What makes individuals turn to terrorism? As the chapter described, terrorism is a method of violence or tool of warfare employed to achieve some political goal. This general definition is helpful in explaining a common reason why individuals turn to terrorism. Terrorists believe their best or only chance of getting what they want (a political aim) is by terrorizing mostly civilians. This definition, however, doesn’t explain why some people—and not others—turn to terrorism. The first part of this case study provides several reasons why individuals may turn to terrorism through a profile of terrorists. The second part provides an account of one particular individual who found himself drawn to terrorism. The case study raises interesting but difficult questions about how terrorism can be eliminated. As you read the case study, consider which factors can lead to the rise of terrorists and how those factors may be addressed before an individual turns to terrorism.

**WHO ARE THE TERRORISTS?**

One of the difficulties in combating terrorism is that there is no such thing as a typical terrorist. Stereotypical views held by many people are that terrorists grew up poor, with little or no education, or that they were drawn to terrorism because of serious mental deficiencies. The actual backgrounds of terrorists is much more complex than these stereotypes. In Belgium, for example, counterterrorism experts could not explain what motivated a thirty-eight-year-old white Catholic woman to convert to Islam, travel to Iraq, and then blow herself up in 2005. A study by Dutch researcher Edwin Bakker found, after examining almost twenty variables concerning terror suspects’ social and economic backgrounds, that no reliable terrorist profile existed.¹

Some terrorists may, in fact, be poor, mentally unstable, or criminals who also engage in violent political-oriented activity. But many terrorists are educated and come from middle-class or well-to-do backgrounds.² This is true of many of the people in al Qaeda, for example. According to Jessica Stern, who has interviewed hundreds of terrorists, many terrorist leaders come from middle or upper classes and have trained in technical fields, but their followers tend to be working-class dropouts.³

Terrorists may or may not be motivated by a religious ideology. Cindy C. Combs, a terrorism analyst, defines the crusading terrorist—either religious or non-religious—as “neither a dummy nor a fool, neither a coward nor weakling. Instead, the crusading terrorist is frequently a professional, who is well-trained, well-prepared, and well-disciplined in the habit of blind obedience.”⁴ Similarly, Adrian Karatnycky finds commonalities among Islamic and non-Islamic terrorists groups around the world. “Like the leaders of America’s Weather Underground, Germany’s Baader-Meinhof Gang, Italy’s Red Brigades, and Japan’s Red Army Factions, the Islamic terrorists were university-educated converts to an all-encompassing neo-totalitarian ideology. For them, Islamism is the new universal revolutionary creed, and bin Laden is Sheikh Guevara.”⁵

One of Stern’s interesting findings is how terrorists initially motivated by a “universal revolutionary creed” can continue terrorist activities for more mundane reasons. She describes many terrorists as being driven by some passion, but notes that terrorism can actually become a career as well. For some, the mission changes as terrorists become more interested in money, political power, status, or attention.⁶ The process of individuals shifting their primary motive from revolutionary religious or secular missions to more worldly goals may be at work, for example, among terrorist groups involved in the illegal trade in drugs, diamonds, or even intellectual property. Although there is no typical terrorist, we do know that certain characteristics make terrorist movements attractive to individuals. Research by Harvard’s Louise Richardson found that all terrorist movements require three components: alienated individuals, a complicit society or community, and a legitimizing ideology.⁷ Consequently, a successful counter-terrorism strategy would seek to legitimize nonviolent moderates in order to isolate the terrorists. In addition, governments should enforce democratic principles and civil liberties—avoiding unfair detentions and the kinds of problems (e.g., torture) that occurred at Guantanamo Bay. Moreover, counterterrorism programs should try to exploit weaknesses in the terrorists’ ideology with the aim of creating divisions among the terrorists.

The remainder of this case study builds on the above profile of terrorists by looking at a specific example of someone who was drawn to terrorism. Does the individual fit your preconceived notions of what motivates a terrorist? As Louise Richardson suggests, is the individual alienated, a member of a complicit society or community, and a follower of legitimizing ideology?

**PORTRAIT OF AN ARAB AS A YOUNG RADICAL**

In the fall of 2001, Kamel Daoudi was arrested in England on suspicion that he was part of a plot by al Qaeda to blow up the American Embassy in Paris. The Algerian-born...
I decided to learn as many languages as possible—English, French, and Arabic. In junior high school I wanted to be Indiana Jones. I often the only Arab in the class. People were jealous of me because of my good grades but they made fun of me for the way I acted and for my excessive modesty in the eyes of the Parisians. In school I was a brilliant student and I was often the only Arab in the class. People were jealous of me because of my good grades but they made fun of me for the way I acted and for my excessive modesty in the eyes of the French children. They made jokes about my first name. In junior high school I wanted to be Indiana Jones. I decided to learn as many languages as possible—English, then Spanish. I took courses in Arabic.

**Childhood Experiences**

Allah the Great says in the Koran that neither Jews nor Christians will ever be satisfied with you until you follow their religion. But Allah's way is the true way. This is without a doubt the verse of the Koran that sums up the 28 years of my life.

My name is Kamel Daoudi. My first name means perfection in Arabic. My last name means coming from the tribe of the sons of David. I was born in Algeria on the third of August 1974. My father was working in France to meet the needs of his large family. I only saw my father in the summer when he managed to save enough to pay for a ticket to take the boat or plane so that he could come and see my mother, his mother and me and leave us a bit of money.

My childhood, in spite of my poor mother's poverty, was a happy one. I was spoiled by my maternal uncles and aunts, who used to take me with them to the colorful sunny bazaars in the little town and bought me sweets and tried to make up for my father's absence. In the summer of 1979, when I was about to turn 5, my father came to get us—my mother, my brother, who is two years younger than I, and myself—to take us to France. I was condemned to be my father's foot soldier while he was working. I was alternately an interpreter, guide and accountant for my poor mother, who had a great deal of trouble getting used to this new barbarian language. Very early on I had adult responsibilities, which literally ate into my childhood, which I wanted to live in the same way as other children.

Mr. Daoudi's father, a hospital worker, pushed him to excel in school and beat him with a wooden paddle when he failed to do so. At this time in his life, his family was evicted from their apartment and had to move to a poor suburb of Paris:

That's where I became aware of the abominable social treatment given to all of those potential “myselfs” who had been conditioned to become subcitizens just good for paying pensions for the real French when the French age pyramid starts getting thin at the base.

**Making the Decision to Become a Terrorist**

There were only two choices left for me, either to sink into a deep depression, and I did for more than six months at the end my second year at university, or to react by taking part in the universal struggle against this overwhelming unjust cynicism.

So I reviewed everything that I had learned and put all of my knowledge into a new perspective. I then understood that the only person worth devoting my life to was Allah.

Everything suddenly became clear to me and I understood why Abraham went into exile, why Moses rebelled against the Pharaoh [sic], why Jesus was spat upon and why Muhammad said, “I came with the sword on judgment day.” My battle was and will be to eradicate all powers that are opposed to the law of Allah, the most high, whatever the price may be, because only our creator has the power to make laws and any system based on the laws of men is artifice and lies.
This glorious battle will not stop until the law of Allah has been re-established and applied by a just and honest caliph. . . . I knew that a victory of Islam over the West was possible.

I decided to go to Algiers in the middle of the war, with the curfew and the shooting that was taking place. For four months I saw the situation with my own eyes and I experienced the roadblocks. . . . and the intervention of the Algerian military security forces. Had it not been for my belief that armed groups had already been infiltrated by the Algerian security services, I would probably [have] joined up with the partisans who wanted to introduce Islamic law in Algeria.

France was a major protagonist in this conflict . . . . I could not accept the fact that the former colonial power was continuing to control my country’s destiny when so many women, children and men had been tortured, massacred, raped and assassinated

The Algerian war, the Bosnian war, the Gulf War, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Palestine, Lebanon—all of these events strengthen my conviction that the Judeo-Christian community influenced by atheism has a visceral hatred of the community of Muhammad. . . . For all these reasons and because of all these events which have left indelible wounds, I went over to the forces of the “dark side.” . . .

I got married, thinking that marriage would regenerate me and make me more stable. But this was a mistake that made me want to escape the Machiavellian social trap that was closing in on me. My ex-wife, who I had met through an American chat room, . . . didn’t live up to my dreams. In spite of her many qualities, she did not have . . . a taste for strong sensation and adventure. Seeing that my idea of life was not the same as hers I decided to leave her, leaving her everything I could.

My ideological commitment is total, and the reward of glory for this relentless battle is to be called a terrorist. I accept the name of terrorist if it is used to mean that I terrorize a one-sided system of iniquitous power and a perversion that comes in many forms.

I have never terrorized innocent individuals and I will never do so. But I will fight any form of injustice and those who support it. My fight will only end in my death or in my madness.

**Epilogue**

In March 2005, a French court sentenced Daoudi to nine years imprisonment for participation in a plot to bomb the U.S. embassy in Paris. He was officially charged with “criminal association in relations with a terrorist enterprise” for his role in the plot.9

**Notes**


3. Jessica Stern, “The Protean Enemy,” *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 4 (July/August 2003): 38. A similar description is provided by Christoph Reuter, who has explored the history of suicide bombing. Reuter contends there is no typical “suicide assassin.” The person may be religious or secular; the person may be financially secure; the person may be destitute. What seems to link all of them, according to Reuter, is the decision to transform their powerlessness into extraordinary power. Christoph Reuter, *My Life Is a Weapon: A Modern History of Suicide Bombing* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004). See also “Shireen and Others Like Her,” *The Economist*, May 22, 2004.


**Questions**

**Check Your Understanding**

1. What aspects of Daoudi’s upbringing were positive and negative?

2. What are Daoudi’s perception of the West in general? What experiences served to radicalize him?

**Analyze the Issues**

1. In what ways does Daoudi’s experience fit the general description of the background of terrorists in the first part of the case study?

2. What is the role of religion in Daoudi’s life?

3. Immigration from troubled regions of the world to the more stable and wealthy regions (for example, Europe) will continue. Given the decentralizing forces at work in world politics—including ethnic conflict and the fragmentation or failure of states—will this lead to more Kamel Daoudis? If so, can anything be done to prevent such individuals from turning to terrorism?

4. In what way may terrorists be considered rational or irrational?
FURTHER INFORMATION
To find out more about Algerian, French, and Islamic terrorism, consult the sources cited in the endnotes as well as the following:

*Africa Studies Quarterly* (online), http://web.africa.ufl.edu/asq.

Cornell University’s Middle East and Islamic Studies website devoted to Algeria, http://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/algeria.htm.