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P A P E R



Would-Be Warriors

Incidents of Jihadist
Terrorist Radicalization
in the United States
Since September 11, 2001

Brian Michael Jenkins



INVESTMENT IN PEOPLE AND IDEAS

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Summary

Between September 11, 2001, and the end of 2009, a total of 46 cases of domestic radicalization and recruitment to jihadist terrorism were reported in the United States. In some of the cases, individuals living in the United States plotted to carry out terrorist attacks at home; some were accused of “providing material support to foreign terrorist organizations”; and some left the United States to join jihadist organizations abroad. All these individuals can be called “homegrown terrorists.”

Forty-six cases of radicalization in a period of little more than eight years may seem significant, but in each case, an average of only three people were accused—and half of the cases, including some of the fully formulated plots to carry out terrorist attacks in the United States, involved only a single individual. Only 125 persons were identified in the 46 cases.

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Although the numbers are small, the 13 cases in 2009 did indicate a marked increase in radicalization leading to criminal activity, up from an average of about four cases a year from 2002 to 2008. In 2009, there was also a marked increase in the number of individuals involved. Only 81 of the 125 persons identified were indicted for jihadist-related crimes between 2002 and 2008; in 2009 alone, 42 individuals were indicted. The remaining two individuals were indicted in January 2010 in connection with a plot uncovered in 2009.

Who Are the Recruits?

Most of America’s homegrown terrorists are U.S. citizens. Information on national origin or ethnicity is available for 109 of the identified homegrown terrorists. The Arab and South Asian immigrant communities are statistically overrepresented in this small sample, but the number of recruits is still tiny. There are more than 3 million Muslims in the United States, and few more than 100 have joined jihad—about one out of every 30,000—suggesting an American Muslim population that remains hostile to jihadist ideology and its exhortations to violence. A mistrust of American Muslims by other Americans seems misplaced.

Many of the jihadist recruits in the United States began their journey on the Internet.

Many of the jihadist recruits in the United States began their journey on the Internet, where they could readily find resonance and reinforcement of their own discontents and people who would legitimate and direct their anger. Some of the recruits gained experience on the streets. At least 23 have criminal records—some of them very long records—for charges including aggravated assault, armed robbery, and drug dealing. A good percentage of those arrested could be described as having the experience and skills that would make them dangerous.

But what is most at issue here are intentions, not ability. The 46 cases demonstrate earnest intent. The individuals were ready to be terrorists. Their ideological commitment was manifest. Some were naïve, some were adventurers, some were misguided. But many were no doubt sincere in their anger and determination, having made the ideological leap to armed jihad. They came into contact with U.S. authorities when they tried to act on their beliefs. They had, in the words of one prosecutor, “jihadi hearts and jihadi minds,” and juries convicted them on their intent.

The 1970s Saw Greater Terrorist Violence

While radicalization and recruitment to jihadist terrorism are cause for continuing concern, the current threat must be kept in perspective. The volume of domestic terrorist activity was much greater in the 1970s than it is today. That decade saw 60 to 70 terrorist incidents, most of them bombings, on U.S. soil every year—a level of terrorist activity 15 to 20 times that seen in most of the years since 9/11, even counting foiled plots as incidents. And in the nine-year period from 1970 to 1978, 72 people died in terrorist incidents, more than five times the number killed by jihadist terrorists in the United States in the almost nine years since 9/11.

America’s perception of the terrorist threat today differs greatly from what it was 35 years ago. It is not the little bombs of the 1970s but fear of another event on the scale of 9/11 or of scenarios involving terrorist use of biological or nuclear weapons that drives current concerns. In response, the country has conceded to the authorities broader powers to prevent terrorism. However, one danger of this response is that revelations of abuse or of heavy-handed tactics could easily discredit intelligence operations, provoke public anger, and erode the most effective barrier of all to radicalization: the cooperation of the community.

Are We Doing This Right?

Traditional law enforcement, in which authorities attempt to identify and apprehend a perpetrator *after* a crime has been committed, is inadequate to deal with terrorists who are determined to cause many deaths and great destruction and who may not care whether they themselves survive. Public safety demands a more preventive approach—intervention *before* an attack occurs.

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As long as radicalization and recruitment to terrorism remain a reality, domestic intelligence collection, always a delicate mission in a democracy, will remain a necessary activity. Under appropriate controls, intelligence operations can disrupt terrorist recruiting, uncover terrorist plots, and discourage those who would turn to violence.

And by preventing dramatic terrorist actions that inevitably create fear and alarm, intelligence operations can also prevent overreactions by the general public, allay unwarranted suspicions, and thereby protect vulnerable minorities (in this case, the American Muslim community) against official discrimination and even individual acts of revenge.

Meanwhile, expanded efforts must be made through community policing and other means to work with members of the Muslim community. These efforts must entail work-

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ing with the community actively and consistently to address issues of crime, fears of crime, the suspicions of authorities, and other community concerns.

Relatives and friends are often more likely than the authorities to know when someone is turning dangerously radical and heading toward self-destruction. On occasion, relatives and friends have intervened. But will they trust the authorities enough to notify them when persuasion does not work? Citizen involvement is essential, but so is maintaining positive police relations with all members of the community without stigmatizing any group or privileging special interests.

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Recruitment Will Continue

The homegrown jihadist threat in America today consists of tiny conspiracies, lone gunmen, and one-off attacks. The continued trust and cooperation of the Muslim community, tips to police from the family members and close acquaintances of those heading toward violence, alert citizens, and focused intelligence-collection efforts will remain essential components of the thus-far-successful containment of domestic jihadist terrorism. But prevention will not always work. More attempts will occur, and there will, on occasion, be bloodshed.

As long as America's psychological vulnerability is on display, jihadists will find inspiration, and more recruitment and terrorism will occur.

In addition to traditional law enforcement, police intelligence collection, and community policing, public reaction is an essential component of homeland defense. Needless alarm, exaggerated portrayals of the terrorist threat, unrealistic expectations of a risk-free society, and unreasonable demands for absolute protection will only encourage terrorists' ambitions to make America fibrillate in fear and bankrupt itself with security. As long as America's psychological vulnerability is on display, jihadists will find inspiration, and more recruitment and terrorism will occur. Panic is the wrong message to send America's terrorist foes.