

The Homegrown Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland (ARI)

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Theme: Radicalisation into violence affects some small segments of the American Muslim population and recent events show that a threat from homegrown terrorism of *jihadist* inspiration does exist in the US.

Summary: The wave of arrests and thwarted plots recently seen in the US has severely undermined the long-held assumption that American Muslims, unlike their European counterparts, are virtually immune to radicalisation. In reality, as argued in this ARI, evidence also existed before the autumn of 2009, highlighting how radicalisation affected some small segments of the American Muslim population exactly like it affects some fringe pockets of the Muslim population of each European country. After putting forth this argument, this paper analyses the five concurring reasons traditionally used to explain the divergence between the levels of radicalisation in Europe and the US: better economic conditions, lack of urban ghettos, lower presence of recruiting networks, different demographics and a more inclusive sense of citizenship. While all these characteristics still hold true, they no longer represent a guarantee, as other factors such as perception of discrimination and frustration at US foreign policies could lead to radicalisation. Finally, the paper looks at the post-9/11 evolution of the homegrown terrorist threat to the US homeland and examines possible future scenarios.¹

Analysis: The American authorities and public have been shocked by the tragic events of 5 November 2009, when Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan allegedly opened fire against fellow soldiers inside the Fort Hood military base, killing 13 people and wounding 30 others. The shooting triggered a heated debate over Major Hasan's motives. Earlier analyses focused on personal and psychological factors, such as his alleged distress towards his forthcoming deployment to Iraq and the abuses he had reportedly suffered from other soldiers. As the days went by, more and more evidence surfaced pointing to Major Hasan's radical Islamist sympathies. Colleagues and acquaintances described

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¹ It goes without saying that various forms of homegrown terrorism have long threatened the US, some of them well before those of jihadist inspiration. Right-wing militias, radical environmentalist groups and, to a lesser degree, some fringe left-wing and anarchist groups are very much active inside the country and have occasionally carried out violent acts over the last few years. Yet it is undeniable that, in terms of magnitude, frequency and sophistication, homegrown terrorism of jihadist inspiration currently represents the most immediate threat against the US and is therefore the subject of this analysis.

many instances in which the Virginia-born Army psychiatrist had expressed extremely negative feelings towards the US and praised acts of violence against it. Reports also indicated that the FBI had investigated Major Hasan's e-mail conversations with Anwar al Awlaqi, a US-born Yemeni-based cleric known for his fiery rhetoric and links to two of the 9/11 hijackers.

Authorities have so far been reluctant to officially label the Fort Hood shooting an act of terrorism and, at the time of writing, various investigations are exploring all angles of this tragic event. While it might be premature, if ever possible, to identify the full spectrum of motives behind Major Hasan's actions, it is fair to say that radical Islamist ideology had an influence on his worldview. In any case, the Fort Hood shooting comes at the tail end of two months that have challenged many of the assumptions on terrorism and radicalisation in the US that have shaped the debate for more than a decade. Since September 2009, in fact, a staggering series of arrests has taken place on US soil:

- On 20 September, FBI agents arrested two Afghan immigrants in Colorado and one in New York.² According to the authorities, one of the men, Najibullah Zazi, had trained in an al-Qaeda training camp in Pakistan and, once back in the US, had purchased large quantities of chemical substances in various beauty supply stores. Zazi allegedly intended to mix the substances and detonate them against targets throughout the New York metropolitan area. The authorities described Zazi's plot as the most serious threat against the US homeland uncovered since 9/11.³
- On 24 September, a 19-year-old Jordanian immigrant was arrested for having parked what he believed to be a car bomb in the car park of a 60-story skyscraper in downtown Dallas, Texas.⁴ Before driving the car to the site, Hosam Hamer Husein Smadi had made a video which he believed would have been sent to Osama bin Laden.⁵
- On the same day but in an unrelated plot, Michael C. Finton, a 29-year-old American-born convert to Islam, parked a car that he also believed laden with explosives outside a federal courthouse in Springfield, Illinois.⁶ In both the Finton and the Smadi cases, federal agents had approached the two men after unearthing information about their desire to commit acts of violence, led them to believe they were affiliated to al-Qaeda and supplied them with explosives that the men wrongly believed to be active.
- On 21 October, the authorities indicted two Boston-area natives, Tarek Mehanna and Ahmad Abousamra, with various conspiracy charges.⁷ According to the indictment, the men, who had been extremely active in online jihadist forums, had been trying to join various al-Qaeda affiliates since 2001 and had also planned attacks inside the US (reportedly targeting a local shopping mall and various US government officials).
- On 27 October, the authorities arrested two long-time Chicago residents of Pakistani descent and charged them with conspiracy to provide material support and/or to commit terrorist acts against overseas targets.⁸ According to the charges the two men had been in close contact with senior leaders of Pakistani jihadist groups *Lashkar e*

² http://www.fbi.gov/pressrel/pressrel09/zazi_092009.htm.

³ Kevin Johnson, 'Alleged terror threat seen as "most serious" since 9/11 attacks', *USA Today*, 25/IX/2009.

⁴ <http://dallas.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/pressrel09/dl092409.htm>.

⁵ Jon Nielsen, 'FBI says Dallas terror plot suspect made video to send to Osama bin Laden', *Dallas Morning News*, 5/X/ 2009.

⁶ <http://www.usdoj.gov/usao/ilc/press/2009/09September/24Finton.html>.

⁷ <http://boston.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/pressrel09/bs102109a.htm>.

⁸ http://www.justice.gov/usao/iln/pr/chicago/2009/pr1027_01.pdf.

Taiba and *Harakat ul Jihad Islami* and one of them, Daood Gilani, had travelled to Denmark to conduct surveillance of the facilities of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands Posten* for a possible attack against it. On 7 December the authorities charged Gilani also with conducting surveillance of various targets in Mumbai in the two years preceding the deadly November 2008 attack on the Indian city. According to the indictment, upon accepting the task Gilani changed his name to David Headley and travelled at least five times to Mumbai, confident that his new name and American passport would not attract the attention of the Indian authorities. After each trip he travelled to Pakistan, where he shared the pictures, videotapes and notes he had taken with senior *Lashkar e Taiba* operatives.⁹

- On 28 October, the federal authorities in Detroit proceeded to arrest 11 members of *Ummah*, a group of mostly African-American converts to Islam, on charges that ranged from mail fraud to illegal possession and sale of firearms. Most suspects were arrested without opposing resistance, but Luqman Ameen Abdullah (alias Christopher Thomas), the group's leader, fired at agents and was subsequently killed. While the case cannot be considered a full-fledged terrorism investigation, it nevertheless involves a US-based radical Islamist network. *Ummah*, in fact, is a group that, according to authorities, 'seeks to establish a separate Sharia-law governed state within the United States' and whose members have been involved in violent acts in the past.¹⁰
- Finally, in early December, the Pakistani authorities arrested five American Muslims in the city of Sargodha. The five, all US citizens in their late teens and early 20s who had gone missing from their northern Virginia homes a few days earlier, had reportedly been in touch via the Internet with senior militants of various al-Qaeda-affiliated organisations and allegedly intended to train with local outfits to fight against US forces.¹¹

All these plots are very diverse in their origin, degree of sophistication and characteristics of the individuals involved. Yet they all contribute to paint the picture of the complex and rapidly changing reality of terrorism of Islamist inspiration in the US. Moreover, they smash or, at least, severely undermine an assumption that has been widely held by policymakers and analysts over the last 15 years. The common wisdom, in fact, has traditionally been that American Muslims, unlike their European counterparts, were virtually immune to radicalisation. Europeans, argued this narrative, have been unable to integrate their immigrant Muslim population and radicalisation is the inevitable by-product of the discrimination and socio-economic disparity suffered by European Muslims. America, on the other hand, is more open to its immigrants and has been able to integrate its Muslims, making them impervious to radicalisation.

The wave of arrests of the last months of 2009 has contributed to shedding light on a reality that is significantly more nuanced, showing that radicalisation affects some small segments of the American Muslim population exactly like it affects some fringe pockets of the Muslim population of each European country. Evidence supporting this view has been available for a long time, as the cases of American Muslims joining radical Islamist groups date back to the 1970s.¹² According to data collected by the NYU Center on Law and

⁹ <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2009/December/09-nsd-1304.html>.

¹⁰ <http://detroit.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/pressrel09/de102809.htm>.

¹¹ Waqar Gilani & Jane Perlez, '5 US Men Arrested Said to Plan Jihad Training', *New York Times*, 11/XII/2009.

¹² For an overview, see Lorenzo Vidino, 'Homegrown *Jihadist* Terrorism in the United States: A New and Occasional Phenomenon?', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 32, 1/I/2009, p. 1-17.

Security, for example, more than 500 individuals have been convicted by the American authorities for terrorism-related charges since 9/11.¹³ Most of them are US citizens or long-time US residents who underwent radicalisation inside the US. While making a numerically accurate comparison is not easy, it is fair to say that the number of American Muslims involved in violent activities is either equal or only slightly lower than that of any European country with a comparable Muslim population.

Yet, despite this evidence, for a long time the American authorities and commentators seemed unable to acknowledge the existence of radicalisation among small segments of the American Muslim population. In the FBI's parlance, for example, until 2005, the term 'homegrown terrorism' was still reserved for domestic organisations such as anti-government militias, white supremacists and eco-terrorist groups such as the Earth Liberation Front. Such groups were termed 'homegrown' to distinguish them from jihadist terrorist networks, even though some of the latter possessed some of the very same characteristics (membership born and raised in the US and a focus on US targets). Since the cause of the *jihadists* was perceived to be foreign, the US government did not label them as 'homegrown', despite the typically homegrown characteristics of many of them.

The July 2005 attacks in London led the US authorities to look at the homegrown issue with renewed attention. As an increasing number of cells that clearly possessed homegrown characteristics were uncovered throughout the country, the authorities began to re-assess the definition of homegrown. By 2006 top FBI and DHS officials began to openly speak of homegrown terrorism of *jihadist* inspiration inside the US, even describing it as a threat 'as dangerous as groups like al-Qaeda, if not more so'.¹⁴ As a consequence of this reassessment, the US authorities began to ask themselves if the emergence of relatively large numbers of radicalised second-generation Muslims that had been observed in Europe could also take place in the US. This fear led to an increased attention on the dynamics and causes of radicalisation among Muslims in both Europe and North America.

Comparing Radicalisation in Europe and America

Five concurring reasons have traditionally been used to explain the divergence between the levels of radicalisation in Europe and the US. The first one is related to the significantly better economic conditions of American Muslims. While European Muslims generally languish at the bottom of most rankings that measure economic integration, American Muslims fare significantly better, and the average American Muslim household's income is equal to, if not higher, than the average American's.¹⁵ As the many cases of militants who came from privileged backgrounds have proved, economic integration is not always an antidote to radicalisation, but it is undeniable that radical ideas find a fertile environment among unemployed and disenfranchised youth. A direct consequence of economic integration is the lack of Muslim ghettos in the US. Areas of large European cities with a high concentration of poor Muslim immigrants have been ideological sanctuaries where radicals could freely spread their message and where radical Islam has become a sort of counterculture. The American Muslim community's economic conditions have prevented the formation of such enclaves in the US.

¹³ <http://www.lawandsecurity.org/publications/TTRCHighlightsSept25th.pdf>.

¹⁴ Remarks of FBI Director Robert Muller, City Club of Cleveland, 23/VI/2006.

¹⁵ *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*, Pew Research Center, 22/V/2007, p. 24-5.

Geographic dispersion, immigration patterns and tougher immigration policies have also prevented the formation of extensive recruiting and propaganda networks as those that have sprung up in Europe. While places such as Brooklyn's al-Farooq mosque or Tucson's Islamic Center saw extensive jihadist activities in the 1990s, they pale in comparison to recruiting headquarters such as London's Finsbury Park, Hamburg's al-Quds mosque or Milan's Islamic Cultural Institute. Moreover, the fact that large segments of the American Muslim population belong to ethnicities that have traditionally espoused moderate interpretations of Islam has been cited as another reason for America's lower levels of radicalism. In fact, Muslims from the Iranian and Indian American communities, which account for vast segments of America's Muslim population, have traditionally embraced moderate forms of Islam and have been, to varying degrees, almost impervious to radicalisation.

Finally, commentators have often pointed out that America is a country built on immigration, traditionally accepting immigrants of all races and religions as citizens. European countries, on the other hand, have been unable to develop a sense of citizenship not linked to century-long identifying factors such as ethnicity and religious affiliation. In a nutshell, it is easy to become American, while it is very difficult for immigrants, particularly if they are not white and Christian, to be accepted as full-fledged Germans, Frenchmen or Spaniards. This sense of exclusion is traditionally cited as one of the factors driving some European Muslims to radicalisation, while the more inclusive nature of American society would prevent American Muslims from undergoing the same process.

While all these characteristics still hold true, they no longer represent a guarantee. Factors such as perception of discrimination and frustration at US foreign policies could lead to radicalisation, irrespective of favourable economic conditions. Experts and community leaders have repeatedly warned about the growing alienation of American Muslims, particularly among those of the second generation. These frustrations could produce what Steven Simon refers to as 'a rejectionist generation', which could embrace radical interpretations of Islam.¹⁶ The same conclusion has been reached by a widely publicised report released by the New York Police Department Intelligence Division in 2007. 'Despite the economic opportunities in the United States', reads the report, 'the powerful gravitational pull of individuals' religious roots and identity sometimes supersedes the assimilating nature of American society which includes pursuit of a professional career, financial stability and material comforts'.¹⁷

Various cases have shown that radicalisation can also touch communities where extremism is rare, such as Albanian and Iranian Americans. Moreover, the fact that no organised jihadist group has an extensive network in the country is no longer a guarantee that radicalisation cannot reach America's shores, as the Internet has, in many cases, replaced the need to have operatives physically spreading the propaganda on the ground.¹⁸ Young American jihadist wannabes, given the easy access to the internet that they enjoy, have been extremely active online. A search of jihadist chat rooms and even of subgroups in 'benign' social network sites such as *Myspace.com* reveals the presence

¹⁶ Steven Simon, Statement before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 12/IX/2006.

¹⁷ Report by Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, New York Police Department Intelligence Division, *Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat*, August 2007, p. 8.

¹⁸ Bruce Hoffman, 'The Use of the Internet by Islamic Extremists', Testimony before the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 4/V/2006.

of many American-born youngsters that glorify al-Qaeda's ideology. By the same token, several cases have shown that the Internet has also become a way to connect American aspiring jihadists to like-minded individuals worldwide.

Future Scenarios

The terrorist threat to the US homeland has evolved significantly over the last eight years. Until mid-2003 virtually all of the terrorist conspiracies intended to strike against American soil had been planned, albeit with varying degrees of involvement, by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM) and al-Qaeda's central leadership. The arrest of KSM and many of his top lieutenants, al-Qaeda's loss of the Afghan sanctuary and the significant improvement in homeland security measures triggered a shift that began to materialise in late 2003. With the exception of the 2006 Transatlantic Plot, a plot hatched by UK-based militants apparently directed by al-Qaeda members in Pakistan to detonate liquid explosives on board several US-bound flights, every single attack against the American homeland thwarted by US authorities since then appears to have been conceived by individuals acting independently from al-Qaeda's leadership.¹⁹

The individuals involved in these plots have been an odd mix of low-ranking al-Qaeda affiliates and jihad enthusiasts who had never had any contact with al-Qaeda or other established organisations. And most of them have been characterised by the absolute operational independence of the planners. The result of this shift from leader-led to homegrown has been a remarkable decrease in the sophistication of the operations planned, as most of the plotters were amateurish if not embarrassingly clumsy, lacking the basic tradecraft and capabilities to operate undetected or mount any sort of sophisticated attack.

While this was true until a few months ago, there are indications that things are changing. Recent investigations have shown that a small yet increasing number of American Muslims have been travelling to Pakistan to acquire operational skills and establish contacts with various jihadist outfits. One well known case is that of Bryant Neal Vinas, a 26 year-old Long Island native who was captured in Pakistan and brought back to the US in November 2008.²⁰ Vinas, who had allegedly participated in a rocket attack against a US military base in Afghanistan, decided to cooperate with American interrogators and has since provided 'an intelligence gold mine'.²¹ Thanks to Vinas' information the authorities have been able to identify and arrest several American and European militants who had also trained with al-Qaeda and affiliated groups in the Afghanistan/Pakistan region.

While this 'Pakistan connection' is not new to the European authorities, it is a disturbing new development for their American counterparts. To be sure, Americans had trained with various Afghanistan/Pakistan-based jihadist outfits before and after 9/11. In 2003, for example, the US authorities dismantled the so-called 'paintball jihad' network in northern Virginia.²² The network was formed by a dozen young men from the Washington suburbs who had travelled to Pakistan immediately after 9/11, where they trained with *Lashkar-e-Taiba*. But what seemed to be isolated cases are increasingly becoming the norm. Moreover, in the case of Vinas and at least two of the cases from the fall of 2009 (the

¹⁹ Vidino, 'Homegrown Jihadist Terrorism in the United States'.

²⁰ US v. Bryant Neal Vinas, Superseding Indictment, US District Court, Eastern District of New York, 08-823 (NGG) (S-1), 28/1/2009.

²¹ 'Man Was "Gold Mine" of Terror Intel', Associated Press, 31/VII/2009.

²² *Terrorism in the United States, 2002-2005*, unclassified report by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, http://www.fbi.gov/publications/terror/terrorism2002_2005.htm.

Najibullah Zazi/New York plot and the Chicago/Denmark plot) authorities have noticed with apprehension that American militants returning from Pakistan were significantly better trained and organised than the homegrown jihadists who had been operating in the US over the last few years. The 'Pakistan connection', that operational link to organised outfits in the Afghanistan/Pakistan area that makes amateurish homegrown networks graduate into more professional terrorist clusters, has been crucial in the development of jihadist networks in Europe over the last five years and it now appears to have become a significant factor also in the US.

Given these dynamics, one of the scenarios that the US authorities take into particular consideration is the case of a homegrown cluster that, thanks to the directions and skills obtained from al-Qaeda or various al-Qaeda-affiliated networks in Afghanistan/Pakistan, manages to reach sufficient operational sophistication to carry out a significant attack against the American homeland.²³ And if traditionally authorities estimated that al-Qaeda's leadership intended to strike inside the US only with a mass-casualty attack that would at least rival the actions of 9/11, lately this assessment has been revised.²⁴ Recent cases have shown that not only independent clusters but also American networks operating in cooperation with Afghanistan/Pakistan-based groups are focusing on less grandiose plans, considering that even a less ambitious attack –on the scale of the 2004 Madrid or 2005 London bombings– would be a success.

If Afghanistan/Pakistan is a major source of concerns, the authorities have also been monitoring the possible impact of the Somali conflict on American domestic security. Over the last few years, in fact, a few dozen young American Muslims have travelled to Somalia to fight and train alongside al-Shabaab, the local Islamist militia battling the Somali government and African Union troops. Most of them have been ethnic Somalis, sons of the large Somali diaspora community present in Minneapolis, Seattle and other American cities. One of them, 27-year-old Minneapolis college student Shirwa Ahmed, reportedly blew himself up in a suicide bombing in northern Somalia in October 2008.²⁵ Another four Minneapolis residents have been reported killed in the African country since then. A few non-ethnic Somali Americans have also reportedly joined al-Shabaab. While the New Jersey native of Egyptian descent Amir Mohamed Meshal and Massachusetts-born convert Daniel Maldonado have been arrested after leaving Somalia, Alabama native Omar Hammami is still very much active inside the country, starring in several English language al-Shabaab propaganda videos under the *nom de guerre* Abu Mansour al Amriki.

While there are no indications that al-Shabaab is planning an attack within the US, its increased focus on global issues and public support for al-Qaeda make the hypothesis not that far-fetched. Moreover, while many of the foreign fighters joining al-Shabaab, whether from the US, Europe or other regions, are Somalis driven by some sort of nationalist sentiment, others are aspiring jihadists whose interest in the African country is mostly tactical and temporary. It is safe to assume that many of them, given the opportunity, would use the skills acquired in Somalia against other targets. Questioned by American interrogators after his arrest, in fact, Daniel Maldonado described his experience in the African country with these words: 'I would be fighting the Somali militia, and that turned

²³ Interview with various FBI officials, September/October 2009, Boston and Washington DC.

²⁴ David Johnston & Eric Schmitt, 'Smaller-Scale Terrorism Plots Pose New and Worrisome Threats, Officials Say', *New York Times*, 31/X/2009.

²⁵ <http://minneapolis.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/pressrel09/mp112309.htm>.

into fighting the Ethiopians, and if Americans came, I would fight them too'.²⁶ The fact that Maldonado was in close contact with the individuals arrested in Boston in October 2009 provides additional evidence as to why the 'Somalia connection' is considered a serious threat.

Conclusion: Since 9/11 the American counterterrorism posture has been extraordinarily aggressive, both domestically and globally. Extensive overseas military and intelligence gathering actions, the introduction of enhanced investigative powers, a significantly improved inter-agency coordination and, in general, a constant high level of vigilance have allowed the authorities to keep the country safe from terrorist attacks. While some civil libertarians might have a point in questioning some of the tools used to do so, the achievement is nevertheless remarkable. At the same time, though, the US seems to be lacking a long-term strategy to confront the threat of radicalisation on the domestic front. The authorities have in fact been unable to conceive a policy that would pre-emptively tackle the issue of radicalisation, preventing young American Muslims from embracing extremist ideas in the first place.

Various intelligence and law enforcement agencies have reached out to the academic community to better understand the social, political and psychological causes of radicalisation. But the limited understanding of the issue, coupled with the overlap of jurisdiction between often competing federal, state and local authorities, has prevented the implementation of a systematic, nationwide programme to combat radicalisation. Solutions are, to be sure, hard to find. Europeans, who experienced the problem of radicalisation of segments of their own Muslim communities well before the US, are still struggling with the same issue and are only now attempting to put in place coherent anti-radicalisation programmes, the success of which must still be verified. Equally challenging have been the efforts, on both sides of the Atlantic, to find reliable and representative organisations within various Muslim communities to be employed as partners in anti-radicalisation activities. Clearly, more attention and analysis should be devoted to the issue. But the awareness that homegrown terrorism of *jihadist* inspiration does exist in the US is a necessary starting point. The events of the fall of 2009 provided, if needed, additional evidence to suggest so.

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²⁶ Affidavit of FBI Special Agent Jeremiah A. George in US v. Daniel Joseph Maldonado, US District Court, Southern District of Texas, H-07-125M, 13/II/2007.