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Interview with CDR Youssef Aboul-Enein, USN¹

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Most Islamic terrorists—especially the leaders and planners—are well-educated and semi-affluent, and they were not educated in radical madrassas. Numerous studies over the past 50 years have disproven the assumption that ending poverty and providing education would reduce the appeal of the terrorist message. Some of the terrorist foot soldier recruits are uneducated, poor, and/or mentally disabled, but they represent the few, not the many², and even fewer of the leaders come from these circumstances. Therefore, only a small percent of terrorists would be affected by improvements in economic or educational conditions.

- A study by a terrorism expert examined 102 Islamist radicals involved in global *jihād* and found no correlation between poverty and terrorism; only about one-quarter of the *jihād*is reviewed were from impoverished backgrounds. “[M]embers of the global Salafi *jihād* were generally middle-class, educated young men from caring and religious families who grew up with strong, positive values of religion, spirituality, and concern for their communities³.”
- For example, the “underwear bomber” Umar Abdulmuttalab, who tried to set off a bomb on a US passenger jet flying over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009, is the son of one of the richest men in Africa and attended University College London.
- In addition, Anwar al-Awlaki, the late leader of al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, was studying for his PhD at George Washington University before he took up arms with al-Qa’ida. His father was a Cabinet minister in Yemen⁴.

Ideology, not grievances, is the root cause of terrorism. ISIS and other Islamic terrorists have created an ideology by misinterpreting and misrepresenting the Quran to provoke violence and recruit religious and influential young men (and sometimes women). This ideology should not be confused with theology because the “teachings” the leaders of the terrorist groups make could be debunked by a genuine Islamic scholar.

¹ See the Biographic Information section for background about the interviewee.

² *Nonsense about terrorism’s “root causes”*, Peter Bergen <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/19/opinion/bergen-terrorism-root-causes/index.html>

³ <http://www.discoverthenetworks.org/viewSubCategory.asp?id=550>

⁴ *Nonsense about terrorism’s “root causes”*, Peter Bergen <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/19/opinion/bergen-terrorism-root-causes/index.html>



- The Quran consists of many examples of writings, lessons, and historical events that support tolerance for other religions, justice, and equality. Those messages need to be capitalized on, including the passages supporting different religions and components within those religions co-existing peacefully.
- The Islamic terrorists should be referred to as *Islamists* because this sets them apart from the majority of non-violent Muslims.

To counter this message, creating an alternative message and blasting it throughout the Arab media is a viable solution. The media needs to be “flooded with a cacophony of Islamic-based, constructive narratives,” recognizing that differences in Muslim perspectives need to be acknowledged to develop sustainable approaches for how to reach these groups.

- Countries such as Jordan, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt *and* the US should use Islamic scholars and Islamic historians to craft the message with the nuances that only they can provide so the messages are authentic and unquestioned by the target audience.
- Many clerics have and are willing to issue *fatwas* against the use of violence, which resonate with the “ground-level” mosque attendees. These scholars and clerics have authority and influence in these tribal communities. Tribes also are the keys to gaining influence in the Middle East.
- The realities of a beheading—the sights, smells, regrets—could be spread, rather than the glorified video game version, to deter young people from joining the jihadists and facing a different reality once they have become involved in the group.
- ISIS is alienating and targeting many Islamic groups, leading to an increasing number of groups willing to take up arms against ISIS. Capitalizing on those rifts could increase the presence and influence of anti-ISIS Muslims.

Going forward, saplings—the identified, newly emerging threats—need to be addressed early instead of allowing the threat to grow to an unmanageable size.

- The US government missed opportunities like taking out Osama bin Laden and Muqtada al-Sadr when they were direct threats and could have been eliminated.
- The US continues to wait until the threat gets out of control to take action.

Biographic Information:

US-born Youssef Aboul-Enein moved to Saudi Arabia with his Saudi father and American mother when he was four years old. He earned the rank of Commander and currently teaches part-time at the National Intelligence University and National Defense University. He is the author of *“Militant Islamist Ideology,”* and *“Iraq in Turmoil,”* both published by Naval Institute Press. His first book was named among the top 150 most influential titles on terrorism and counter-terrorism by the journal, *Perspectives on Terrorism*. He has served in operational tours in Liberia, Bosnia, and the Persian Gulf, as an officer in the Navy Medical Service Corps and Middle East Foreign Officer,



Adjunct Military Professor and Chair of Islamic Studies at the National Defense University and Country Director for North Africa and Egypt and special advisor on Islamic militancy at the Office of the Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs.

He has published articles on Islamic militancy, Arab affairs, and Middle East military tactics for *Military Review*, the *Marine Corps Gazette*, and the *Foreign Area Officer Journal*. He is engaged in a long-term project to highlight Arabic works of military interest in the pages of *Military Review* and has already published excerpts of memoirs by Egyptian and Algerian generals as well as by a Hamas operative.

CDR Aboul-Enein holds a B.B.A. from the University of Mississippi, an M.B.A and Masters in Health Services Administration from the University of Arkansas in Little Rock, and an M.S. in Strategic Intelligence from the Joint Military Intelligence College.

Publications:

Published by the US Naval Institute:

- *The Secret War for the Middle East: The Influence of Axis and Allied Intelligence Operations During World War II*, October 2013
- *A Militant Islamist Ideology: Understanding the Global Threat*, September 2013
- *Iraq in Turmoil: Historical Perspectives of Dr. Ali al-Wardi, from the Ottoman Empire to King Feisal*, April 2012

Published by the U.S. Air Force Counter Proliferation Center:

- *The Ideologue of Modern Islamic Militancy*, March 2004

Numerous Articles in the *Small Wars Journal*