

ASYMMETRIC THREAT GLOBAL SNAPSHOT

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The Threat Within

“Today, while we still face threats from Al-Qaeda, and many of its affiliated groups, we also face a challenge in dealing with homegrown extremists in the United States who, while not formally part of these terrorist organizations, believe in their ideologies and wish to harm the United States in furtherance of it.”¹ Barely a month after FBI Director Robert Mueller testified to a Senate committee in September 2009, Virginia-born and raised Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan savagely opened fire in the Soldier Readiness Facility at Ft. Hood, TX, killing 13 and wounding 39.

The concept of terrorism originating within the U.S. is nothing new. The Unabomber and the Oklahoma City federal building bombing by Timothy McVeigh are two prominent examples. Also notable is that the 9/11 perpetrators lived and trained in the U.S. for over a year prior to the attacks. However, the Ft. Hood tragedy is the latest incident in a growing trend of *homegrown terrorism*. What differentiates it from other domestic threats is the violent radicalization inspired from anti-American terror groups originating outside the U.S., like Al Qaeda. These threats are also a double-edged sword. “Homegrown terrorists pose a particular concern due to the increasing number of Westerners joining militant Islamic movements, and the operatives’ familiarity with the societies they are targeting.”²

Although homegrown terrorism has been a significant issue in Europe, particularly the United Kingdom (the July 7, 2005 London bombers were first generation-British; three of Pakistani-descent and one Jamaican-descent Muslim convert), the problem is growing in the U.S. An early example is Adam Gadahn, a Californian convert to Islam, who became active in Al-Qaeda as a spokesman and planning attacks. On the FBI’s Most Wanted Terrorist list since 2004, Gadahn is the first American charged with treason in over 50 years. Washington, DC-area native John Walker Lindh is now serving a 20-year prison sentence for his involvement in the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001.³

Until recently, officials had considered individual cases, like Gadahn and Lindh, to be unusual, and many homegrown plots to be more talk than action because of a lack of resources, organization, and know-how. “Homegrown radicals only become a significant threat when they are able to connect with militant radical groups with significant experience. Anyone can become influenced by militant ideology and change from a middle-class college student to a would-be terrorist. But unless these individuals have access to organized terrorist networks, they are limited to what they can do.”⁴ However, this viewpoint is no longer the case.

In fact, these obstacles are disappearing. Terrorist and extremist groups quickly embraced the Internet to disseminate propaganda, but “the growing use of the Internet to identify and connect with networks throughout the world offers opportunities to build relationships and gain expertise that previously were available only in overseas training camps.”⁵ Whether posted by extremist groups or by fanatical individuals, the volume of information and propaganda, at a minimum, serves to amplify violent Islamist messages and create a community of like-minded radicals. In the summer of 2009, Virginia-born Ehsanul Islam Sadequee

¹ Robert S. Mueller, U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs hearing, September 30, 2009, http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Files.View&FileStore_id=05ae8640-f9b2-40c4-b15a-a8017cd25af5.

² David Gartenstein Ross & Laura Grossman, "Homegrown Terrorists in the U.S. & U.K; An Empirical Examination of the Radicalization Process," April 2009, http://www.defenddemocracy.org/downloads/HomegrownTerrorists_USandUK.pdf.

³ “The Case of the Taliban American,” *CNN.com*, December 19, 2001, <http://www.cnn.com/CNN/Programs/people/shows/walker/profile.html>.

⁴ Lydia Khalil, “The Threat of Homegrown Terrorism,” *Boston Globe*, October 27, 2009, http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2009/10/27/the_threat_of_homegrown_terrorism/.

⁵ United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, “Violent Islamist Extremism, The Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat,” May 8, 2008, http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/_files/IslamistReport.pdf.

and U.S. citizen Syed Haris Ahmed were convicted on several charges of supporting terrorist organization.⁶ Central to the conviction was their involvement in “a loose on-line network connecting individuals in North America, Europe, and South Asia,” where they “made contact in chat rooms with likeminded individuals and proceeded to plan attacks, conduct surveillance of potential target sites within the United States, and pursue overseas training.”⁷

Another alarming form of homegrown terrorism is the “lone wolf” terrorist, who is influenced by extremist ideology but acts independently of any network. Sometimes, these threats seem to be of an impulsive nature. For example, an American-born Muslim convert killed one soldier and wounded another at a Little Rock military recruiting center in June 2009. Saying he had acted in retaliation against the U.S. military's treatment of Muslims, Abdulhakid Mohammed suspiciously claimed that the shooting had “...been on my mind for awhile. It wasn't nothing planned really. It was just the heat of the moment, you know.”⁸

Terror groups and extremists have also turned to recruiting Americans in ethnic communities. Officials estimate that up to 20 young Somali men, primarily recruited from Minnesota's sizable Somali community, have returned over the last two years, likely to fight a jihad. “At least three have died in Somalia, including one who authorities believe was the first American suicide bomber. Three others have pleaded guilty in the U.S. to terror-related charges.”⁹

Ethnic groups are not the only susceptible targets for terrorist recruiting either. “‘There is a concern that Al-Qaeda are attempting to recruit in prisons and on the outside, not just Americans but anyone they think is sympathetic to their cause,’ said Mark Corallo, a Justice Department spokesman.”¹⁰ Convicts are targeted because they may seek revenge against the U.S. and its justice system. This was the case with Jose Padilla, a career criminal and former gang member who was convicted of plotting with Al-Qaeda to detonate a radioactive dirty bomb in the United States. Padilla purportedly became interested in Islam while in prison and converted after his release in 1992. Padilla then journeyed to Pakistan and Afghanistan where he trained in explosives at Al-Qaeda camps.

What motivated Army Major Nidal Hasan's murderous rampage at Ft. Hood is anybody's guess. Reports indicate that the Virginian Hasan, who had purportedly joined the U.S. Army out of a patriotic sense of duty, had increasingly turned to extremist Islamic views over his disagreement with the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and had been allegedly harassed within the Army for being Muslim.¹¹ Hasan also had an email correspondence with Anwar al-Aulaqi, an American-born Muslim cleric living in Yemen with a large radical Islamist (jihadist) following, after attending his lectures at a Northern Virginia mosque eight years ago.¹²

Homegrown terrorism has been a national security issue since 2001. While federal agencies have greatly increased their ability to disrupt plots and dismantle networks, the Ft. Hood tragedy proves that it is not enough. What is certain is that the threat is closer than we think and its demands a no-nonsense approach.

⁶ “Georgia Man Convicted on Terror-related Charges,” *CNN.com*, August 12, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/CRIME/08/12/georgia.terror.trial/index.html>.

⁷ United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, *op.cit.*

⁸ “Recruitment Shooting Suspect Doesn't Think Killing Was Murder,” *Associated Press*, June 10, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2009/06/10/crimesider/entry5077616.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody>.

⁹ “Somali President Condemns U.S. Terror Recruiting,” *USA Today*, October 4, 2009, http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2009-10-04-somalia-president-terror_N.htm.

¹⁰ Bryan Robinson, “Officials on Lookout for U.S. Terror Recruits; Government, Prison Officials on the Lookout for Terror Recruiting on U.S. Soil,” *ABCNews.com*, June 13, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=91557&page=1&page=1>

¹¹ William Wan, Kafia A. Hosh, and Christian Davenport, “Unassuming on the Surface, but Roiling Within,” *Washington Post*, November 7, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/06/AR2009110604353.html?sid=ST2009110604506>.

¹² Sudarsan Raghavan, “Cleric Says He Was Confidant to Hasan,” *Washington Post*, November 16, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/15/AR2009111503160.html>.