

[The Link Between Engineers and Jihad](#)

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Intelligence agencies tasked with profiling the terrorist mind, and figuring out where future extremists might be found, have begun focusing on a surprising target: science students. As it turns out, many recruits in extremist groups such as Al Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizbullah, and Hamas have backgrounds in medicine, engineering, and other hard sciences. In one study by Oxford sociologists -Diego Gambetta and Steffen Hertog, who will be publishing a book on the subject next year, out of 178 terrorists with higher education, almost half studied math or science. And the phenomenon is not limited to Islamists--strong links to science and engineering studies have been found among neo-Nazis, too, and engineers disproportionately supported Hitler and Mussolini during World War II.

With an eye on such statistics, Western and Israeli intelligence agencies are now ramping up their monitoring of hard--sciences departments in universities across the Middle East, says Claude Moniquet, a former French intelligence operative and current head of the -Brussels-based European Strategic Intelligence and Security Center, which advises foreign intel agencies. U.S. officials are also apt to give visa requests from engineering students extra scrutiny, says Juan Zarate, deputy national-security adviser for counterterrorism under former president George W. Bush.

So why do geeks disproportionately turn to terror? According to personality experts, engineers are more likely than humanities students to view society like a big machine. And when that machine breaks down, engineers often tend to think it can be fixed by eliminating the so-called bad parts and replacing them with good ones. This clear distinction between right and wrong, good and bad, broken and fixed, appeals to scientific minds, which are more likely to be troubled by the idea that life might have messy moral gray -areas. It's a mindset of "either the equation works or it doesn't," says Mitchell Silber, head of intelligence analysis for the New York Police Department. Silber says this mentality helps explain why engineers are more likely to make literal interpretations of Islamic holy writings that appear to call for violence or jihad.

The ability to get inside the engineering mind is also proving helpful when suspects are captured, says Ami Angell, former civilian head of a Department of Defense-funded -insurgent-rehabilitation program at Camp Bucca in southern Iraq. The rehab program had a rough start in 2007, says Angell, but results drastically improved when the program was tweaked to target the insurgents' love of logic. Respected Iraqi clerics refocused class discussions on Quran passages that appeared to highlight the need to interpret scripture in context, rather than just literally; and they pushed the students to make clear arguments about why indiscriminate killing would not make society a better place. Angell says appealing to the extremists' logical side was "crucial" to the program's success. Of course, not all terrorists are rational--far from it. But for those who are, using the rigor of their own disciplines against them may prove a powerful new tool in the war on terror.