



The Exaggerated Threat of American Muslim “Homegrown” Terrorism

BOTTOM LINES

- **A Common Misperception.** Despite warnings by public officials and terrorism analysts, there is little evidence that the risk of terrorist attacks in the United States by American Muslims is especially serious or growing.
- **Rare and Unsophisticated Attacks.** Terrorist plots by American Muslims are not growing in sophistication, and terrorists’ capacities to acquire skills from overseas training are limited. In addition, contrary to concerns that so-called lone wolves will increasingly attempt terrorist attacks that are difficult to foil, there have been only two shootings in the United States by American Muslims since September 11, 2011, despite a significant propaganda effort by leaders of al-Qaida encouraging such attacks.
- **Consequences of Exaggerating the Threat.** Misjudging the threat of Muslim homegrown terrorism generates serious risks, such as alienating American Muslim communities, whose demonstrated willingness to expose aspiring militants is an important reason why the homegrown threat has remained small.

By Risa A. Brooks

This policy brief is based on “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism in the United States: How Serious Is the Threat?” which appears in the fall 2011 issue of International Security.

LITTLE EVIDENCE OF AMERICAN MUSLIMS PLOTTING ATTACKS

In recent years, public officials in the United States and terrorism analysts here and abroad have warned of an increasing threat of Muslim homegrown terrorist attacks. The terrorist attacks in Madrid in 2004 and in London in 2005 perpetrated by European homegrown terrorists have contributed to these concerns, as has the surge in terrorist-related arrests in the United States in 2009 and 2010. Among these are the high-profile arrests of Maj. Nidal Hasan, who engaged

in a deadly shooting spree at Fort Hood, Texas, in November 2009, and Faisal Shahzad, who attempted to bomb Times Square in May 2010. A closer look at the evidence, however, reveals that the threat of American Muslims engaging in lethal attacks in the United States has been frequently overstated.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, American Muslims do not appear to be increasingly motivated to commit terrorist acts in the United States. Recent studies of the “radicalization” of American Muslims accused of engaging in domestic terrorism have explored the life histories of these individuals, and they have provided insight into the extremist beliefs and changes in behavior that preceded the turn to violence. Yet these studies offer little evidence that American Muslims—even those exhibiting the danger signs of radicalization—will increasingly engage in

acts of terrorism against fellow Americans. In fact, there is minimal evidence that American Muslims are becoming more radical in their beliefs. Surveys in 2011 by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reveal no trend of growing support for militancy among American Muslims.

In addition, a surge in the number of American Muslims arrested on terrorism-related offenses in recent years does not mean that this segment of society is more prone to engage in terrorism. As a result of expanded initiatives in domestic counterterrorism by the Department of Homeland Security and new FBI authority to undertake “assessments” and open preliminary investigations of suspect Americans, officials increasingly have the tools to detect terrorist activity in its early stages. According to the *New York Times*, from March 31, 2009 to March 31, 2011, the FBI initiated more than 82,000 assessments of individuals and groups suspected of being involved in terrorist activities in the United States.

Combine this enhanced ability to detect aspiring terrorists with law enforcement’s frequent use of sting operations to advance plots that might have otherwise gone nowhere, and one can largely account for the spike in terrorist-related arrests. For example, of the eighteen attacks attempted against U.S. targets since September 11 that reached some level of operational development (targets chosen, surveillance undertaken, and the like), twelve involved the use of federal officials at the plots’ formative stages.

The surge in arrests could also be the result of a clustering of arrests of those long engaged in militancy or the apprehension of large groups of individuals, such as members of the Daniel Boyd network or Somali al-Shabaab recruits. In short, improvements in detection or other actions by law enforcement could be contributing to the increase in the number of individuals charged with terrorism-related offenses independent of any larger trends in the American population.

THE CHALLENGE OF AVOIDING DETECTION WHILE PLOTTING SOPHISTICATED ATTACKS

Even if more American Muslims were to engage in homegrown terrorism, their attacks would likely fail either because of technical error or because authorities were able to discover their plots before they could be executed. Unlike the September 11 hijackers, American Muslim homegrown terrorists tend to be amateurs and often lack the basic skills of terrorist tradecraft. Moreover, opportunities to enhance their skills are limited. Technical information available online is often incomplete or poorly presented, and perfecting the skills to manufacture explosives and cultivate other expertise—including the ability to maintain operational security when preparing attacks and recruiting other militants—increases the risk of exposure. For these reasons, every attempted terrorist plot by American Muslims in the United States has ended in the arrests of the would-be perpetrators, with the exception of Shahzad and two others, Carlos Bledsoe and Maj. Nidal Hasan.

In fact, the evidence suggests that engaging in terrorist activity in the United States carries a serious risk of exposure. First, although difficult to quantify, societal awareness about terrorism has grown considerably over the years. In October 2010, for example, members of a Hawaiian mosque reported to authorities a new member whose recent move to the area raised their suspicions. Contrast this with the hospitality and no-questions-asked reception that the Muslim community in San Diego gave to two of the September 11 hijackers in the months preceding the attacks. Additionally, over the past decade, alert citizens otherwise unacquainted with the would-be perpetrators have reported apparent terrorist activity involving American Muslims to authorities. Second, as the result of both a significant investment in grassroots counterterrorism efforts spanning the federal, state, and local levels as well as expanded prerogatives such as the availability of FBI assessments, would-be terrorists must contend with an increasingly sophisticated monitoring and

investigative apparatus. Third, American Muslim communities have demonstrated a willingness to report aspiring terrorists in their midst—a dynamic that, according to several studies, has occurred in more than 20 percent of terrorism-related cases. Consider that Shahzad is the only homegrown Muslim terrorist unknown to authorities before he tried to execute his plot. Equally telling is why he failed: according to New York Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly, Shahzad purposely fabricated his bomb with inferior-grade fertilizer to evade detection.

RISKS OF EXAGGERATING THE THREAT

Since September 11, American Muslims have executed two successful terrorist attacks in the United States—the Fort Hood shootings by Maj. Nidal Hasan in November 2009 and a lesser-known attack by Carlos Bledsoe on a U.S. Army recruiting station in Little Rock, Arkansas, in June 2009. Although both cases could be cited as evidence of the dangers of “lone wolves,” the small number of such attacks, despite their operational simplicity, suggests either that there are no aspiring terrorists in the country or that even plotters of simple terrorist attacks are being detected before they can harm Americans.

Based on the evidence, the fear of a coming wave of Muslim homegrown terrorist attacks against the United States is greatly exaggerated. This fact deserves serious reflection given the considerable risks that can arise from mischaracterizing the threat. As the United States enters an era of fiscal austerity, officials must evaluate the opportunity costs of investing in domestic counterterrorism against other priorities. Consider, for example, how the FBI’s shift in resources from white collar crime to counterterrorism after the September 11 attacks, as documented by the national media, reduced the agency’s capacity to handle cases of mortgage and securities fraud at the height of the financial crisis. Additionally, the FBI has assigned dozens of agents to participate in recent sting operations. Government officials need to seriously consider whether these investments in domestic counterterrorism are worth the cost.

Equally important, overstating the threat of Muslim homegrown terrorism unnecessarily heightens tensions between American Muslim communities and federal and local officials. This potentially undermines relationships of trust that form the basis for cooperation between Muslim communities and authorities. Methods commonly employed by law enforcement in these communities, such as extensive surveillance and cultivation of informants, are inherently challenging for any segment of society to endure, even when they are handled with care and sensitivity—care and sensitivity that a false sense of urgency associated with the homegrown terrorism threat could undermine.

Federal officials and local police should be commended for their outreach efforts to American Muslim communities. Yet there is evidence of questionable and counterproductive practices being employed by some members of law enforcement in monitoring these communities. One example involves the October 2011 reports by the Associated Press about the extensive surveillance of Imam Sheikh Rada Shata by the New York City police, even though he had been an invited speaker and a host of events for NYPD officers in his Bay Ridge mosque.

In sum, inflating the terrorist threat could alienate Muslim communities in the United States. This would be a worrisome development, because those communities’ widespread rejection of terrorism and their ongoing willingness to expose suspected militants are two reasons why the homegrown threat remains small.

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