

Countering Terrorism and Radicalization in 2010 and Beyond: *A New Terrorist Threat? Assessing “Homegrown Extremism”*

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Five events during the fall of 2009 thrust concerns over “homegrown extremism”—or terrorist activity perpetrated by U.S. legal residents and citizens—into public view:

- September 19: Najibullah Zazi, an Afghan citizen and U.S. legal resident, is arrested on charges of conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction. Authorities claim that Zazi traveled to Pakistan to receive explosives and weapons training and that he planned to launch an attack in the U.S.
- November 5: Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan allegedly kills 13 and wounds 30 at Fort Hood Army Base, outside Killeen, Texas. Early reports reveal that Hasan had been in contact with radical Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaki.
- November 23: Federal officials unseal indictments against eight people charged in connection with the alleged recruitment of up to two-dozen Somali-Americans to fight with the Somali insurgent group and al Qaeda affiliate, al-Shabaab.
- December 8: The F.B.I. accuses U.S. citizen David Coleman Headley of conspiring with operatives of Lashkar-e-Taiba, a Pakistani terrorist group, in the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Authorities also allege that Headley had planned to attack a Danish newspaper.
- December 9: Five young Northern Virginia men are arrested in Sargodha, Pakistan. U.S. and Pakistani authorities claim the group traveled there to fight alongside Taliban militants in Afghanistan.

This rash of arrests has important implications for policymakers and officials in charge of counterterrorism and homeland security because U.S. legal residents and citizens are lucrative assets for global terrorist organizations:

- Facing relatively few restrictions on global travel, legal residents and citizens could leave the U.S., receive explosives or weapons training in terrorist camps, and return here to plan and execute attacks.
- Their facility with English and familiarity with American culture could allow them to elude—far more easily than foreign nationals—U.S. law enforcement officials.

What do these five cases say about the nature of “homegrown extremism” in the U.S.? In Europe, domestic radicalization seems to be the product of poverty and social marginalization within Muslim communities. But socioeconomic factors fail to wholly explain America’s recent experience with domestic extremism. Hasan, for instance, made around \$90,000 per year as a medical doctor in the U.S. Army. The “Northern Virginia Five” come from socially-integrated, middle class families. All five also attended college. These facts suggest there is no “catch-all” explanation for the rise in domestic extremism.

Still, a few important similarities among the five cases do suggest some directives for policy in this area:

- First, nearly all of the men seem to have relied on an “intermediary”—like an extremist cleric or a terrorist recruiter—to facilitate and catalyze their radicalization. Zazi is said to have been close to Queens, New York imam Rahman Halimi, a close associate of Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. In addition, al-Awlaki mentored Hasan; al-Shabaab agents appear to have recruited Minnesota Somalis; and one of the five Northern Virginia men exchanged emails with an alleged Taliban recruiter.

These intermediaries linked up with last fall’s suspects in a number of ways: in person, often at mosques; by telephone; and even through internet chat rooms. Law enforcement officials, then, must continue to work on multiple levels to interdict the “links” formed between would-be domestic extremists and their transnational recruiters. For instance, because radicalization often occurs online, counterterrorism officials should continue to aggressively monitor extremist websites for clues about potential plots.

Governments at the federal, state, and local level also must continue to nurture relationships of mutual trust and respect with Muslim communities, because the family and friends of alleged extremists often are investigators’ first resource for information on suspected crimes. Consider the case of the “Northern Virginia Five.” Upon the group’s disappearance, family members contacted the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), an Islamic civil liberties group. CAIR officials then alerted the F.B.I. about the missing youths. This type of cooperation has proved vital in facilitating authorities’ initial investigation of the plot.

- Second, many of these individuals seemed to act on a belief that the U.S. is at war with Islam—a narrative which al Qaeda and other global terrorist groups look to propagate. The Afghanistan and Iraq Wars consumed Hasan; the Minnesota Somalis condemned Ethiopia’s U.S.-supported overthrow of Somalia’s Islamist government in 2006; and Ahmed Abdullah Minni, the ringleader of the group of Northern Virginians, applauded Taliban attacks in extremist chat rooms.

While it would be difficult, if not impossible, to prove that such sentiments caused radicalization, the anecdotes above suggest that something more than poverty or social marginalization is behind the rise of domestic extremism. Last December, for instance, terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman suggested that America’s two ongoing wars provided the only logical impetus to the recent spate of plots.¹ This hypothesis raises a troubling proposition: that some American Muslims may perceive U.S. military action in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and other Muslim countries as part of some broader war on Islam and its adherents.

The U.S. needs to counteract this narrative. Long-term, policymakers must balance the need to combat global terrorism with the drawbacks of overt military action in Muslims countries. Doing so will require the U.S. to forge stronger partnerships with states threatened by extremist violence; cooperation, rather than large-scale intervention, ultimately offers a surer path to mitigating terrorism.

(This briefing is excerpted from a forthcoming study on recent trends in domestic radicalization in the U.S.)

¹ Scott Shane, “New Incidents Test Immunity to Terrorism on U.S. Soil,” *New York Times*, Dec. 11, 2009 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/12/us/12assess.html?ref=us&pagewanted=print>).