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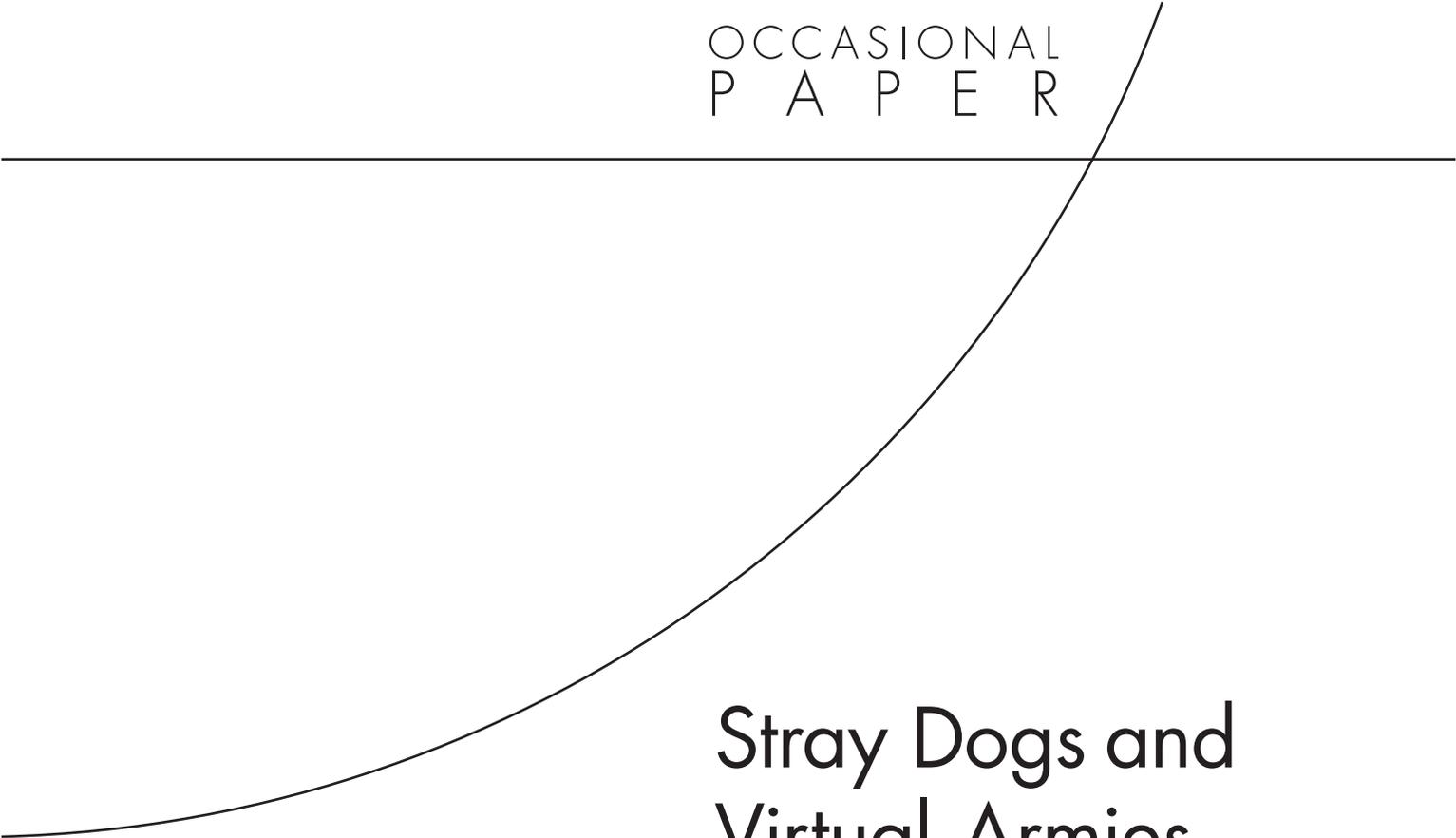
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# Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies

Radicalization and Recruitment  
to Jihadist Terrorism in the  
United States Since 9/11

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## Summary

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The evidence suggests that al Qaeda, although weakened, remains as intent as ever on its worldwide terrorist campaign. But it faces a more difficult and dangerous operating environment than it did 10 years ago and has necessarily changed its approach. Instead of conducting large-scale attacks, which are difficult to plan and implement in the glare of improved U.S. intelligence, al Qaeda seeks American homegrown recruits to implement a campaign of individual jihad and do-it-yourself terrorism.

How successful has al Qaeda been with this new approach in the years since 9/11? So far, the turnout is tiny. A total of 176 Americans have been indicted, arrested, or otherwise identified as jihadist terrorists or supporters since 9/11. The 176 individuals were involved in 82 cases, 20 of which were announced in 2010, as compared with 15 in 2009.

This analysis counts cases, plots, and individuals. A case represents the culmination of an investigation. It may involve a single individual or a group of persons charged with materially assisting or joining a jihadist terrorist group abroad or with plotting terrorist attacks in the United States. Plots comprise the subset of cases in which individuals or small groups were accused of planning terrorist attacks against targets in the United States. Obviously, these cause the greatest concern.

The number of cases and individuals involved in homegrown terrorism increased in 2009 and again in 2010, but counting cases turns out to be an imperfect way of measuring activity. In fact, fewer individuals were arrested or indicted in 2010 than in 2009, while the cases in both years reflect investigations of activity going back to the middle of the decade.

This paper examines the cases of homegrown terrorism from September 11, 2001, through 2010 and highlights lessons learned from those cases that suggest actions for the future.

Working alone or with others, so-called homegrown terrorists planned and in some cases implemented terrorist activities, contributed financial or other material support to others' terrorist activities, or became radicalized in the United States and then traveled to other countries to conduct terrorist activities directed against those countries or against the United States. They were "jihadists" in that they subscribed to al Qaeda's ideology of worldwide terrorism.

In the United States, to hold radical views is not a crime. The Constitution provides strong protection of individual beliefs and free speech. Only when these turn to criminal incitement and violent action or manifest intent to engage in violence is there cause for legal intervention—this is why analysts favor the complete phrase "radicalization *and* recruitment to terrorist violence." It is the second step that makes the first step a matter of concern.

The 82 cases since 9/11 involved 32 plots. Few of these 32 got much beyond the discussion stage. Only 10 developed anything resembling an operational plan that identified a specific target, developed the means of attack, and offered a sequence of steps to carry out the planned action. Of these, six were Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) stings. Only two indi-

viduals actually attempted to build devices on their own. One was arrested while doing so, and the other's device failed. The rest of the would-be terrorists only talked about bombs. In only two cases did jihadist terrorists actually succeed in killing someone, and both of these cases, which occurred in 2009, involved lone gunmen.

The recruits are generally young, although a bit older than the average American criminal offender. The overall average age of recruits is 32, and the median age is 27. The number with a high school education or less coincides roughly with the national average for men 25 and older. More jihadists started college than the national average (many attended local community colleges), but far fewer graduated, since many dropped out in their early twenties to join the jihadist campaign.

Arab and South Asian immigrant communities are statistically overrepresented in the small sample of recruits for whom we have information about national origin, and most are Muslim, but the numbers are still small: 176 terrorists out of an American Muslim population of several million comes to roughly 6 out of 100,000. Meanwhile, several thousand Muslim Americans serve in the U.S. armed forces. A mistrust of American Muslims by other Americans therefore seems misplaced.

Somalia merits special concern. Four of the 20 cases in 2010 involved recruiting or fundraising for the al-Shabaab group in Somalia, and four more involved individuals going or attempting to go to Somalia to join this group. A ninth case involved a Somali-American planning a terrorist attack in the United States. Overall, Somalis and Pakistanis are heavily represented among America's homegrown jihadists. In Europe, Somalis, Algerians, and Pakistanis predominate; all three countries are engaged in major internal conflicts, suggesting that local diaspora communities with links to war zones and struggling with assimilation are the most likely to produce homegrown terrorists.

## Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies

Radicalization and recruitment to terrorism, in person or on the Internet, does not appear to be a community phenomenon; rather, it is an individual decision. In fact, a majority of the 82 cases described in this paper involve the actions of a single individual attempting to join a jihadist front abroad or plotting to carry out a terrorist attack in the United States. Analysts have tended to call such individuals "lone wolves," in my view, a romanticizing term that suggests a cunning and deadly predator. A few of those recorded here display this kind of lethal determination, but others, while still dangerous, skulk about, sniffing at violence, vocally aggressive but skittish without backup. "Stray dogs," not lone wolves, more accurately describes their behavior.

On the other hand, many conspirators were working for al Qaeda at the time of their arrest. Eight of the individuals were working with FBI or police informants or undercover agents whom they believed to be part of al Qaeda or some other jihadist group. They had connected with a group, but it wasn't the one they expected.

## A Preventive Approach

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 deter-

mined to cause many deaths and great destruction and who may not care whether they themselves survive. Public safety demands a preventive approach—intervention *before* an attack occurs.

Prevention includes working closely with the communities from which terrorists emerge to elicit their cooperation—family and friends may dissuade would-be terrorists from taking action or alert the authorities to potential violence, and on occasion they have done so. Prevention also means working with these communities to help them assimilate, earn their trust, and prevent discrimination. At the same time, Muslim Americans must accept that while religion alone does not make the community a target of the state, neither does it provide immunity from legitimate intelligence and law enforcement investigations. Policing efforts aimed at enlisting community cooperation and intelligence efforts aimed at preventing and deterring terrorist activity that would endanger society and the Muslim communities themselves will continue.

One way of finding out who might be dangerous is to probe intentions with sting operations, which lubricate the suspect's decisionmaking. Instead of monitoring a subject for months, perhaps years, sting operations offer him the means to take action. Indeed, FBI sting operations have interrupted a substantial number of plots that may or may not have otherwise been successful. Stings will continue to be necessary, but they must be closely managed to preclude entrapment.

Since 9/11, al Qaeda has increasingly used the Internet to build an army of followers. Many of the terrorists identified in this paper began their journey on the Internet. However, al Qaeda has not yet managed to inspire many of its online followers to action. In the United States, its virtual army, with a few exceptions, has remained virtual.

Prevention will not always work. Al Qaeda remains a threat. More terrorist attempts will occur. In addition to traditional law enforcement, 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. Panic is the wrong message to send to America's terrorist foes. As long as America's psychological vulnerability is on display, jihadists will find inspiration. More recruitment and more terrorism will follow.