad Khalifa, who was assassinated in Arizona in 1990—a murder that Khalifa's followers blame on militants linked with al-Qaida. Taheri-Azar endorsed Khalifa's emphasis on the significance of the number 19 in the Quran, a view that many Islamists consider to be heretical numerology. His prison letters listed his favorite songs and albums; Islamist militants frown upon Western music as frivolous or sinful. In other words, Taheri-Azar knew next to nothing about the Islamist ideology that he was willing to kill and die for.<sup>23</sup>

If terrorists like Taheri-Azar can be recruited through the Internet and books and news media, then why aren't there more attacks? What is stopping people? Chapters 2–4 propose three explanations. One is that much of the support for Islamist radicalism is symbolic, not strategic. Al-Qaida and Bin Ladin may be "sheik" in the way that Che Guevara and Malcolm X are chic—objects of

youthful pop culture more than inspirations for revolutionary militancy. Even among militants, al-Qaida faces competition from local Islamist rivals such as the Taliban and Hamas, who object to al-Qaida's global agenda. More broadly, al-Qaida faces competition from liberal Islamic movements, whose combination of democratic politics and cultural conservatism is far more popular among Muslims than the revolutionaries' antidemocratic violence. Anxiety over their unpopularity has divided the revolutionaries: some have responded by converting to liberalism, while others have turned to ever-more-heinous attempts to purify their societies through violence.

Chapter 5 looks at U.S. foreign policy in light of the failure of Islamist terrorists to mobilize Muslims around the world. One aspect of al-Qaida's strategy has been to provoke the United States, and to a lesser extent other Western countries, into committing atrocities that will galvanize support for Islamist revolution. Critics of the U.S.-led "war on terrorism" worry that this strategy is working. But it may be that changes in U.S. policy don't matter much for most Muslims. Distrust of the U.S. government's intentions may run so deep that new policies are discounted and dismissed even before they begin. I propose that a more reasonable yardstick for the success of U.S. policy in Muslim societies is the fate of the liberal Islamic movement in those countries. U.S. actions ought to be judged by the extent to which they assist or undermine those movements.

Finally, chapter 6 examines what to expect from the study of Islamist terrorism. Expertise on the subject is hard to come by, not just because few scholars in the West read Arabic and other languages of Muslim societies, but also because these scholars are under attack by right-wing think tanks for being terrorist-coddling ideologues, whose failure to anticipate the disasters of 9/11 demonstrates their bias and cluelessness. At the same time, government agencies frequently invite Middle East and Islamic studies experts

to help them predict and prevent terrorist attacks. These are unreasonable expectations. Both the condemnation by the think tanks and the invitations by the government seem to imply that social scientists can predict the future actions of tiny cells of highly committed radicals. This has never been true. Although some social scientists may brag about their predictive models, revolutionary violence is inherently unpredictable. The best that we can do is try to understand it as it happens, because even the terrorists can't tell us what is going to happen next.

The bad news for Americans is this: Islamist terrorists really are out to get you. They cannot be deterred by prison sentences, "enhanced" interrogations, or the prospect of death. They consider the United States to be their mortal enemy, and they would like to kill as many Americans as possible, in as dramatic a way as possible. The more I look at their websites, watch their videos, and read their manifestos and discussion boards, the more I realize that these are a brutal and inhumane bunch. It is worth taking them seriously.

The good news for Americans is this: there aren't very many Islamist terrorists, and most of them are incompetent. They fight each other as much as they fight anybody else, and they fight their potential state sponsors most of all. They are outlaws on the run in every country in the world, and their bases have been reduced to ever-more-wild patches of remote territory, where they have to limit their training activities to avoid satellite surveillance. Every year or two they pull off a sophisticated attack somewhere in the world, on top of the usual daily crop of violence, but the odds of their getting lucky and repeating an operation on the scale of 9/11 seem like a long shot, since no other attack in the history of Islamist terrorism has killed more than 400 people, and only a dozen attacks have killed more than 200.<sup>24</sup>

Still, the fear of terrorism persists, wildly out of alignment with the rate of terrorist violence. In one recent survey, 15 percent of

Americans said that terrorism was the greatest threat to the United States—a higher percentage than for any other threat. (Six percent considered “the economy” as the greatest threat, and 5 percent listed “Barack Obama.”) Politicians in the United States and many countries fan these fears, or cater to them to avoid appearing “soft” on security issues. The U.S. government spends \$170 billion a year on the Global War on Terror, compared with less than \$25 billion for the fight against HIV/AIDS, which causes 7,000 deaths every day. I am not suggesting that funding should necessarily follow a one-to-one ratio with casualties, but a mismatch of this magnitude seems like an indication of panic.<sup>25</sup>

This panic does not match America’s image of itself as the land of can-do pragmatism and “the home of the brave,” as our national anthem describes us. Disproportionate fear of terrorism is prolonging a state of emergency that limits civil liberties, skews budget priorities, and projects force excessively around the world. Exaggerated fear of Islamist terrorism has stoked suspicion of Muslims, to the point that some Americans object to the very presence of Muslims and mosques in the United States as a sinister plot to impose Islamic rule—as though this tiny minority might somehow convert or subjugate the 80-plus percent of Americans who are Christian. Panic over terrorism has led some Americans to compromise their belief in the freedom of religion, when it comes to Islam, and to hedge our foundational judicial principle of innocent until proven guilty.

This book aims to reduce the panic by examining evidence about Islamist terrorism—the actual scale of it and the reasons it is not more widespread. The book presents evidence from the terrorists’ websites, in Arabic and other languages, and from interviews with young Muslims around the world. It also presents findings from surveys in Muslim communities, election results, and other indicators of public opinion. At the end of the book are detailed notes where you can check my sources and compare them

with the sources presented in alarmist writings, most of which are based on fear and ideology more than serious research.

Let me be clear, though. I have no intention of whitewashing the potential for violence of small groups of Islamist revolutionaries. There will be more terrorist attacks, and some of them could be successful in killing hundreds of people, perhaps even thousands. Last year, Faisal Shahzad almost succeeded in an attack of this scale, filling a vehicle with explosives and parking it just off Times Square in New York City. As with the terrorist who drove through campus in Chapel Hill, incompetence saved the day—Shahzad used faulty firecrackers as his detonator. We may not be so lucky in the future. But even if they succeed in killing thousands of us, attacks like these do not threaten our way of life, unless we let them.<sup>26</sup>

As the trauma of 9/11 recedes, Americans will come to realize that—for all its faults and dangers—the world today is the safest it has ever been. Life expectancy has risen in recent generations to the point where people commonly see their grandchildren grow up. There have been fewer wars in the past decade than at any time in modern history. Terrorism kills fewer people now than it did in the 1980s. All this could change overnight, and I am not suggesting that the world turn a blind eye to the threat of terrorism. I am suggesting that we treat this threat on the scale that it deserves.<sup>27</sup>

On September 11, 2001, Mohammad Taheri-Azar and I were both in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, far from the events that made the day historic. Taheri-Azar reports that he was pleased by what he saw on television that day, because America finally reaped what it sowed. I have my own 9/11 story. That morning, my godfather went to work, as usual, in a building across the street from the World Trade Center. As he arrived, he saw smoke on one of the towers, then on the other, and when the south tower started to come down he ran. Clouds of dust from the devastation enveloped him as he fled miles on foot to his home. If 9/11 reminded

Taheri-Azar of the Gulf War and other recent events, it reminded my godfather of an earlier trauma. He was a child in Holland when the Nazis occupied the country and forced his family into trains. He survived years in concentration camps. New York was a refuge for him after the liberation of Europe, and now the refuge itself was under attack. In our conversations since that day, he has wondered whether 9/11 signaled a new era of violence on the scale of the Nazi holocaust. This book is an attempt to understand why that hasn't happened.