

Closer Than You Think: The Continuing Threat of Homegrown Terrorism

"Groups affiliated with al Qaeda are now actively targeting the United States and looking to use Americans or Westerners who are able to remain undetected by heightened security measures." FBI Director Robert Mueller's words to the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee in September duplicated his statement to the same group last year.¹

While the warning was the same, the threat and impact have risen significantly. Mueller acknowledged that, "it appears domestic radicalization and homegrown extremism is becoming more pronounced based on the number of disruptions and incidents."² In the past 18 months, at least 63 American citizens have been charged with or convicted of crimes directly related to terrorism, including 20 so far in 2010.³ In 2009, there were a total of 11 jihadist attacks, jihadist-inspired plots, or efforts by Americans to travel overseas to obtain terrorist training, including the Ft. Hood shootings.⁴ Some other notable incidents include the December 2009 arrest of five men from Alexandria, Virginia in Pakistan, later charged with planning to fight American soldiers in Afghanistan and a possible attack within the United States; the attempted bombing of Northwest Airlines flight 253 by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab on Christmas Day 2009; and the attempted Times Square bombing in May 2010 by Faisal Shahzad, a Pakistani-born U.S. citizen.⁵

Why has countering this threat proven to be so difficult? One reason is the reluctance to "call a spade a spade". For example, the Department of Defense's report about the Ft. Hood shootings failed to mention gunman Nidal Hasan's name and motive, particularly his Muslim faith. Former Army Secretary Togo West and retired Navy admiral Vernon Clark, who led the review, claimed their focus was "with actions and effects, not necessarily with motivations." Yet many insiders believe that the Pentagon's omission of Hasan's radicalization was due to political correctness. Representative John Carter, whose district includes Ft. Hood, stated "The report ignores the elephant in the room — radical Islamic terrorism is the enemy."⁶

The U.S. is also cited for not having learned from the European experience with domestic terror. "Before the July 7, 2005, suicide attacks on the London transportation system, the British believed that there was perhaps a problem with the Muslim communities in Europe but certainly not with British Muslims in the U.K., who were better integrated, better educated, and wealthier than their counterparts on the Continent."⁷ For example, Abdulmutallab came from a wealthy Nigerian family and graduated from a top British university.

¹ Jason Ryan and Pierre Thomas, "Significant Developments in Terror Threats Since 9/11, Officials Say," *Napolitano, Mueller, Leiter Discuss Increased Tempo of Attacks Against U.S.* *ABCNews.com*, September 22, 2010, <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/homegrown-terror-threat-significant-officials/story?id=11699198>.

² Robert S. Mueller, III, Statement Before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, September 22, 2010, <http://www.fbi.gov/news/testimony/nine-years-after-9-11-confronting-the-terrorist-threat-to-the-u.s.>

³ Jordy Yager, "Washington struggling to rein in homegrown terrorism," *The Hill*, September 22, 2010, <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/120291-washington-struggling-to-rein-in-growing-homegrown-terrorism>.

⁴ Peter Bergman and Bruce Hoffman, *Assessing the Terrorist Threat, A Report of the Bipartisan Policy Center's National Security Preparedness Group*, September 10, 2010,

<http://www.bipartisanpolicy.org/sites/default/files/NSPG%20Final%20Threat%20Assessment.pdf>.

⁵ "Homegrown Terror," *Washington Post*, June 7, 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/06/AR2010060603996_pf.html.

⁶ Mark Thompson, "The Fort Hood Report: Why No Mention of Islam?" *Time*, January 20, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1954960,00.html>.

⁷ Bergman and Hoffman, op.cit.

A Duke University study found that most homegrown terror suspects were male, under age 30 and U.S.-born, naturalized citizens or legal residents of the country. However, “Even with the common threads among the cases, researchers said they found no definitive pattern of how the accused were radicalized and no geographic center of extremism in the U.S.”⁸ For example, Shahzad, who attempted to car bomb Times Square, earned an MBA, had a finance career and lived with his wife and children in Connecticut.

Al-Qaeda has also cleverly changed its ways. Al Qaeda’s “diversification” strategy is to mount “attacks involving a wide variety of perpetrators of different nationalities and ethnic heritages to defeat any attempt to ‘profile’ actual and would-be perpetrators and to overwhelm already information-overloaded law enforcement.”⁹ This strategy seems to be the product of the “Americanization” of Al Qaeda’s leadership and related groups. Radical cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, who grew up in New Mexico, had links to suspects in both the Times Square bombing and the Fort Hood shootings. American David Headley also helped scope targets for the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks.¹⁰

The lack of a strategy to deal with this threat had been the Achilles' heel of U.S. national security. The consequences of not heeding lessons already learned have been considerable. “Our long-held belief that homegrown terrorism couldn't happen here has thus created a situation where we are today stumbling blindly through the legal, operational and organizational minefield of countering terrorist radicalization and recruitment occurring in the United States.”¹¹

Progress came earlier this year when homegrown terrorism was designated as one of the country's top national security priorities. The White House announced that the new strategy included a “new interagency effort that brings together key stakeholders” and “outreach to communities across the country.”¹² Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano recently noted “a much stronger level of communication between departments.” However, she acknowledged that “perhaps in the future officials should hammer out an overarching written strategy that details a chain of command and operations.”¹³ For example, there is no organization at the federal level specifically responsible for identifying radicalization or working to prevent terrorist recruitment of U.S. citizens and residents.

“The American ‘melting pot’ has not provided a firewall against the radicalization and recruitment of American citizens and residents, though it has arguably lulled us into a sense of complacency that homegrown terrorism couldn’t happen in the United States.”¹⁴ But it has happened and there are clear indications that they will continue to happen. The list of potential targets includes more passenger jets, U.S. military bases in America, and western hotel chains. Suicide bombings within the U.S. are also noted as a real possibility.

Unless the U.S. moves forward from reissued warnings and hammers out a strategy, these potential threats will become a grim reality.

This Snapshot is a sequel to “The Threat Within” from November 2009.

⁸ “Study: Most homegrown terrorists are U.S. citizens,” *USAToday.com*, January 6, 2010, http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2010-01-06-terror-danger-study_N.htm.

⁹ Bergman and Hoffman, op.cit.

¹⁰ “9/11 Commissioners Warn of Homegrown Terror; Former Heads of Bipartisan Group Say U.S. ‘Stumbling Blindly’ in Policy to Counter Domestic Radicalization,” *CBSNews.com*, September 10, 2010, <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/09/10/national/main6852275.shtml>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Yager, op.cit.

¹⁴ Bergman and Hoffman, op.cit.