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## **“Dumb” Yet Deadly: Local Knowledge and Poor Tradecraft Among Islamist Militants in Britain and Spain**

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*Islamist militants frequently lack a talent for tradecraft. In recent attacks in Britain and Spain, terrorists made numerous mistakes: receiving traffic citations while traveling in “enemy” territory, acting suspiciously when questioned by the police, and traveling together during missions. Militants’ preference toward suicide operations restricts their ability to acquire practical experience, particularly when they lose their lives during attacks. And their unyielding devotion to their cause blinds them to opportunities to improve their operations. This is good news for counterterrorism officials. Terrorists’ poor tradecraft provides alert law enforcers with critical leads they can use to identify their attackers, unravel their plots, and—sometimes—disrupt their operations before they cause additional harm.*

Terrorism requires knowledge, knowledge about whom or what to attack—and how to attack them. Building a bomb requires familiarity with chemicals that are combined to form explosive compounds, detonators that ignite the chemicals to create the explosion, and electrical devices or fuses that trigger detonation. To plan and perform attacks, terrorists must know how to operate secretly in hostile environments without detection from law enforcers, what intelligence professionals call tradecraft.<sup>1</sup> Militants with relevant knowledge are more likely to execute effective attacks than those without. But some terrorists are more informed—and experienced—than others. The medical doctors behind the failed car bombings in London and Glasgow in 2007 lacked the bombmaking skills of the petty criminals that killed 56 people in the London tube and bus bombings two years before. Well-educated Islamists do not necessarily make good terrorists. Terrorism is a craft involving its own peculiar set of skills and knowledge that practitioners must develop to be

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good at it. This begs an important, yet little understood, question: how do terrorists actually acquire the experience—and expertise—they need to carry out acts of political violence?

This article addresses this question by drawing on the author's field work on "Islamist" militancy in Britain and Spain, home to two of the most devastating terrorist attacks since 9/11.<sup>2</sup> In both countries the author interviewed dozens of officials from American, British, and Spanish law enforcement and intelligence agencies, including, but not limited to, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the London Metropolitan Police, and the Spanish *Guardia Civil* and national police. He also accessed Muslim informants, interviewing a broad cross-section of Islamists, Salafis, and community activists, along with former Guantánamo Bay detainees and members of al-Muhajiroun, a militant group that seeks to establish *Sharia* in Britain.<sup>3</sup> Guided by the principles of ethnographic research, the author sought respondents for their expertise in Islamist terrorism. He also gathered valuable data from secondary sources, including news reports, academic studies, and court documents from criminal proceedings in Britain and Spain. Many of the data used in this article are drawn from these open sources; the author uses his interviews to extend insights from these artifacts.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to existing studies, this article suggests that the most useful distinction in terrorist knowledge is not between tacit and explicit knowledge, but between *techne* and *mētis*. The latter concepts come from the ancient Greeks, as interpreted by James C. Scott and others. *Techne* refers to abstract technical knowledge that militants acquire through formal instruction and knowledge-based artifacts, like bombmaking manuals. *Mētis* refers to practical knowledge militants develop by performing their activities repeatedly in local settings.<sup>5</sup> If militants acquire *techne* by abstraction, they develop *mētis* by doing, engaging in the activity itself. While both types of knowledge are essential for terrorism, *mētis* allows practitioners to apply technical knowledge to suit local conditions. This intuitive blending of the abstract with the concrete forms the cornerstone of real-world expertise.

Rather than fitting the stereotype of highly sophisticated "super" terrorists, the militants examined here are often surprisingly sloppy. Reflecting the situational nature of *mētis*, militants frequently lack a talent for tradecraft—and by extension urban terrorism. In preparing for operations they commit basic errors, such as receiving speeding tickets in "enemy" territory and traveling together to carry out attacks. Their preference for suicide attacks restricts their ability to accumulate practical experience, especially when planners and bombmakers lose their lives in the operation. Unlike the "Provos" in Great Britain or Basque militants in Spain, Islamist terrorists in both countries have carried out isolated attacks, not extended campaigns, limiting their ability to learn-by-doing.<sup>6</sup>

This article explores how Islamist militants in Europe, particularly Britain and Spain, acquire the knowledge they need to carry out terrorist attacks. The article begins by dissecting *techne* and *mētis*, emphasizing how the latter provides militants with the practical know-how they need to assemble bombs, fire weapons, case targets, and perform other "hands-on" activities. Next, the author highlights the operational carelessness in several Islamist terrorist attacks, drawing on interviews, court documents, and other data to reveal terrorists' poor tradecraft and limited *mētis*. The author's approach is comparative: he analyzes a cross-case sample that includes not only so-called "dumb" terrorists like Mohammad Salameh and Richard Reid but the perpetrators behind three of the most "successful" attacks by Islamist terrorists to date.<sup>7</sup> While 9/11, 3/11, and 7/7 all suffered from flawed planning and performance, the attackers possessed the practical skills and local knowledge, in a word, the *mētis*, necessary to execute their plans to devastating effect. The article concludes by exploring the causes of militants' poor tradecraft and careless mistakes, suggesting that their lack of practical experience, their affinity toward suicide attacks, and their ideological zeal all help account for their limited operational capacity.

### ***Techne and Mētis***

Terrorists acquire knowledge of their violent craft through training, study, and practice.<sup>8</sup> The method of diffusion depends on the type of knowledge being acquired. In organization theory, this distinction is commonly framed in terms of explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge refers to formal knowledge that is easily shared between people through written and oral language. People preserve explicit knowledge in documents and other artifacts and teach it through formal instruction. Tacit knowledge refers to personal hunches and insights that are difficult for people to express, let alone share, in part because they are not fully aware of it. Tacit knowledge is implicit; it lies beyond what is consciously known.<sup>9</sup> In one of the few studies that unpacks terrorism knowledge, Brian Jackson highlights the distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge, suggesting that the Provisional Irish Republican Army’s ability to consistently use mortars effectively against the British depended on its members acquiring the appropriate tacit knowledge.<sup>10</sup> This article builds on Jackson’s insight, not by extending his distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge, but by drawing on *techne* and *mētis* to suggest something different.

Abstract technical information (*techne*) is similar to explicit knowledge in that it is communicated through language, stored in artifacts, and taught as formal instruction. *Techne* is structured and communicated in “small, explicit, logical steps” that can be expressed with quantitative precision, broken down and verified, like a cooking recipe—or an explosives preparation.<sup>11</sup> Terrorists may acquire bombmaking *techne* by reading manuals and other documents that provide detailed, step-by-step recipes for making explosives, or attending training camps where experienced practitioners teach these explicit, logical steps as part of their deadly curriculum.

However, unlike explicit knowledge, which may be situational, *techne* transcends geography and context. *Techne* is based on general principles that apply across time and space. Such technical knowledge is universal; it does not vary across local settings.<sup>12</sup> The universality of *techne* is important for terrorism. A bombmaking recipe, properly prepared, will cause certain chemicals to react with other chemicals, producing explosions, whether the preparation is made at a training camp in south-western Asia or an apartment building in western Europe. This knowledge is useful to terrorists not only because it is easy to codify, like explicit knowledge, but because it is fungible. Practitioners may acquire the abstract principles of bombmaking at a training camp in Waziristan, a farmhouse outside Madrid, or even an online instructional manual.<sup>13</sup>

If terrorist *techne* can be acquired from recipes and other knowledge-based artifacts, the ability to apply this knowledge to local settings requires “subtle and complex skills that are difficult to master simply by reading about them.”<sup>14</sup> For example, when preparing for attacks terrorists must interact with neighbors, family members, friends, co-workers, sometimes even law enforcers and other security professionals, without raising suspicion about their true intentions. Although some terrorists receive training in undercover operations, performing effective tradecraft requires talents that are not readily imparted through formal instruction.<sup>15</sup> This is where *mētis* comes in. To function effectively in unpredictable, real-world environments practitioners rely on “practical skills and acquired intelligence.”<sup>16</sup> Similar to tacit knowledge, practitioners acquire such *mētis* gradually, through the accumulation of experience that comes from engaging in the activity itself.<sup>17</sup> However, unlike tacit knowledge, *mētis* is not necessarily implicit; practitioners may be aware of the experiential knowledge necessary to perform their violent skills effectively.

Consider learning how to fire a gun. To gather information about the firearm’s specifications and basic instructions on how to operate it (*techne*) one can study the operations

manual or be taught by an experienced instructor with access to this technical information. Yet, to gain even a modest degree of practical know-how (*mētis*) one must actually handle, load, and discharge the weapon. “There is a practical aspect to this,” explains a former counterterrorism official with the State Department. “It is almost like sitting in a firearms class and saying here is a nine millimeter pistol and this is the velocity and these are the rounds that you are carrying and this is how you take it apart. But you still have to go to the range.”<sup>18</sup> To learn how to shoot the gun proficiently, and be capable of hitting the intended target, one must go to the firing range and practice. To fire well under more demanding conditions, such as shooting from a moving vehicle, one must practice under these conditions. Even relatively “simple” violent acts like firing a gun involve practical skill and acquired intelligence, more so when the activity in question, like assembling bombs and casing targets, requires coordination among multiple participants and knowledge of local conditions. Would-be terrorists may learn the *techne* involved in shooting weapons, building bombs, or performing tradecraft by studying manuals or receiving formal instruction at training camps. But to develop hands-on proficiency in these activities, they must eventually 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 case targets, acquiring the practical, consciously known “know-how” that is essential for executing successful attacks.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike *techne*, such *mētis* is not “settled knowledge”; it varies across local contexts.<sup>20</sup> What works in one location may not work in another. Street smarts in London are different from cave smarts in Afghanistan. The tradecraft required to succeed at urban terrorism in the West is not easily obtained from training in guerrilla warfare, even as taught at the best Al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Yet, as government officials and terrorism scholars have long recognized, training can be an important source of knowledge for aspiring militants, particularly when it provides them with hands-on instruction relevant to their areas of operation, along with the opportunity to practice their violent skills. Several officials interviewed in this research stress that the most significant terrorist plots in Britain, including the 7/7 bombings and the airline liquid explosives plot in August 2006, involved people who had received at least some operational training from more experienced militants in the federal tribal areas in north-western Pakistan. “We know that there is a tendency for groups to go to Pakistan now to seek out training as a means of getting the information they need to get the scheme accomplished,” explains an FBI official in London. “They are developing the basic knowledge and ability they need by going through the training camps.”<sup>21</sup> Indeed, in a recent article in this journal, Bruce Hoffman documents how Mohammed Siddique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer received training in bombmaking and “countersurveillance tradecraft” at an Al Qaeda training camp in Pakistan several months before they carried out the 7/7 bombings in London.<sup>22</sup>

At the Pakistani camps, veterans teach novices how to build bombs and fire AK-47s and other weapons. The training camps at which these activities unfold are modest affairs, particularly in comparison with some of the Afghanistan camps prior to 9/11. The new “camps,” such as they are, may consist of a tent or two located in isolated mountain terrain or a house in a town surrounded by a wall.<sup>23</sup> Classes may contain a trainer, his assistant, and a group of ten to twenty students. Students’ opportunities to practice their classroom instruction are often restricted, for fear of arousing suspicion with the sound of weapons fire or chemical explosions. In his testimony in the Operation Crevice trial, which resulted in the conviction of five men for their participation in a 2004 plot to detonate fertilizer-based explosives around London, Mohammed Junaid Babar, a member of the conspiracy who later turned state’s evidence, recalls that at one training session participants were only

allowed to fire a couple of shots from their weapons at the end to avoid creating unwelcome attention from neighbors and authorities: “Basically everyone waited until the last day to fire their weapons.”<sup>24</sup>

Babar’s admission contains an important implication for counterterrorism policy: government pressure and increased public vigilance can hamper militants’ efforts to acquire hands-on experience by impeding their ability to practice what they have learned. Blending abstract *techné* with real-world *mētis* is never easy, particularly when practitioners are forced operate in hostile environments featuring observant adversaries that seek to identify and destroy them.

### Poor Tradecraft

Islamist militants may be driven by a higher cause but at the end of the day they remain human beings, with all the limitations and fallibilities this entails. Like all human beings, they rely on biased beliefs and imperfect memories that hamper decision making, memory recall, and information processing. And like other illicit non-state actors, they operate in dynamic and hostile environments characterized by information uncertainty and stress. Terrorism may not be rocket science, but it is nerve racking. When preparing for attacks militants try to avoid attracting unwanted attention from law enforcers and suspicious neighbors by practicing effective tradecraft. This includes communicating with their colleagues and coordinating their activities in secret, often for extended periods, while not appearing to be doing anything out of the ordinary. Militants must also interact with numerous people—family members, friends, neighbors, fellow workers—from whom they shield their true intentions and actions. They try to minimize their exposure to authorities and stand ready to deceive wary officials and bystanders when the need arises. Effective tradecraft also suggests that militants avoid traveling together during missions to protect their operations from potential surveillance. These practices are not easy to perform, let alone master.<sup>25</sup> In the heat of an operation, many militants, even those with extensive training, have been known to panic and make simple mistakes that defy basic tradecraft and appear obtuse to external observers.

Mohammad Salameh violated tradecraft and became the poster boy for “stupid” terrorists when, following the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, he returned repeatedly to a car rental agency and a local police station to claim a four-hundred-dollar refund on the van he and his fellow conspirators had just blown up in their bid to topple the Twin Towers. Salameh’s apparently foolish behavior had an economic motive: to get the cash he needed for a plane ticket to Jordan. But if Salameh’s desperation had a cause, it also exposed the conspiracy and gave FBI officials the opportunity to catch him at the rental agency.<sup>26</sup>

Several years later, Mohamed Odeh, an experienced Al Qaeda militant who built the bombs used in the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, was detained by Pakistani immigration officials in Karachi, where he had flown following the attacks. When questioned by immigration officials Odeh failed to put his counter-interrogation training to use. Asked whether he was a “terrorist,” Odeh remained silent; when pressed whether he had anything to do with the Nairobi bombing, he attempted to justify them in the name of Islam. Immigration authorities responded to Odeh’s pleas by turning him over to Pakistani intelligence, to whom Odeh made a complete confession over the next several days, naming fellow conspirators in the plot, bragging about his own bombmaking abilities, providing details about where and how he made the bombs, and confirming his membership in Al Qaeda. Pakistani officials shared this intelligence with the FBI, providing the Bureau’s “first solid lead connecting bin Laden to the embassy bombings.”<sup>27</sup>

In December 1999, Ahmed Ressay, who like Odeh received training in Afghanistan, was on his way to attack the Los Angeles International Airport, when he also wilted under pressure. Instead of mixing his car in with the bulk of traffic arriving on his ferry boat at Port Angeles, Washington, Ressay waited until his car was the last one off the ferry, under the mistaken assumption that this would attract less attention from law enforcers. It did not. During what began as a routine Customs inspection, Ressay acted nervously, drawing closer scrutiny from a second official. When that officer began an initial pat-down and search of his car, Ressay tried to run away, leading officials to arrest him and discover the explosives hidden in the trunk of his car. In Ressay's pocket, authorities found a scrap of paper with the name and phone number of a fellow militant with whom he planned to blow up the airport. FBI officials in New York City exploited Ressay's carelessness by identifying and arresting his colleague, further disrupting the plot.<sup>28</sup>

In all three cases, experienced militants, two of whom were trained by Al Qaeda, committed basic errors in tradecraft, including interacting repeatedly with law enforcers in the tense period immediately following an attack, when officials were on high alert, needlessly volunteering their political sympathies to immigration officials and boasting about their bombmaking skills to intelligence officers, and carrying the un-encoded name and phone number of a fellow conspirator while crossing an international border and panicking under pressure. Each mistake, while not always preventing disaster, proved costly to the terrorists, allowing authorities to detain them for further questioning and gather evidence that led to the unraveling of their criminal conspiracies.<sup>29</sup>

Even the "planes operation," the most devastating terrorist attack in human history, was characterized by sloppy tradecraft. Many of the 9/11 perpetrators had been trained at one or more of the Al Qaeda-affiliated camps in Afghanistan. Several, including Nawaf al Hazmi and Khalid al Mihdhar, even attended the "elite" Mes Aynak camp, where they received advanced instruction in firearms and close quarters combat. Hazmi and Mihdhar were no ordinary recruits: they were experienced militants that had fought in Bosnia and Afghanistan. Following their selection to the 9/11 plot, Hazmi and other operatives traveled to Pakistan, where they received personal instruction from Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, himself a veteran militant who had fought in Afghanistan and been involved in numerous terrorist plots against the United States dating back to the early 1990s. Mohammed drew on his experience living in North Carolina to teach the militants basic phrases in English and how to use a phone book and rent an apartment in the United States. He also gave them instructions on making travel reservations, using the Internet, and encoding their communications.<sup>30</sup>

In spite of their training and experience in guerrilla warfare, several 9/11 perpetrators committed basic errors in tradecraft that nearly sabotaged their plans. Nawaf al Hazmi and Khalid al Mihdhar, in particular, were completely unprepared for their assigned roles of piloting the suicide aircraft. They were sent to the United States to learn how to fly planes, but upon arriving in California Hazmi barely spoke English and Mihdhar spoke none. Both quickly soured on their half-hearted attempts to learn the language, even though their pilot training was in English, the international language of aviation.<sup>31</sup> In June 2000 Mihdhar exposed the operation by abruptly returning to Yemen to visit his family, without permission from Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who was reportedly livid at the security breach and wanted to replace the unreliable militant.<sup>32</sup> Hamzi stuck it out in San Diego, but he increased his exposure to potential surveillance by befriending several people with no connection to the plot, cryptically boasting to one that he would soon become famous.<sup>33</sup> Later on, when driving to the East Coast with Hani Hanjour, who was recruited into the plot to replace him as one of the pilots, but whose own English and piloting skills were

scarcely better, Hazmi again endangered the operation by receiving a speeding ticket in Oklahoma.<sup>34</sup> He was not the only hijacker to receive a traffic citation. Less than two days before the attacks, Ziad Jarrah, the pilot for United Airlines Flight 93, got a speeding ticket while driving to his hostage team’s final staging point in New Jersey.<sup>35</sup>

Ziad Jarrah’s personality conflicts with Mohammed Atta, the dour, intense ringleader of the plot, also threatened to derail the operation. Jarrah reportedly chafed under Atta’s command and felt excluded from operational decision making.<sup>36</sup> He also needlessly compromised the security of the impending attacks by making *five* separate trips outside the United States to visit his girlfriend and family. When Jarrah considered dropping out of the operation altogether, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed arranged to send funds to Zacarias Moussaoui, another Al Qaeda trainee, possibly to support him as a replacement pilot for Jarrah, or to facilitate his participation in another attack. But Moussaoui was so incompetent that two days into his aviation training in Minnesota his flight instructor called the FBI to report him as a potential hijacker. Moussaoui drew attention to himself by, among other things, insisting on receiving advanced training for flying large commercial aircraft without, like most of the flight school’s students, being employed as a pilot or having thousands of flying hours to his credit; paying for the expensive course with almost US\$ 9,000 in cash, without being able to account for the source of these funds; asking how much fuel a jumbo jet could carry and how much damage it would cause if it crashed into anything; and getting “extremely agitated” when law enforcers asked him about his religious background. Moussaoui raised enough concerns among the federal agents that questioned him that they arrested him the same day for immigration violations, to make sure he could not continue his training.<sup>37</sup> While Moussaoui maintained enough tradecraft sense to lie to investigators about the purpose of his U.S. visit, his arrest, largely caused by his own negligence and short-temper, exposed Al Qaeda’s stateside activities to disruption shortly before the 9/11 attacks. Recognizing his ineptitude, the 9/11 Commission describes him simply as “an Al Qaeda mistake and a missed opportunity” for law enforcers to prevent the attacks.<sup>38</sup>

Like Al Qaeda’s previous attacks, 9/11 was characterized less by flawless execution than by steadfast, malleable militants practicing slipshod tradecraft. While the planes operation was beset with numerous problems during the preparation stages, none of them proved disastrous, in part because the plotters adapted to each challenge. When perpetrators proved unprepared for their original assignments, they were reassigned to other tasks for which they were better suited. When the plot lacked qualified personnel to execute the simultaneous hijacking of four planes, they recruited additional participants that spoke English and had experience living in the West, including Mohammed Atta and his Hamburg friends.<sup>39</sup> When personality conflicts between Atta and Jarrah endangered the operation, they persuaded both hijacker-pilots to overcome their personal animosities for the greater good of the suicide mission.<sup>40</sup> The attackers’ ability to fix their mistakes and adapt their activities in response to unforeseen circumstances, defining qualities of *mētis*, ensured that the planes operation, flawed as it was, was ultimately carried out with devastating results.

### **After 9/11: More Shoddy Tradecraft**

As would be expected from a tragedy of such magnitude, the 9/11 attacks received a tremendous amount of media coverage and attention from policymakers, counterterrorism specialists, and the general public. Over the past several years, reporters, officials, scholars, and citizens have created a vast repository of knowledge about the attacks, information that has appeared in press accounts, government reports, academic studies, blogs, and other



documents, many of which are available online. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, to take one notable, widely publicized example, contains a wealth of information about how the terrorists prepared for and conducted the attacks, detailing mistakes they made along the way. The report also discusses numerous shortcomings in the government's counterterrorism efforts, many of which, members of the original Commission believe, were not adequately addressed in the years following the attacks.<sup>41</sup> Presumably, Islamist militants that have carried out operations since 9/11 enjoyed access to this knowledge. "It seems reasonable to assume," one counterterrorism analyst observes, "that they have studied the report from the 9/11 Commission, detailing the errors committed by the hand-picked *crème de la crème* of Al Qaeda prior to hijacking the four aircraft."<sup>42</sup> Yet, most Islamist terrorists since 9/11 do not appear to have benefitted from their predecessors' mistakes. Indeed, many post-9/11 plots have been less capable and more slipshod, suggesting that the planes operation may have represented the apex of Al Qaeda's tactical sophistication, at least to date.

Richard Reid's bumbling, yet dogged, attempt to ignite his shoes in the passenger cabin of a commercial airliner is a striking and diagnostic case. On 21 December 2001, only three-and-a-half months after 9/11, Reid showed up at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris with a Miami-bound plane ticket he purchased three days before with \$1,800 in cash. Reid claimed to be flying to the Caribbean for the Christmas holidays, yet his clothes were visibly dirty and he carried no luggage. Understandably wary of Reid's appearance and behavior, security officials searched him thoroughly and questioned him for so long he missed his flight. Reid remained undeterred. After walking the rainy streets of Paris that night, he returned to the airport the next day, where his disheveled appearance caught the attention of his fellow passengers, one of whom later remarked, "I was immediately struck by how bizarre he looked."<sup>43</sup> This time Reid's unkempt appearance did not keep him from boarding the plane. Onboard he made two flight attendants suspicious by repeatedly refusing their offers of food or drink on the long transatlantic voyage. "Usually I think, 'Yeah! Less work for me,'" one of the flight attendants later reported. "But something about him . . . seemed strange."<sup>44</sup> A couple of hours into the flight, passengers began to smell smoke in the cabin: Reid was attempting to light the fuse on his shoe bomb with matches after his seatmate left for a bathroom break. Alerted by passengers, one of the stewardesses quickly located him. When she realized that Reid was trying to light one of his shoes, the flight attendant struggled with him and cried out for help. Her colleague and several passengers then joined the scuffle, and together they subdued the 6'4", 200 lbs. militant and stopped him from igniting his shoes, narrowly averting disaster.<sup>45</sup> The vigilance and courage of the flight attendants and passengers, confronted with this terrifying scenario just weeks after 9/11, is commendable, even heroic. But if Reid had simply ignited the bomb fuse properly, perhaps by keeping his booby-trapped shoes dry the night before, or by using a plastic lighter instead of six separate matches, or by lighting the fuse from a more secluded spot on the plane, such as one of the lavatories, he might have succeeded in detonating the explosives, possibly rupturing the aircraft's fuselage and causing the plane to crash.

Yet, even if Reid had managed to bring down the aircraft, his attack would still have been marred by poor tradecraft and avoidable mistakes. The relationship between *mētis* and successful terrorist attacks is not tautological. Some *mētis*-laden conspiracies, such as the fertilizer-based explosives plot disrupted by British officials in Operation Crevice, are never successfully completed, while other, error-prone operations succeed in spite of the attackers' limited practical experience and local knowledge. *Mētis* can and does contribute to terrorists' operational success in some cases, but it is not a sufficient cause of success in all cases. In the shoe-bombing incident, Reid's poor tradecraft contributed to his failure, in

large part because of the alert and timely intervention of two American Airlines stewardesses and several passengers.

### **Madrid and London Bombings**

Following in the ignominious tradition of Mohammad Salameh and Ahmed Ressam, Reid's amateurish attack pegged him as another poster boy for "dumb" terrorists. But even the perpetrators behind two of the most devastating post-9/11 attacks, the 2004 Madrid bombings and the 2005 London bombings, violated basic rules in tradecraft, leaving them needlessly exposed to potential surveillance and disruption. In preparing for what was intended to be a series of bombings in Madrid, not just a single day's carnage, Jamal Ahmidan, one of the coordinators of the attacks, completed what Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon describe as a "series of amateurish and nearly botched transfers" of hashish for explosives and detonators with Emilio Suárez Trashorras, a drug dealer and former miner who provided the explosives used in the attacks from a mine in Asturias, in northern Spain.<sup>46</sup> Following several erratic, almost comical transactions in which the two criminals appeared to be working at cross purposes, by the end of February 2004 Trashorras and Ahmidan decided that these exchanges were too risky and slow.<sup>47</sup>

With the 14 March general elections they hoped to influence fast approaching, Ahmidan and two colleagues drove up to Asturias themselves to steal the rest of the explosives from the mine. While searching for the dynamite in the middle of the night, they got lost and had to call Trashorras for directions. After eventually finding the explosives and meeting with Trashorras the next morning, they returned to Madrid in separate cars. On the way, driving a stolen car with false number plates and carrying a fake Belgian passport for identification, Ahmidan recklessly exposed the operation when a *Guardia Civil* officer pulled him over for speeding and cited him for lacking proper documentation for the vehicle.<sup>48</sup> To his credit, Ahmidan remained calm when questioned by the police officer and offered a plausible lie to explain the car's missing paperwork. However, when the officer noticed Ahmidan's birthplace on the otherwise false passport, he remarked, "Tetuán was a Spanish protectorate," which caused the Moroccan-born militant to lose his composure and retort, "and Andalus was based at Córdoba."<sup>49</sup>

This was not the first time in the run up to the attacks that Ahmidan was stopped by the police while carrying stolen goods or heedlessly sharing his leanings with non-Muslim Spaniards. Three months before the attacks, two *Guardia Civil* officers questioned Ahmidan as he struggled to start his car in the truck stop area at a highway gas station. When the officers approached Ahmidan and asked him for identification, he became visibly nervous and showed them his fake Belgian passport. Ahmidan explained that he had been visiting his sister in nearby Bilbao, but he was unable to remember her address. The officers, who were investigating a string of gas station robberies, were skeptical of his story. They asked Ahmidan if he had traveled on the adjacent highway earlier in the day, because his face seemed familiar. Ahmidan snapped back, calling them racists. The officers then searched his car and found three large knives, a club, a large amount of cash, and two suitcases full of what appeared to be stolen clothing, judging from the store price and alarm tags still attached to the garments. In spite of the goodies and Ahmidan's suspicious behavior, the officers did not arrest him. Instead, they issued him a ticket for possessing illegal weapons and sent him on his resentful way.<sup>50</sup> Weeks later, days before the final explosives run to Asturias, Ahmidan had an argument with Trashorras's wife, Carmen Toro, during which he reportedly chortled, "We are the most powerful army in the world. Look at the Twin Towers." When Toro objected that many innocent people had died in the 9/11 attacks,

Ahmidan prophetically countered, “innocents also die in Iraq, in Palestine. Aznar is killing people in Iraq, someday there will be blood here too.”<sup>51</sup>

But first Ahmidan and his colleagues had to assemble the bombs Toro’s husband helped them acquire. To do so, they followed an elementary bomb design using cell phone alarms to trigger the detonators, apparently not realizing, or not caring, that the phones could be exploited by law enforcers to track them down if any of the bombs failed to detonate. The militants’ poor bombing-making skills ensured that this oversight came back to haunt them. After three of the thirteen bombs failed to explode, Spanish investigators traced the phone in one of them to a phone shop managed by Jamal Zougam, whose arrest provided authorities a major break in the investigation. Zougam, one of the perpetrators that placed the bombs on the trains, had supplied cell phones and Subscriber Identity Module (SIM) cards to his fellow conspirators. The Madrid bombers used these devices not only to build triggers for the bombs but to call each other and their family members, providing investigators with an invaluable opportunity to track them down through their communications. When authorities discovered that the phone and SIM card in the unexploded bomb were part of a larger pack Zougam had supplied his colleagues, they traced the calls made on each SIM card that was activated in the area where the bombs were built. This electronic trail led authorities to Emilio Trashorras, who was subsequently convicted of providing the explosives used in the attacks, and the Oulad Akcha brothers, both of whom reportedly helped carry out the bombings and later died at the police standoff in Leganés, a neighboring city south of Madrid. Incredibly, Jamal Zougam, the telecommunications “specialist” for the operation, was using one of the cards when he was arrested by authorities, two days after the attacks. Zougam’s arrest, announced by Spanish authorities and widely reported in the media, did not stop the other bombers at large from continuing to use their phones and SIM cards to make telephone calls. These calls provided the authorities with additional leads and eventually led them to the apartment in Leganés, where the perpetrators decided to make their last stand. Indeed, during this final confrontation, some of the bombers used one of the Zougam-supplied phones to make farewell calls to their family members.<sup>52</sup>

The morning of the Madrid attacks, the bombers violated a basic rule of tradecraft when, instead of traveling separately to minimize their exposure to surveillance, several of them traveled together in a *Renault Kangoo* van to a railway station in Alcalá de Henares. The van driver parked near the station and three bombers entered the Alcalá de Henares station together, where they were spotted by an observant doorman who called the police after the bombings, providing a critical early clue for the criminal investigation.<sup>53</sup> The militants then boarded the trains that would carry their devastating payloads into the Spanish capital. They also left critical forensic evidence inside the *Kangoo* van they abandoned near the train station, including an audio cassette tape containing Koranic recitations and several detonators and explosives wrappers. The audiotape provided investigators evidence suggesting that the attacks had not been carried out by Basque nationalists, as the Aznar administration originally claimed; the wrappers and other remains allowed officials to trace the explosives back to the mine in Asturias.<sup>54</sup> These avoidable errors in tradecraft, and the overall sloppiness of the attack, did not prevent the Madrid bombers from killing more than 190 people on that fateful day. But their mistakes and carelessness did provide critical clues that helped investigators piece together the conspiracy and track down the perpetrators, preventing them from killing more people in their planned follow-up attacks.

The morning of the London bombings, four suicide bombers, two of whom reportedly received “countersurveillance tradecraft” training at an Al Qaeda training camp several months earlier, violated similar rules in tradecraft.<sup>55</sup> Instead of traveling separately to London to protect the security of their looming attacks, Mohammed Siddique Khan, Shehzad

Tanweer, and Hasib Hussain drove together in the same car from Leeds to Luton, thirty miles north of London. On the way the trio stopped for snacks and gasoline at a filling station, where Tanweer purchased a packet of “crisps,” then argued with the cashier over his change and looked directly at one of the ubiquitous closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras that blanket Britain. While Tanweer’s “normal” demeanor later impressed police officials, his actions drew unnecessary attention to himself as he journeyed with his fellow bombers on a suicide mission.<sup>56</sup> The three militants then continued their drive together to the Luton station, where they met the fourth bomber, Jermaine Lindsay, who had been restlessly moving about the train station for almost two hours, awaiting their arrival. After parking their car next to Lindsay’s, the four men gathered their suicide backpacks, leaving incriminating explosives residues in the vehicles, entered the Luton station as one, where more CCTV cameras captured them for posterity, and walked together to the train platform.<sup>57</sup> The “home made” explosives they carried were rudimentary affairs, composed of house hold materials, like hydrogen peroxide and flour. Investigators believe the terrorists detonated the bombs manually themselves.<sup>58</sup>

On the train ride into London, the bombers stood out among the morning business commuters by dressing casually and carrying rucksacks, apparently hoping to pass themselves off as students or tourists. They stayed close to each other on the train, continuing to disregard the tradecraft rule of traveling separately during a mission to avoid unnecessary risk. When they arrived at King’s Cross station, the men again drew attention to themselves by hugging each other euphorically before boarding the separate trains that would carry each to his destiny. At the time of their deaths, the bombers carried personal items and identification cards, an elemental oversight given that they were in the middle of performing suicide attacks. Indeed, Khan and Tanweer had been identified by British intelligence officials in previous counterterrorism investigations and were at risk of surveillance. Along with the abundant CCTV footage showing the young men traveling together and the explosives materials they carelessly left in their abandoned cars and the Beeston flat serving as their “bomb-factory,” the personal documents allowed British investigators to identify them quickly and begin piecing together the basic outlines of their conspiracy.<sup>59</sup>

Like the 3/11 bombers, the 7/7 terrorists committed avoidable errors in tradecraft and execution. However, unlike the 3/11 bombers, who planned to conduct follow-up attacks, the 7/7 terrorists carried out a single suicide operation comprising four coordinated bombings. Once the last bomber, Hasib Hussain, finally managed to detonate his bomb on the double-decker bus near Tavistock Square, their work was done. The London bombers’ mistakes, whether due to carelessness, ignorance or something else, did not undermine their final outcome because law enforcers did not have the opportunity to exploit their adversaries’ poor tradecraft.

### **Explaining—and Exploiting—Poor Tradecraft**

What explains the sloppiness? Why do terrorists—including both experienced veterans that received the most sophisticated instruction Al Qaeda had to offer, and inexperienced novices with no formal training whatsoever—keep making basic errors in tradecraft? How can counterterrorism officials take advantage of terrorists’ poor tradecraft to identify inept militants and disrupt their operations?

*Mētis* and *techne* can help answer these questions. While some Islamist militants possess abundant *techne*, acquired from training camps and knowledge-based artifacts, they are often short on *mētis*, the experiential “know how” needed to execute attacks in local settings far removed from their training sites. Even battle-hardened militants that

develop their own *mētis* in political violence typically do so by participating in one or more “*jihads*” in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, or Yemen. Militants’ combat knowledge, however useful in those locales, is essentially limited to guerrilla warfare. Such *mētis* does not necessarily translate into effective urban terrorism in Western countries, where success requires local knowledge, street smarts, and a talent for clandestine operations. “[T]he skills that can be learned in insurgency situations have limited value when transferred to other settings,” explains a counterterrorism analyst:

Just as fighting an insurgency is different from fighting a pitched battle or conventional war, it also different from conducting clandestine operations in a hostile environment, far from your base of support. The technical skills required to operate a rocket-propelled grenade or mortar system in hit-and-run attacks in Afghanistan or to function as a sniper in Ar Ramadi are very different from the skills needed to plan and execute a terrorist attack in New York or London.<sup>60</sup>

In Pakistan, Somalia, and elsewhere, militants from western Europe and the United States have learned how to build improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by drawing on locally available materials and their own experience. But these skills do not transfer seamlessly to urban settings in their home countries. To detonate a bomb on the Washington Beltway, or the Washington Metro, a militant who has been trained in Somalia or Yemen would need to operate secretly in the United States for days or weeks, during which time he would have to acquire the materials necessary for the attack, without attracting the attention of law enforcers. The hypothetical terrorist would have to speak English with at least some proficiency, and possess knowledge of local conditions, including where to acquire the necessary materials. Moreover, the overseas-trained militant would need the *mētis* necessary to adapt his technical bombmaking knowledge to work with materials he can obtain locally, which may not be the same ingredients and components he has used in the past. “What is available in Pakistan is not necessarily available here in the UK,” explains an intelligence analyst from the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. “[C]hemicals are often easier for these guys to get in Pakistan than here, so they have to adjust to local conditions.”<sup>61</sup>

Scholars of terrorism have learned to never say never. But it would be challenging for an overseas-trained militant to plan and execute a bombing in this scenario, particularly in today’s hostile counterterrorism environment. “I guarantee you that if you try today to do that in the city you live in, that within probably a week the FBI would have you in custody,” explains a former counterterrorism official. “It is very difficult today to get your hands on, especially in the United States . . . these precursors for explosives to construct an IED, unless you are looking at a rudimentary pipe bomb.”<sup>62</sup> Of course, a rudimentary pipe bomb, of the sort used by restless American youths to blow up mailboxes, does not have the firepower and psychological impact of a shaped-charge explosively formed penetrator.

There is no need to limit this discussion to hypothetical examples. The 9/11 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, referred to by some officials as “dumb and dumber,” were clueless when it came to performing their assigned tasks in a Western country they had never lived in. Even renting an apartment in southern California proved to be a daunting task, requiring the assistance of local, English-speaking Muslims who knew the area. Not coincidentally, the pilots recruited to replace the hapless duo, Mohammed Atta, Marwan al Shehhi, and Ziad Jarrah, lived in Germany for years prior to joining Al Qaeda.<sup>63</sup> When they fortuitously showed up at the

Khalden training camp in November 1999, Mohammed Atef, Al Qaeda’s military chief, immediately recognized their value for the planned operation.<sup>64</sup> These “educated, technical men. . .,” Lawrence Wright reports, “did not need to be told how to live in the West.”<sup>65</sup> They already knew how. Atta and his colleagues drew on their knowledge and experience from living in Germany, infused with *mētis*, to perform adequate, if imperfect, tradecraft in the planes operation.

Unlike the 9/11 hijackers, Mohammed Siddique Khan and his co-conspirators in the 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 helping them carry out their suicide bombings. Although two of the bombers, Khan and Tanweer, received training in Pakistan,<sup>66</sup> any *techne* they acquired there merely complemented the *mētis* they already possessed from living in Britain for so many years. The 7/7 bombers drew on their local knowledge and experience to move around the country and obtain the explosive materials they needed without having their plot disrupted by law enforcers. Similarly, the Madrid bombers drew on their own *mētis*, acquired from living in Spain for many years, to prepare for and execute their attacks. While numerous conspirators, such as Jamal Ahmidan and Serhane ben Abdelmajid, were originally from North Africa, they had permanently settled in Madrid and were fluent in Spanish, critical skills they exploited as they went about acquiring the resources they needed for the operation. Other key participants, including Emilio Trashorras, the former miner who provided access to the explosives, were natural born citizens that had lived in Spain their entire lives. Ahmidan, Trashorras, and others possessed another critical source of *mētis*: criminal experience in drug trafficking. Ahmidan was a veteran hashish and Ecstasy smuggler who had previously killed a man in Morocco. Rafa Zouhier was an experienced drug dealer who provided Ahmidan the connection to Trashorras, who himself had a history of hashish trafficking. These criminals drew on their contacts and practical knowledge of drug trafficking and explosives to play essential roles in the Madrid bombings.

As in the United States after 9/11, today in Spain and Britain it has become increasingly difficult for would-be terrorists to acquire violent *mētis*, in part because counterterrorism agencies have cracked down on militants following the Madrid and London bombings and other incidents. In recent years law enforcement and intelligence agencies in all three countries have created a hostile environment for Islamist terrorists, intercepting their communications, arresting their members, disrupting their plots. Unlike *techne*, which can be acquired from knowledge-based artifacts, *mētis* is learned by doing. This presents militants with a dilemma: to develop hands-on knowledge for executing attacks they must practice building bombs, discharging firearms, conducting surveillance, and performing related activities, but in doing so they expose themselves to potential surveillance and disruption by security officials.<sup>67</sup> Terrorists’ chance of exposure increases as the counter-terrorism environment around them grows increasingly vigilant and hostile. To remain below the radar of law enforcers and suspicious neighbors, Islamist terrorists have adopted security-enhancing measures, like waiting until the last day of training before allowing students to fire their weapons or detonate their bombs. These precautions are sensible for maintaining operational security, but they do not really allow participants to practice what they have learned. Yet gaining a feel or knack for terrorism comes from repeated practice and direct experience in the activity itself. There is no substitute for local knowledge and practical, hands-on experience in bombmaking, weapons handling, and tradecraft.

Insufficient opportunities for hands-on practice are not the only sources of terrorists’ sloppy tradecraft and careless mistakes. Suicide bombings also have a tendency to limit the operational capacity of Islamist terrorists, particularly when perpetrators are not divided

into separate groups, where different people perform distinct functions, like gathering reconnaissance, building bombs, and executing attacks. In the London bombings, the same terrorists that built the bombs bombed the targets, killing themselves in the process. No one, such as an operational planner or master bombmaker, apparently survived, hoping to apply his experience to future attacks. Something similar occurred in the Madrid bombings, which were not designed with martyrdom in mind. 3/11 was intended to be the opening salvo of an extended bombing campaign, with the perpetrators conducting additional attacks around Madrid. However, Jamal Ahmidan and his colleagues failed to elude law enforcers long enough to conduct another attack, in large part because of their poor tradecraft and bombmaking skills. When Spanish law enforcers took advantage of the bombers' numerous mistakes to track them down to an apartment in Leganés, the militants decided to blow themselves up with their remaining explosives rather than learn from the experience and live to fight another day.

Terrorists that execute a single attack do not accumulate the experience that allows them to improve their operational capacity over time. Developing such competence requires engaging in a sustained campaign of operations, where practitioners can draw on their previous experience to continue their attacks and avoid repeating mistakes. This is what the "Provos" and Basque militants did in their respective decades-long struggles with British and Spanish authorities. In both cases, militants drew on their extensive operational experience to improve their bombmaking methods and their ability to carry out successful attacks.<sup>68</sup> Today, Islamist militants in Great Britain and Spain lack such wide-ranging experience. While both countries have experienced several Islamist terrorist attacks and plots in recent years, "[t]he attacks are isolated, rather than an IRA-like campaign," explains a former counterterrorism official with the London Metropolitan police.<sup>69</sup> This does not mean that Islamist terrorists never innovate in their never-ending quest to overcome counterterrorism security measures. Some of them clearly do, as demonstrated by the 2006 airline liquid explosives plot and the more recent 2009 Christmas Day bombing attempt. However, the sporadic timing of these operations, and the diffuse nature of Islamist terrorism in western Europe, where "bunches of guys"<sup>70</sup> come together on *ad hoc* basis to execute single attacks, suggests that such militants, unlike their Irish and Basque predecessors, do not enjoy ample opportunities to learn from experience.

Even when Islamist militants have the opportunity to enhance their operations through the accumulation of experience, it is not clear they actually do so. Like other human beings, terrorists are subject to psychological frames and beliefs that affect their willingness to change and improve their activities. Militants interviewed in this research expressed a steadfast devotion for their cause that, at times, appears to limit the sort of adaptive behavior necessary for operational improvement. "We don't need to adapt and change that much," a former leader of al-Muhajiroun explains, "because we believe Allah's will is there to protect us."<sup>71</sup>

If my destiny is to go prison . . . there's nothing anyone can do about it. . . . We believe in taking precautions. We don't believe that any amount of precaution is going to save you from the test that Allah has destined upon you. So in our case, going underground, changing the policy, changing the structure, we do not need to change that much. We continue as usual. Obviously, we change a thing here and there, individuals . . . organizations. . . . But the propagation of Islam will never change, will never stop. . . . That is the area which you cannot tap into. That is the area between me and my Lord. . . . So that is the thing which makes them stronger, that is the thing which should make them even

more firm, what should make them propagate even more, what makes someone strap a bomb to themselves and fly into a building.<sup>72</sup>

Such militants view themselves as soldiers of Allah, warriors in a cosmic struggle whose ultimate victors will be determined by God, not men. While al-Muhajiroun has certainly changed “a thing here and there” in response to external pressure, like forming different spin-off groups when the British government moved to ban their organizations, the leader’s comment is instructive because he suggests that whether or not he and his fellow militants succeed in avoiding jail ultimately has less to do with their own *mētis* and more to do with God’s predetermined fate for them.

To the extent that such convictions are common among Islamist terrorists, which this respondent admittedly is not, it provides additional insight for understanding the sloppiness of their tradecraft. If the Madrid bombers believed their divine duty was to carry out the railway attacks on 3/11, two-and-one-half years to the day after 9/11, and that human preparation and planning would not determine the outcome of an attack that was already preordained by God, they may have not cared a great deal whether leaving explosives residues in the car or communicating from the same pack of cell phones that triggered the bombs would expose the operation and lead law enforcers to their door. If Shehzad Tanweer believed that in a matter of hours he was destined to die as a “*shahid*” in central London, he may not have cared or even considered whether grousing with a cashier at a gas station and traveling with his fellow martyrs had the potential to derail the operation. What external observers may see as avoidable failures of tradecraft, mistakes that could have been averted with more caution and foresight, these dedicated soldiers of Allah may view as unnecessary—and irrelevant.

This is good news for counterterrorism officials. Islamist militants’ operational blunders provide alert law enforcers with critical leads they can use to identify their attackers, unravel their plots, and—sometimes—disrupt their operations before they cause additional harm. The Madrid bombings provide an obvious case in point. After tragedy struck, Spanish law enforcers exploited the bombers’ sloppy tradecraft to piece together the conspiracy and track them down before they could carry out their planned follow up attacks. Yet 3/11 is also instructive for what did not happen. As in the weeks leading up to 9/11, there were missed opportunities in Spain. Two *Guardia Civil* officers’ failure to detain Jamal Ahmidan after discovering weapons, cash, and stolen clothing in his car three months before the Madrid bombings is puzzling. Perplexity turns to frustration when recalling that another *Guardia Civil* officer later let Ahmidan go with a minor traffic citation after catching him speeding in a (stolen) car that lacked proper paperwork once he obtained the explosives for the attacks.

As these examples suggest, poor tradecraft is no substitute for vigilant police work. Prepared, perceptive law enforcers and civilian bystanders must be capable of exploiting their adversaries’ sloppiness by recognizing the warning signs of their reckless behavior and preventing their violent acts. The paragon is not the *Guardia Civil* but Luis Garrudo, the alert doorman who saw the Madrid bombers park the *Kangoo* van and enter the Alcalá de Henares train station and reported his observations to Spanish law enforcers, Deanna Dean, the observant border guard who noticed Ahmed Ressay’s hesitation and nervousness during a routine Customs inspection at Port Angeles in Washington state, Hermis Moutardier and Cristina Jones, the attentive airline stewardesses that recognized Richard Reid’s odd behavior and stopped him from detonating his shoe bomb. In each case routine activities by alert officials—and civilians—led to militants’ arrest and detainment. Tragically, such



situational prevention was not always enough to stop impending attacks, but it did prevent dangerous militants from killing many more.

## Conclusion

Since 9/11 government officials, journalists, and researchers have all warned that Islamist terrorism represents a grave, even existential, threat to the West. Often missing from these accounts is the recognition that Islamist terrorists are prone to the same errors in judgment and operation that plague all human beings. Opening the black box of terrorist operations exposes the hyperbole behind these portrayals. To be sure, security-conscious militants in Britain, Spain, and the United States have carried out devastating attacks in recent years, and they continue to plot against the West, as several disrupted and failed operations in 2009 indicate. However, these adversaries have not shown themselves to be terrorist “supermen,” and many do not appear to be capable of significantly improving their operational capacity over time. Islamist terrorists are “not that adaptable,” concludes one intelligence officer. “They have a plan to execute and they work on building the skills around it.”<sup>73</sup>

Of course, building skills is not easy, particularly when those skills depend on the concrete, contextual knowledge of *mētis*. Even the simplest terrorist actions involve practical know-how, more so when the activity in question, like assembling bombs and casing targets, is more complicated, requiring familiarity with local conditions. Would-be terrorists may learn the *techné* involved in discharging firearms, building bombs, or performing tradecraft by reading manuals or attending training lectures. But to develop proficiency in these activities, budding militants must eventually put the book down and practice. The competent terrorist is a practiced terrorist, one who has built bombs, fired guns, and cased targets with his or her own hands. Terrorists develop their violent skills, their *mētis*, by doing, by engaging in the activity in local, real-world settings.

It is no accident that the most devastating terrorist attacks in recent years—9/11, 3/11, 7/7—were led by militants with the *mētis* necessary to carry out complex operations in the areas where they operated. While veteran *jihādists* like Nawaf al Hazmi and Khalid al Mihdhar were ill-suited for their original roles in the planes operation, the suicide pilots that replaced them, Mohammed Atta, Marwan al Shehhi, and Ziad Jarrah, had the experience, language skills, and tradecraft necessary to coordinate their activities in the United States. Key participants in the Madrid bombings, Jamal Ahmidan, Serhane ben Abdelmajid, and Emilio Trashorras, and the London bombings, Mohammed Sidique Khan, Shehzad Tanweer, and Jermaine Lindsay, were even more experienced in their areas of operation, helping them to attack and kill hundreds of people. The apparent rise of “homegrown” Islamist militancy in the United States is a legitimate concern for analysts and policymakers, not because such militants necessarily have the capital and capability to execute 9/11-style attacks, but because some of these individuals may be capable of combining their local knowledge of cities and towns they have inhabited with the paramilitary training they received in Pakistan or Somalia to attack their fellow Americans.

Awareness, not hysteria, is the proper response to such prospects. As these pages have shown, poor judgment and poor tradecraft are common among Islamist terrorists. While conventional wisdom about consummate terrorists may offer comfort to those who wish to explain the failure to prevent attacks by reifying the alleged sophistication of their assailants, the sobering fact remains that many, if not most, of these attacks, including the most successful ones, were replete with basic errors in tradecraft. In the numerous cases examined here, terrorists became visibly upset when questioned by law enforcers or ran away from them, leading to their untimely arrest; they received speeding tickets and other traffic

citations when driving in “enemy” territory; they hinted about their imminent attacks to people outside their conspiracies; they traveled together, rather than separately, during missions; they dressed and acted in ways that drew attention to themselves, standing out among the unsuspecting bystanders around them. In sum, they were dedicated, determined—and surprisingly sloppy.

Recognizing the carelessness of terrorists is not a clarion call for dismissing the peril they present. Some terrorists may be “dumb” but they are still dangerous. Even Richard Reid, with his scruffy appearance and reckless demeanor, came alarmingly close to killing two hundred people on American Airlines Flight 63 shortly after aviation security procedures were upgraded in the wake of 9/11.<sup>74</sup> Eight Christmas holidays later, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab nearly killed three hundred people on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 on 25 December 2009. Where Reid and Abdulmutallab failed, Mohammed Sidique Khan and Jamal Ahmidan succeeded, killing dozens, even hundreds, of people in their respective attacks in London and Madrid. The fact that the London and Madrid bombers slaughtered so many in spite of their poor tradecraft is both sobering and instructive. Sobering because it illustrates that one need not be a “criminal mastermind” to carry out such devastating attacks; instructive because it is a reminder that terrorist “masterminds” are rare creatures indeed. The danger comes less from hyper-sophisticated terrorists that are impervious to human fallibilities than from ham-fisted fanatics whose dedication to the cause often undermines the skills they need to survive increasingly hostile environments.

## Notes

1. Fred Burton, “Beware of ‘Kramer’: Tradecraft and the New Jihadists,” *Stratfor Weekly*, 18 January 2006.

2. In this article the term “Islamist” refers to activists that seek to organize political and legal authority in the community according to Islamic law (*Sharia*). “Islamist militant” refers to Islamists that support armed struggles by Muslim fighters against non-Muslim forces, either to remove the latter from what they perceive as Muslim lands or to impose *Sharia* on resistant populations. “Islamist terrorist” refers to Islamist militants that are actively involved in the use of political violence against civilian noncombatants. For additional discussion of Islamism, see International Crisis Group, “Understanding Islamism,” *Middle East/North Africa Report*, no. 37 (2 March 2005); Mohammed Ayoob, *The Many Faces of Political Islam* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); and David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

3. Over the years, the leaders of al-Muhajiroun (the Emigrants) and its associated spin-offs, like the Savior Sect, al-Ghurabaa, Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah, and the recently banned Islam4UK, have called on their followers to establish Islamic rule in Britain and to support *jihad*, whether or not it has been sanctioned by an Islamic state. While al-Muhajiroun adopts a more expansive view of *jihad* than other Salafi and Islamist groups, its leaders reject the use of political violence against civilian non-combatants in England because they believe that they are beholden to a “covenant of security” that protects British citizens from such attacks. Author interview with former leader of al-Muhajiroun, London, 22 September 2007. For more on al-Muhajiroun, see Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), p. 10, and Jamestown Foundation, “Al-Muhajiroun in the UK: an Interview with Sheikh Omar Bakri Mohammed.” Available at [http://www.jamestown.org/news\\_details.php?news\\_id=38](http://www.jamestown.org/news_details.php?news_id=38) (accessed 24 November 2007).

4. The author cites all his interviews anonymously in order to protect the privacy of his respondents and to maintain the human subjects research protections used in this research. He recognizes that this will prevent others from validating the reliability and accuracy of his interview data. He regrets this tradeoff as a necessary precaution in this research.

5. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 313–315; and Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, translated from the French by Janet Lloyd (Sussex, UK: The Harvester Press, 1978), pp. 20, 47–48.

6. However, during the 1990s members of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) carried out a series of bombings and assassinations in France. See Jeremy Shapiro and Bénédicte Suzan, “The French Experience of Counter-Terrorism,” *Survival* 45(1) (Spring 2003), pp. 67–98.

7. Examining “successful” attacks helps control, however imperfectly, for bias in collecting data from disrupted or foiled plots that receive extensive media coverage. Relying solely on well-reported failures for data skews the findings by oversampling attacks that feature incompetent perpetrators. To offset this bias, the comparative case sample used in this article includes “successful” operations by Islamist terrorists, such as the 9/11, 3/11, and 7/7 attacks. For discussion of the comparative case study method, see Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005); and Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, 4th edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009).

8. For a similar theoretical discussion of *techne* and *mētis*, see Michael Kenney, “Beyond the Internet,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22(2) (2010). Examples from the growing body of research on terrorism training and “learning” include Brian A. Jackson, John C. Baker, Kim Cragin, John Parachini, Horacio R. Trujillo, and Peter Chalk, *Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 2: Case Studies of Organizational Learning in Five Terrorist Groups* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2005); Michael Kenney, *From Pablo to Osama: Trafficking and Terrorist Networks, Government Bureaucracies, and Competitive Adaptation* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007); James J.F. Forest, ed., *Teaching Terror: Knowledge Transfer in the Terrorist World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, May 2006); Petter Nesser, “How did Europe’s Global Jihadis Obtain Training for their Militant Causes?,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20(2) (2008): pp. 234–256, and Jeffrey M. Bale, “Jihadist Cells and ‘I.E.D.’ Capabilities in Europe: Assessing the Present and Future Threat to the West,” unpublished report (Monterey, CA: Monterey Institute of International Studies, May 2009).

9. For discussion of tacit and explicit knowledge, see Ralph D. Stacey, *Complex Responsive Processes in Organizations: Learning and Knowledge Creation* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, *The Knowledge-Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Michael Polanyi, *Knowing and Being*, edited by Marjorie Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

10. See Brian A. Jackson, *Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 1: Organizational Learning in Terrorist Groups and Its Implications for Combating Terrorism* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2005), pp. 14–15.

11. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, p. 320.

12. *Ibid.*

13. This, of course, assumes that the technical information contained in the manual is accurate, which is not always the case. See Anne Stenersen, “The Internet: A Virtual Training Camp?,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20(2) (2008), pp. 215–233; and Kenney, “Beyond the Internet.”

14. Burton, “Beware of ‘Kramer.’”

15. *Ibid.*, and Kenney, *From Pablo to Osama*, pp. 144–145.

16. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, p. 313.

17. For a fascinating analysis of *mētis* and *techne*, see Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, especially chapter 9; also see Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*; and Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

18. Author interview with former counterterrorism official, U.S. State Department, 13 August 2008.

19. This is not a novel insight. Nineteenth-century anarchists such as Johann Most understood the value of practicing with firearms and explosives. Writing in the 27 March 1886 edition of *Die Freiheit*, the anarchist journal he founded and edited, Most explains that “the actual possession of

arms is only half the story; one must also know how to use them. It is easy to shoot, but appreciably more difficult to hit anything. Far too little credit has hitherto been given to the importance of this fact and not a few revolutionaries have already paid with their lives for having suddenly taken a shot at some representative of ‘law and order’ without first having made himself into a marksman. For it does take some while, with either a revolver or a rifle, to get the feel of a weapon. Each weapon has, as it were, its own particular characteristics, which need to be studied and respected. Using the first weapon that comes to hand, even the most expert marksman will not be able to score the success he can achieve with his own gun, which he knows backwards. The same applies to modern explosives, dynamite, etc.” John Most, “Advice for Terrorists,” reprinted in Walter Laqueur, ed., *The Terrorism Reader: A Historical Anthology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), p. 108.

20. Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, p. 320.

21. Author interview with Federal Bureau of Investigation official, U.S. Embassy, London, England, 29 October 2007.

22. Bruce Hoffman, “Radicalization and Subversion: Al Qaeda and the 7 July 2005 Bombings and the 2006 Airline Bombing Plot,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 32 (2009), p. 1102.

23. Testimony of Mohammed Junaid Babar, Operation Crevice trial, Central Criminal Court, London, 4 April 2006; Marc Sageman, *The Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008): p. 128. Notes of Babar’s testimony provided to author by Jason Burke, senior reporter, *The Observer*.

24. Testimony of Mohammed Junaid Babar.

25. Fred Burton, “London Bombings: OPSEC Errors or Intelligence Failure?” *Stratfor Weekly* (20 July 2005). Available at [http://www.stratfor.com/london\\_bombings\\_opsec\\_errors\\_or\\_intelligence\\_failure](http://www.stratfor.com/london_bombings_opsec_errors_or_intelligence_failure) (accessed 26 June 2008); Burton, “Beware of ‘Kramer.’”

26. For a fascinating discussion of Salameh’s behavior and the ineptness of the 1993 WTC plot, see Mark S. Hamm, *Terrorism as Crime: From Oklahoma City to Al Qaeda and Beyond* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), pp. 46–48.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

28. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), pp. 177–179; Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), pp. 297–298; *Frontline*, program no. 2004, “Trail of a Terrorist,” first broadcast on 25 October 2001, written and directed by Terence McKenna. Available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/trail/etc/script.html> (accessed 14 May 2009).

29. Hamm, *Terrorism as Crime*.

30. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Outline of the 9/11 Plot*, Staff Statement No. 16. Available at [http://www.9-11commission.gov/hearings/hearing12/staff\\_statement\\_16.pdf](http://www.9-11commission.gov/hearings/hearing12/staff_statement_16.pdf) (accessed 16 June 2004), pp. 2, 4, 9; National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 155, 157; Wright, *The Looming Tower*, p. 309.

31. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 221–222.

32. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Outline of the 9/11 Plot*, p. 5.

33. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 223.

34. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Outline of the 9/11 Plot*, p. 7; National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 522, endnote 64.

35. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Outline of the 9/11 Plot*, p. 10.

36. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 246.

37. United States of America v. Zacarias Moussaoui, United States District Court, Eastern District of Virginia, Alexandria Division, Grand Jury, *Superceding Indictment* (June 2002); United States of America v. Zacarias Moussaoui, United States District Court, Eastern District of Virginia, Alexandria Division, Grand Jury, *Statement of Facts* (22 April 2005); National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Outline of the 9/11 Plot*, pp. 15–17; National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 246, 273, 540, endnote 90; Sean O’Neill and Daniel McGrory, *The Suicide Factory: Abu Hamza and the Finsbury Park Mosque* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 222.

38. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 273.

39. Wright, *The Looming Tower*, p. 309.

40. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *Outline of the 9/11 Plot*, pp. 12–16.

41. 9/11 Public Discourse Project, *Final Report on 9/11 Commission Recommendations* (5 December 2005).

42. Burton, “Beware of ‘Kramer.’”

43. Michael Elliot, “The Shoe Bomber’s World,” *Time* (16 February 2002). Available at <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,203478,00.html> (accessed 8 August 2008); anonymous reviewer, personal communication, 19 January 2010.

44. Cathy Booth Thomas, “Courage in the Air,” *Time* (2 September 2002). Available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1003224,00.html> (accessed 21 May 2009).

45. United States of America v. Richard Colvin Reid, United States District Court, District of Massachusetts, *Government’s Sentencing Memorandum* (17 January 2003); United States of America v. Richard Colvin Reid, United States District Court, District of Massachusetts, *Criminal Complaint*, “Affidavit of Margaret G. Cronin” (23 December 2001), pp. 3–4; Fred Burton and Scott Stewart, “The Heathrow Plot Trial: Retrospection and Implications,” *Stratfor Weekly* (9 April 2008). Available at [http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/heathrow\\_plot\\_trial\\_retrospection\\_and\\_implications](http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/heathrow_plot_trial_retrospection_and_implications) (accessed 26 June 2008); O’Neill and McGrory, *The Suicide Factory*, pp. 214–217, 226; Elliot, “The Shoe Bomber’s World.”

46. Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Next Attack: The Failure of the War on Terror and a Strategy for Getting it Right* (New York: Times Books, 2005), p. 11.

47. José María Irujo, *El Agujero: España invadida por la yihad* (Madrid: Aguilar, 2005), p. 287.

48. Manuel Marlasca and Luis Rendueles, *Una historia del 11-M que no va a gustar a nadie* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2007), pp. 180, 182–183; Paloma D. Sostero, “Un guardia civil declara que multó a ‘El Chino’ cuando volvía de Asturias con explosivos,” *El Mundo* (24 April 2007). Available at <http://w3.elmundo.es/elmundo/2007/04/23/espana/1177316962.html> (accessed 23 July 2008); Retransmisión del Juicio por los atentados del 11 de marzo de 2004, “Declaración Testigo E-68411-L Guardia Civil.” Available at <http://www.datadiar.tv/juicio11m/resumen230407.htm#E68411> (accessed 27 June 2008); Benjamin and Simon, *The Next Attack*, p. 11; *Playing Chess with the Dead*. Available at <http://chesswithdead.blogspot.com/2007/04/trialday-28-april-23rd.html> (accessed 6 June 2007).

49. Tetuán is a city in northern Morocco that was part of Spain’s African empire until 1969, when the Spanish government returned it to Morocco. Al-Ándalus is an Arabic term that refers to the regions of the Iberian peninsula that were ruled by different Islamic caliphs for several hundred years, from approximately CE 711 to 1492. The capital of Al-Ándalus was Córdoba, then widely known as a center of Islamic learning and culture. Because of this history many contemporary Islamist militants believe that Al-Ándalus/Spain must be recaptured for Muslim rule. The quotation is from *Indictment 20/2004*, Committal for Trial (*Auto de Procesamiento*), Juzgado Central de Instrucción Número Seis, Audiencia Nacional, Madrid, signed by magistrate Juan del Olmo (10 April 2006), p. 251.

50. ABC, “Los agentes que multaron a ‘El Chino’ declararon que no hallaron motivos para detenerle” (16 April 2007). Available at [http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-16-04-2007/abc/Nacional/los-agentes-que-multaron-a-el-chino-declaran-que-no-hallaron-motivos-para-detenerle\\_16](http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-16-04-2007/abc/Nacional/los-agentes-que-multaron-a-el-chino-declaran-que-no-hallaron-motivos-para-detenerle_16)

32565652035.html (accessed 11 March 2009); ABC, “La Guardia Civil no detuvo a ‘El Chino’ a pesar de saber que robó ropa” (16 April 2007). Available at [http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-16-04-2007/abc/Nacional/la-guardia-civil-no-detuvo-a-%27el-chino%27-a-pegar-de-saber-que-robo-ropa\\_1632559864764.html](http://www.abc.es/hemeroteca/historico-16-04-2007/abc/Nacional/la-guardia-civil-no-detuvo-a-%27el-chino%27-a-pegar-de-saber-que-robo-ropa_1632559864764.html) (accessed 11 March 2009); Retransmisión del Juicio por los atentados del 11 de marzo de 2004, “Declaración Testigo J-35844-R. Guardia Civil” (16 April 2007). Available at <http://www.datadiar.tv/juicio11m/resumen160407.htm#J35844> (accessed 11 March 2009); Retransmisión del Juicio por los atentados del 11 de marzo de 2004, “Declaración Testigo L-03953-K. Guardia Civil,” (April 16, 2007). Available at <http://www.datadiar.tv/juicio11m/resumen160407.htm#L03953> (accessed 11 March 2009); and *Playing Chess with the Dead*. Available at <http://chesswithdead.blogspot.com/2007/04/trialday-25-april-16th.html> (accessed 6 June 2007).

51. Marlasca and Rendueles, *Una historia del 11-M que no va a gustar a nadie*, p. 177.

52. Marlasca and Rendueles, *Una historia del 11-M que no va a gustar a nadie*, pp. 55–56, 75; *El Mundo* (1 March 2007), “La policía se centró en la pista islamista el 13-M cuando llegó a la tienda de Jamal Zougam.” Available at <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2007/03/01/espana/1172774314.html> (accessed 23 July 2008); Javier Jordan, Fernando M. Mañas, and Nicole Horsburgh, “Strengths and Weaknesses of Grassroot Jihadist Networks: The Madrid Bombings,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31(1) (2008), p. 32; *Playing Chess with the Dead*. Available at <http://chesswithdead.blogspot.com/2007/03/trialday-9-march-1st.html> (accessed 6 June 2007).

53. Paloma D. Sostero, “Una agente de Inteligencia detalla las incógnitas sin resolver en la investigación,” *El Mundo*, 3 July 2007. Available at <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2007/03/07/espana/1173241768.html> (accessed 27 June 2008); Bale, “Jihadist Cells and ‘I.E.D.’ Capabilities in Europe,” p. 32.

54. Marlasca and Rendueles, *Una historia del 11-M que no va a gustar a nadie*, p. 34.

55. Hoffman, “Radicalization and Subversion,” p. 1102.

56. Personal communication with detective inspector, Counter-terrorism command, Metropolitan Police, London, England, 10 October 2008; Jason Bennetto, “July 7 Tube Bomber Argued with Cashier Shortly before Blast,” *The Independent* (31 October 2005). Available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/july-7-tube-bomber-argued-with-cashier-shortly-before-blast-513288.html> (accessed 7 January 2009).

57. British House of Commons, Home Office, *Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005* (11 May 2006), pp. 2–4; Burton, “London Bombings.”

58. As in the Madrid attacks, it is still not clear how the London bombers acquired the knowledge necessary to build their bombs, all of which detonated. The House of Commons investigation notes that the “know-how necessary could be obtained from open sources,” but adds that it’s “more likely” the bombers received “advice from someone with previous experience given the careful handling required to ensure safety during the bomb making process and to get the manufacturing process right.” However, the Prime Minister’s Intelligence and Security Commission report explains that “[o]rganic peroxide explosive is dangerous to manufacture because of its instability but it does not require a great deal of expertise and can be made using readily available materials and domestic equipment.” *Ibid.*, p. 23; and Intelligence and Security Committee, *Report into the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005* (May 2006), p. 11.

59. *Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005*, pp. 2–4, 22; Intelligence and Security Committee, *Could 7/7 Have Been Prevented?: Review of the Intelligence on the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005*, report presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister by Command of Her Majesty (May 2009), pp. 15–16.

60. Burton, “Beware of ‘Kramer.’”

61. Author interview with counterterrorism analyst, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, London, England, 24 July 2007.

62. Author interview with former counterterrorism official, U.S. State Department, 13 August 2008.

63. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, p. 160.

64. Wright, *The Looming Tower*, pp. 307, 309.

65. Ibid., p. 309.

66. Intelligence and Security Committee, *Could 7/7 Have Been Prevented?: Review of the Intelligence on the London Terrorist Attacks on 7 July 2005*, report presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister by Command of Her Majesty (May 2009), p. 51.

67. Author interview with former counterterrorism official, U.S. State Department, 13 August 2008.

68. In separate studies, Bruce Hoffman and Brian Jackson both illustrate how IRA militants improved their detonation systems under pressure from British authorities. See Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*. Revised and expanded edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006): pp. 252–254; and Brian A. Jackson, “Provisional Irish Republican Army,” in *Aptitude for Destruction, Volume 2: Case Studies of Organizational Learning in Five Terrorist Groups* by Jackson et al. (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2005), pp. 93–140.

69. Author interview with former Metropolitan police official, Specialist Operations, 26 July 2007.

70. Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

71. Author interview with former head of al-Muhajiroun in the United Kingdom, London, England, 22 September 2007.

72. Ibid.

73. Author interview with American official, London, England, 24 October 2007.

74. Burton, “Beware of ‘Kramer.’”