

The “Shoe Bomber” Richard Reid – His Radicalization Explained

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On December 22, 2001 Richard Colvin Reid boarded an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami with the intention to bomb the flight. As luck would have it, he encountered technical issues and was unable to carry out the attack. Richard's attempt to execute this large scale terror attack was the outcome of a long radicalization process. This process can be divided into four main phases using the NYPD model of radicalization: Pre-radicalization, Self-Identification, Indoctrination, and Jihadization. The study of Richard Reid's case through the lens of the NYPD Model of Radicalization sheds light on the roots of his indoctrination, and how it led to the potentially catastrophic event he was planning. His radicalization process started as a non-radical religious journey and took a sharp, dangerous turn as a result of various social, sociological and psychological factors, combined with the influence of charismatic leaders, an effective mobilizing mechanism, and group radicalization.

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Background

Richard Colvin Reid is a convicted terrorist who tried to bomb an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami on December 22, 2001. Richard was born in 1973 to a working class family in Bromley, Britain. Richard's father, who is a second generation immigrant from Jamaica, was a career criminal who was frequently in and out of jail. As a mixed race child, and as a young man, Richard couldn't find his place in society and performed poorly in school. At the age of 16, Richard left high school and spent most of his 20's as a petty criminal, in and out of jail like his father. In 1995, Richard converted to Islam whilst in jail. When released one year later, he joined the Brixton Mosque and formed his first connections with prominent radical Islamic figures. Later, Richard joined the community of Finsbury Park Mosque that was known for its anti-American and anti-western radical views.¹

In 1999, Richard went to Pakistan and Afghanistan, where he trained in a terrorist camp and became a member of al-Qaeda and a Mujahidin. One year later, he returned to Britain with a mission to plan and execute a terror attack. During the years 2000-2001 Richard travelled the world to plan and prepare this terror attack. On December 22, 2001, Richard boarded American Airlines flight 63 from Paris to Miami with explosives in his shoes, intending to detonate while in flight. Due to a technical problem, he was unable to detonate the bomb. His suspicious behavior attracted the passengers' attention and they subdued him until the pilots performed an emergency landing in Boston. Richard was arrested immediately, and in 2002, he was sentenced to three life terms plus 110 years in prison.²

Introduction

Richard's attempt to execute this large scale terrorist attack was the outcome of a long radicalization process. There is no one 'root cause' that can explain Richard's behavior. His radicalization process was the result of several social, sociological and psychological factors along with the involvement of charismatic leaders, effective

¹ Abdul Haqq Baker, *Extremists in our midst: confronting terror* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

² Keme Nzerem, "At School with the Shoe Bomber," *The Guardian*, February 28, 2002, , accessed November 12, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/feb/28/september11.race>.

mobilizing mechanism and group radicalization. Richard's radicalization process can be divided into four phases: Pre-radicalization, Self-identification, Indoctrination and Jihadization.

Richard's experiences – both the conditions in which he was born into and the events that marked his life – made him search for a new identity. Richard was seeking meaning and so he became susceptible to new ideologies and religions. Richard's response to the emptiness he felt was to dedicate himself to Islam, which did not have to be a negative force. Unfortunately, Richard was a good candidate for radical Salafi Islamists and for al-Qaeda 'scouts' who were looking for new recruits. His faith was solid, he was poor, he was isolated from any moderate elements and lacked meaning in his life outside of religion. Eventually, Richard's transformation from a Salafi Islamist to an Islamic terrorist and a member of the Mujahidin – an uncommon transformation for Westerners – was possible due to the people he met along the way and internal group dynamics of the groups he frequented.

NYPD Model of Radicalization

The NYPD model was developed by the Intelligence Division of the New York City Police Department in 2007. Its purpose was to find a pattern for the Islamic-based radicalization processes in people living in Western countries by examining case studies from Europe and the United States. The NYPD model posits radicalization occurs in four phases: Pre-Radicalization, Self-Identification, Indoctrination, and Jihadization.³

Pre-Radicalization refers to the period prior to being exposed to Salafi Islam. Self-Identification is the period after an individual is exposed to Salafi Islam and begins associating with others who are also exploring it. During the Indoctrination phase the individual identifies strongly with the Jihadi-Salafi ideology and supports military Jihad against the West. Finally, Jihadization, the last phase, is when an individual is willing to launch a terror attack. Although it is not a requirement for a terrorist or potential terrorist to clearly or linearly experience all of these stages,

³ Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat* (OccupyBawlStreet.com Press, 2015).

Richard's radicalization process is worth discussing in detail as it encompasses all four stages.

First stage: Pre-Radicalization

The first stage includes everything that happened in Richard's life, prior to his conversion to Islam. This stage sheds light on the conditions that sculpted Richard into an individual who would be susceptible to respond positively to new ideologies and religions.

Richard was a third-generation immigrant. First generation immigrants usually tend to be grateful to their host nations despite being poorer and having trouble assimilating as they are escaping hardship. They often had worse lives in their home countries and wanted new opportunities for themselves and their families. The second and third generations however, who haven't experienced the same hardships are born into a reality in which they do not feel equal to the other members of society. These generations are poorer than their native counterparts, their culture is different and they feel alienated by their state's institutions. This 'second-generation problem' refers to the phenomenon where second and third generations of immigrants, who are not managing to assimilate in the new society, have identity crises and hold personal grievances against their home countries.⁴ This often manifests in feeling a lack of personal identity. As Western Europe has experienced many waves of immigration throughout history, it translates to millions of young people who are not satisfied with their place in society. They feel stuck between a place they have perhaps never visited and to which they feel no connection, and a place they were born into that rejects them or treats them as second class citizens.

Richard tried desperately to find his place in society, but as a mixed race child, he never felt accepted by black or white peers.⁵ Marcus Graham, Richard's closest friend at school, said that Richard "*was trying to sort out where he was from, his*

⁴ Boaz Ganor, "Four Questions on ISIS: A "Trend" Analysis of the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 3 (June 9, 2015): , <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/436>.

⁵ Baker, *Extremism in Our Midst*, 130-133.

roots. *He wanted to find an identity.*”⁶ Shortly after Richard was born, his parents divorced. His father was in prison and it was not the first time, as he had been arrested for stealing a car not long before Richard was born. Although Richard's mother had a new partner, his step-father did not treat Richard as his own son, and Richard's biological father rarely visited. In elementary school and junior high school, Richard's performances were not impressive. He was described as a confused boy who was desperate to fit in and find his place in society. At the age of sixteen, Richard dropped out of high school and his family moved to another city where Richard was left alone to live in a cheap motel.

While living alone with no money, friends or family, Richard became an easy target for gangs in the neighborhood. They threatened him and forced him to mug people although being a criminal was not in his nature. This is the first testimony, of many to come, of Richard's weak character.⁷ Richard began increasingly to associate himself with criminal activities. Eventually, armed robberies and other criminal acts became Richard's main source of income until one night, in the spring of 1992, Richard was arrested for armed robbery. He was sentenced to five-years detention at the Feltham Young Offenders' Institution. The environment at the Offender's institution, which was populated mostly with white prisoners, was hostile, especially towards immigrants, mixed-races and black people.

These key elements of the first stage are not the direct reason why Richard became a terrorist but build some necessary fundamentals for Pre-radicalization. Being a third generation immigrant, growing up in an unsupportive environment, harboring feelings of alienation and discrimination, while searching for an identity and something ‘greater’ created in Richard a cognitive openness, that made him ready to adopt different ideologies. Into this vacuum stepped Islam.

⁶ Nzerem, "At School with the Shoe Bomber."

⁷ Peter Alan Olsson, *The making of a homegrown terrorist: brainwashing rebels in search of a cause* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2014).

Second Stage: Self-Identification

The second stage started in 1995 when Richard's search for an idea brought him to the point where he adopted Islam as his new faith. One of the reasons Richard decided to convert to Islam was a recommendation he received from his biological father, who converted to Islam several years before Richard. He told Richard that Muslims get better food at prison and enjoy other benefits such as spending time at the mosque: that way, Richard could avoid being bullied by other prisoners who picked on him regularly.

With time, Richard spent more and more time at the prison mosque, which provided both spiritual and practical escape. Richard was very curious at this time, he asked a lot of questions and wanted to know the reasons for and implications of the West's involvement in other countries. Richard was released in 1996 and immediately joined the Brixton Mosque as he wanted to continue his religious journey and deepen his knowledge and beliefs.⁸

Indeed, Richard was a very enthusiastic student, he studied the Koran every day, learned Arabic and changed his name to Abdel Rahim. Nevertheless, Richard was a perfect target for radical Islamists as he was recognized as having a convenient and easy to shape character. He had nothing to give meaning to his life except Islam, he was already isolated from moderate society, he didn't have friends and was detached from his family. Even though the Imam of Brixton Mosque, Abdul Haqq Baker, was not a radical Islamist and didn't encourage any kind of violence, it was at the Brixton Mosque that Richard first encountered a radical figure – al-Qaeda member Zacarias Moussaoui – and formed personal connections with him.⁹

This concludes the second phase of Self-Identification, where Richard finds his place within a new ideology and deepens his connection to it. It is important to emphasize that Richard's conversion to Islam was not a negative development on its own. Richard's beliefs were not radical, he didn't believe in Jihad or any other violent concepts. Islam was used by Richard as a means to fill the emptiness he felt and gave

⁸ Baker, "Extremism in Our Midst," 130-133; Nzerem, "At School with the Shoe Bomber."

⁹ Olsson, *The Making of a Homegrown Terrorist*, 66.

him a place where he belonged in the same way many peaceful and devout individuals do with many religions.

Third stage: Indoctrination

According to Abdul Haqq Baker, the Imam of Brixton mosque, Richard started combining military elements in his appearance and expressed radical ideas and interpretations of the Koran after he began associating with Zacarias Moussaoui. When Zacarias Moussaoui was expelled from the Brixton mosque due to his radical views, Richard left as well and followed him to Finsbury Park Mosque, which was known for its Salafist Islamist radical views. This influence by personal connections with more radical elements was the beginning of the Indoctrination stage which is often considered a necessary precondition for Jihadization. Indeed, the personal connection with Zacarias Moussaoui, that eventually formed a direct link between Richard and al Qaeda, was the most significant milestone in Richard's radicalization process.

In many cases, a charismatic leader is a necessary element in order to indoctrinate and radicalize someone until they identify with military Islam and are willing to help the Mujahidin in their efforts to fight the West.¹⁰ It was in Finsbury Park Mosque that Richard first met Abu Hamza al-Masri, the Imam of the mosque.¹¹ Al-Masri was a fundamental Muslim who believed and preached for Jihad against the West and had direct links to al-Qaeda. Al-Masri had indoctrinated Richard to the point where he completely identified with radical Islamist views.¹² Perhaps one of the reasons Richard followed the Imams with whom he became close, was because they filled the vacuum that was created when Richard's parents divorced. Growing up without a father figure led Richard to search for a strong leader he could admire and follow. The Imams with whom Richard fraternized were indeed his spiritual fathers.

¹⁰ Lorne L. Dawson, "The Study of New Religious Movements and the Radicalization of Home-Grown Terrorists: Opening a Dialogue," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 1 (2009): , doi:10.1080/09546550903409163.

¹¹ Morten Storm, Paul Cruickshank, and Tim Lister, *Agent Storm: a spy inside al-Qaeda* (London: Penguin Books, 2015).

¹² Storm, Cruickshank and Lister, *Agent Storm: A Spy Inside Al-Qaeda*, 55-60.

Another important element in Richard's indoctrination process was his membership in a closed radical group. Group formation is a catalyst, and can be considered another necessary condition for indoctrination and radicalization.¹³ The Group Dynamic Theory posits that people join radical groups either out of materialistic reasons or social reasons. In Richard's case, all facts indicate that at the beginning of his radicalization process he was motivated by social reasons. His criminal activities provided an income, however he was looking for *meaning*; he was looking for his place in society. Richard's desire to be part of a closed, organised, group could have been his way to compensate for his lacking a supportive family structure.

In addition to Zacarias Moussaoui and Abu Hamza al-Masri, Richard also associated with other known radicals such as Saajid Badat, who meant to conduct a synchronized attack, the same day as Richard, on a different airplane and Djamel Beghal, who was suspected to be an al-Qaeda 'scout'.¹⁴ Richard was 'held' by his own will in a close and radical group, detached from moderate elements. All things considered, the personal connections Richard formed with radical elements who also had direct links to al-Qaeda were the most significant development in Richard's Radicalization process as they accelerated his indoctrination and, eventually, materialized in Jihadization.

Fourth stage: Jihadization

One of the methods al-Qaeda used to recruit people is described as 'the Infection'.¹⁵ The Infection is a top-down recruiting method that al-Qaeda employs in which 'scouts' focus their efforts on specific targets, such as communities in radical mosques. The rationale behind this method is that it requires fewer efforts, it will be harder to plant spies in the organization as it is based on personal connections, and the chances for success in recruiting are higher as it is a focused approach. One of the

¹³ Marc Sageman, "Understanding Terror Networks," 2004, , doi:10.9783/9780812206791.

¹⁴ Carol E.B. Choksy and Jamsheed Choksy, "The Saudi Connection: Wahhabism and Global Jihad," *World Affairs* 178, no. 1 (April 2015).

¹⁵ Elizabeth Mulcahy, Shannon Merrington, and Peter James Bell, "The Radicalisation of Prison Inmates: A Review of the Literature on Recruitment, Religion and Prisoner Vulnerability," *Journal of Human Security* 9, no. 1 (2013): , doi:10.12924/johs2013.09010004.

radical communities al-Qaeda was targeting was the Finsbury Park Mosque, as it was a hub for extremist Muslims.

*"I'm at war with them not for personal reasons but because they have murdered more than, so many children and they have oppressed my religion"*¹⁶ said Richard during his trial. Richard was indoctrinated to adopt a new political ideology just as he was indoctrinated to adopt radical Islamic views. Richard was indoctrinated into believing the West is murdering Muslims all over the world and it is doing everything to suppress the Ummah, the Muslim nation. Accordingly, the only solution to this conundrum was Jihad against the West.

In 1999 Richard's radicalization process took a turn for the worst. He went to Pakistan and Afghanistan, where he trained in an al-Qaeda terrorist camp and became a member of the Mujahidin. In 2000, Richard returned to Britain and on December 22, 2001, he boarded American Airlines flight 63 with explosives in his shoes. However due to a technical problem, Richard was unable to detonate the bomb. His suspicious behavior attracted passengers' attention and after a short struggle, they restrained him until the plane landed. Richard was immediately detained by the US authorities, and in 2002, he was sentenced to spend the rest of his life in prison.

Richard's attempt to execute a terror attack is what differentiates him from the other millions of people all across the world that hold radical views, that suffer from socio-economic problems, that search for meaning and have feelings of alienation and discrimination, but do not turn into terrorists. In Richard's case it was his preconditions and poor background along with the people he met along the way and the internal group dynamic within these groups that enabled his transformation into a terrorist.

¹⁶"Reid: 'I am at war with your country'," *CNN*, January 31, 2003, , accessed November 18, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/LAW/01/31/reid.transcript/>.

Conclusion

Richard's radicalization process started as a non-radical religious journey and took a turn for the worst when Richard met radical Islamists. Richard's poor background and life experiences conditioned him to search for identity, for meaning, desperate to belong somewhere, anywhere. Converting to Islam and joining close radical groups filled Richard's need to feel that he belonged. After a while, when the indoctrination was under way, Richard's faith was solid enough to absorb radical ideologies. The main element that made his indoctrination so powerful and his path to al-Qaeda possible was the personal connections he made. The effect these radicals had on Richard was so strong that even today, when he is being held in maximum security prison in the US, he is still certain he did the right thing.

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