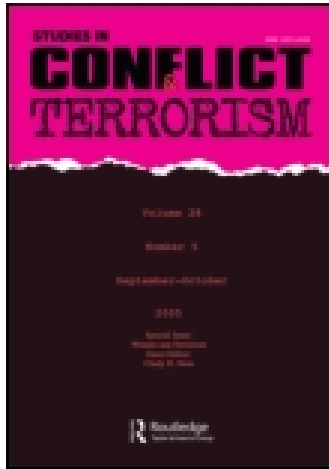


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Assessing the Jihadist Terrorist Threat to America and American Interests

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Assessing the Jihadist Terrorist Threat to America and American Interests

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Al Qaeda and allied groups continue to pose a threat to the United States. Although it is less severe than the catastrophic proportions of a 9/11-like attack, the threat today is more complex and more diverse than at any time over the past nine years. Al Qaeda or its allies continue to have the capacity to kill dozens, or even hundreds, of Americans in a single attack. A key shift in the past couple of years is the increasingly prominent role in planning and operations that U.S. citizens and residents have played in the leadership of Al Qaeda and aligned groups, and the higher numbers of Americans attaching themselves to these groups. Another development is the increasing diversification of the

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types of U.S.-based jihadist militants, and the groups with which those militants have affiliated. Indeed, these jihadists do not fit any particular ethnic, economic, educational, or social profile. Al Qaeda's ideological influence on other jihadist groups is on the rise in South Asia and has continued to extend into countries like Yemen and Somalia; Al Qaeda's top leaders are still at large, and American overreactions to even unsuccessful terrorist attacks arguably have played, however inadvertently, into the hands of the jihadists. Working against Al Qaeda and allied groups are the ramped-up campaign of drone attacks in Pakistan, increasingly negative Pakistani attitudes and actions against the militants based on their territory, which are mirrored by increasingly hostile attitudes toward Al Qaeda and allied groups in the Muslim world in general, and the fact that erstwhile militant allies have now also turned against Al Qaeda. This article is based on interviews with a wide range of senior U.S. counterterrorism officials at both the federal and local levels, and embracing the policy, intelligence, and law enforcement communities, supplemented by the authors' own research.

The New Threat

“Mom, I’m in Somalia! Don’t worry about me; I’m okay,” was how 17-year-old Burhan Hassan’s worried mother discovered where her son had gone weeks after he and six other Somali-American youths disappeared from their homes in the Minneapolis–St. Paul area shortly after Election Day 2008. Almost without exception, the youths who slipped away were described as good boys¹ who were “good students [who] had no problems with the law.”² But what especially troubled their relatives and others in the tight-knit émigré community was that no one could explain how the impoverished young men were able to pay for the \$2,000 airline tickets they used to travel to Somalia.³ “My nephew, he doesn’t have money for a ticket,” the uncle of one lamented. “None of these kids do.”⁴ According to Abdisalem Adam, a teacher and head of the local Dar al-Hijrah Islamic Center, “Up to now, no one knows who recruited them. But they obviously did not wake up one morning and decide to go [to Somalia].”⁵

The youths were radicalized and recruited in the United States and trained in Somalia by al-Shabab (“the Youth”),⁶ an Al Qaeda ally that deliberately emulates its mentor organization—down to its reliance on training camps, a safe haven, the use of the Internet for propaganda purposes, and suicide attacks. Indeed, it is believed that their trainer in Somalia was Saleh Ali Nabhan, the longtime Al Qaeda commander implicated in both the 1998 bombing of the American embassy in Nairobi and the 2002 attack on Israeli tourists at a hotel in Mombasa, who was killed last year. Two of these youths have become the first known Americans to have carried out suicide terrorist attacks.⁷

Nor are these the only persons to have left the United States to train in terrorist camps abroad. They in fact are part of a disquieting trend that has emerged in recent years that includes five young men from Alexandria, Virginia, who sought to fight alongside the Taliban and Al Qaeda and were arrested in Pakistan; Bryant Neal Vinas and Abu Yahya Mujahdeen al-Adam, two American citizens arrested in Pakistan for their links to Al Qaeda; Najibullah Zazi, the Afghan-born, Queens-educated Al Qaeda terrorist convicted of plotting simultaneous suicide attacks on the New York City subway; and most recently Faisal Shahzad, the Pakistani Taliban-trained, naturalized American citizen who tried to bomb New York City’s Times Square in May 2010.

Threat Assessment: Al Qaeda and Allied Groups and Those Inspired by its Ideas Continue to Pose a Threat to the United States

Although it is less severe than the catastrophic proportions of a 9/11-like attack, the threat today is more complex and more diverse than at any time over the past nine years.

Threats are measured by intent and capabilities. Al Qaeda continues to hope to inflict mass-casualty attacks in the United States. Indeed, Al Qaeda leaders have said since 9/11 that the United States is owed millions of deaths because of its supposed crimes against Islam. However, the group's capabilities to implement such a large-scale attack are currently far less formidable than they were nine years ago or indeed at any time since.

Al Qaeda or one of its allies might, however, successfully carry out bombings against symbolic American targets that would kill dozens, such as the subways of Manhattan, as was the plan in September 2009 of Najibullah Zazi; or they might blow up an American passenger jet, as was the intention three months later of the Nigerian Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab, who had been recruited by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Had that bombing attempt succeeded, it could have killed hundreds.

This level of threat is likely to persist for years to come; however, Al Qaeda is believed to lack the capability to launch a 9/11-level attack sufficiently deadly in scope to completely reorient American foreign policy, as those attacks did. And it is worth recalling that only 14 Americans have been killed in *jihadist* terrorist attacks in the United States since 9/11, something that was hardly predictable in the immediate wake of the attacks on Washington and New York.⁸

Despite Al Qaeda's long interest in acquiring chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons, on the infrequent occasions that it or its affiliates have tried to deploy crude versions of these weapons their efforts have fizzled, as was evident in the largely ineffectual campaign of chlorine bomb attacks by "Al Qaeda in Iraq" in 2007. Militant *jihadist* groups will be able to deploy only crude chemical, biological, or radiological weapons for the foreseeable future, and these will not be true "weapons of mass destruction," but rather weapons of mass disruption, whose principal effect will be panic but likely few deaths.

Indeed, a survey of the 172 individuals indicted or convicted in Islamist terrorism cases in the United States between 11 September 2001 and 11 September 2010 by the Maxwell School at Syracuse University and the New America Foundation found that *none* of the cases involved the use of CBRN. (In the one case where a radiological plot was initially alleged—that of the Hispanic-American Al Qaeda recruit Jose Padilla—that allegation was dropped when the case went to trial.)

The Diversification of the Threat

Al Qaeda and its allies arguably have been able to establish at least an embryonic terrorist recruitment, radicalization, and operational infrastructure in the United States with effects both at home and abroad.

The year 2009 was a watershed in terrorist attacks and plots in the United States, with a record total of 11 *jihadist* attacks, *jihadist*-inspired plots, or efforts by Americans to travel overseas to obtain terrorist training.ⁱ They included two actual attacks (at Fort Hood, Texas, which claimed the lives of 13 people, and the shooting of two U.S. military recruiters in Little Rock, Arkansas), five serious but disrupted plots, and four incidents involving groups of Americans conspiring to travel abroad to receive terrorist training. According to the authors' count, in 2009 at least 43 American citizens or residents aligned with Sunni militant groups or their ideology were charged or convicted of terrorism crimes in the U.S. or elsewhere, the highest number in any year since 9/11. In the first nine months of 2010, 20 were similarly charged or convicted.ⁱⁱ See Figure 1 for a worldwide map of significant events since 2008 by Al Qaeda, its affiliates, or those inspired by its ideas.

ⁱA more detailed description of those attacks and plots can be found in Appendix A.

ⁱⁱSee Appendix B for the names and ethnicities of those indicted or convicted from 2003 to September 2010.

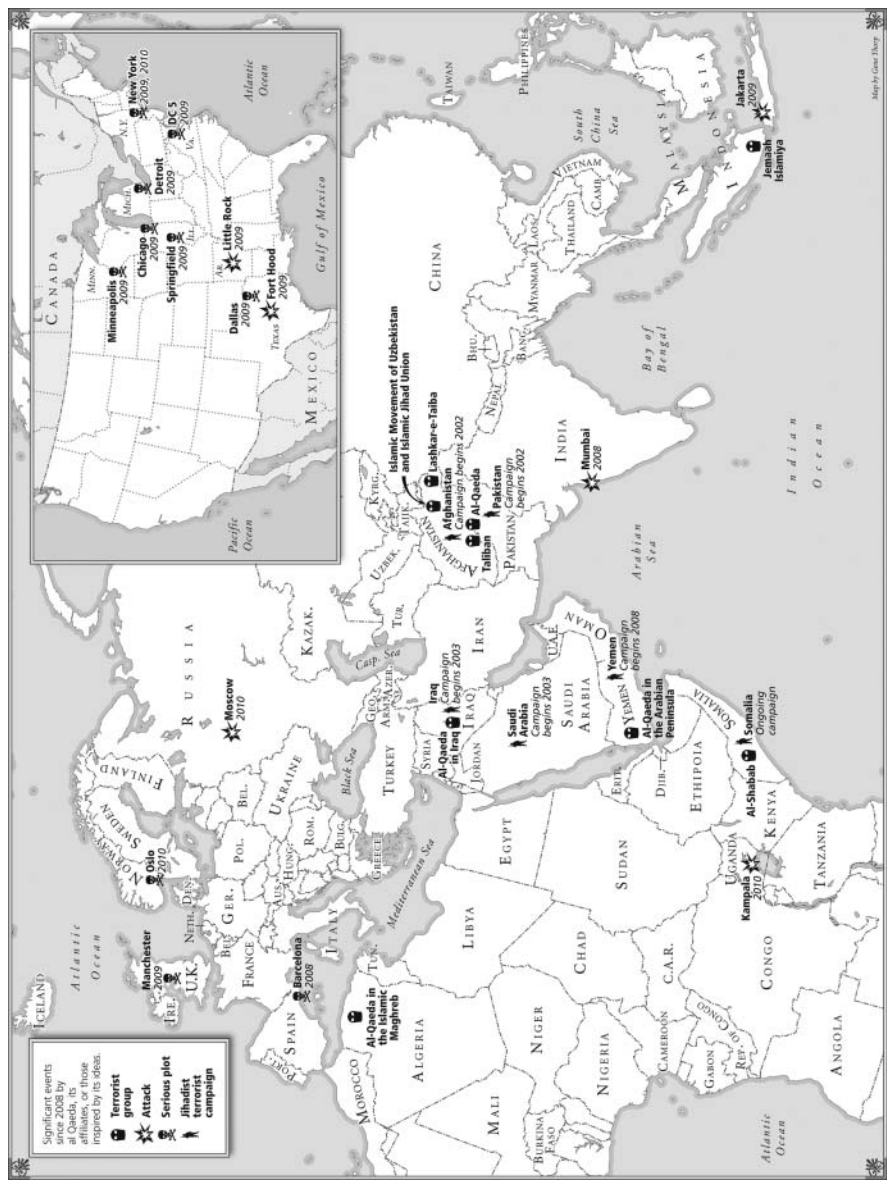


Figure 1. Significant events since 2008 by Al-Qaeda, its affiliates, or those inspired by its ideas.

There is a spectrum of adversaries today arrayed against the United States. At the low end are individuals simply inspired to engage in terrorist attacks completely on their own—such as the Jordanian national who overstayed his visa in an attempt to bomb a Dallas office building,⁹ or the Muslim convert with a similarly far-fetched plan to bomb a federal courthouse in Springfield, Illinois.¹⁰ But in other instances, terrorist groups either actively recruited individuals in the United States, deliberately motivated others to carry out terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, or directed trained operatives in the execution of coordinated strikes against American targets within its borders.

Al Qaeda and its Pakistani, Somali, and Yemeni allies arguably have been able to accomplish the unthinkable—establishing at least an embryonic terrorist recruitment, radicalization, and operational infrastructure in the United States with effects both at home and abroad. And, by working through its local allies, the group has now allowed them to co-opt American citizens in the broader global Al Qaeda battlefield. Considering individual *jihadist* groups will help illuminate trends about the changing threat faced by the Obama administration.

The Threat from Al Qaeda Central

The danger of Al Qaeda comes not only from its central leadership in Pakistan, but through its cooperation with other like-minded groups.

In June of 2010, CIA Director Leon Panetta told ABC News that Al Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan was now "relatively small . . . I think at most, we're looking at maybe 50 to 100."¹¹ The following month Michael Leiter, the head of the National Counterterrorism Center, told an audience in Aspen, Colorado, that there were somewhat "more than 300" Al Qaeda leaders and fighters in Pakistan.¹² For some, these small numbers suggested a decisive turning point in the war on terrorism. But as this article argues, the perils of declaring victory too soon are only too clear.¹³

Overly optimistic arguments about Al Qaeda's demise based on the attrition of its leadership overlook three key points. First, Al Qaeda has always been a small, elite organization. There were only 200 sworn members of Al Qaeda at the time of the 9/11 attacks, and Al Qaeda's role has always been as an ideological and military vanguard seeking to influence and train other *jihadist* groups.¹⁴ In Afghanistan and Pakistan, for instance, in the past several years small numbers of Al Qaeda instructors embedded with larger Taliban units have functioned something like U.S. Special Forces do—as trainers and force multipliers.¹⁵ Second, Al Qaeda's ideology and tactics have spread to a wide range of militant groups in South Asia, all of which are relatively large. The Taliban in Afghanistan alone is estimated to number 25,000 men, while Lashkar-e-Taiba has thousands of fighting men in its ranks.¹⁶ Finally, Al Qaeda Central has seeded a number of franchises around the Middle East and North Africa that now are acting in an Al Qaeda-like manner with little or no contact with Al Qaeda Central itself. Terrorism in fact is not a numbers game. Even small groups of individuals can often have a disproportionate impact on the countries that are their targets. It should be kept in mind that the Red Army Faction (RAF or "Baader-Meinhof Gang") active in West Germany from 1970 to 1998 never numbered more than two dozen or so hard-core terrorists. Yet, they were successful in imposing a reign of terror on that country despite the exertions of its sophisticated police and intelligence and security services for more than a quarter century.

Accordingly, the danger of Al Qaeda comes not only from its central leadership in Pakistan, but through its cooperation with other like-minded groups. The extent of the cooperation between Al Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban, for example, could be seen in

the suicide bombing that killed seven CIA officers and contractors in the American base at Khost in eastern Afghanistan on 30 December 2009. The suicide bomber, Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, a Jordanian doctor, was a double agent: Information he had earlier provided to the CIA was used to target militants in Pakistan.¹⁷ Two months after Balawi's suicide attack, Al Qaeda's video production arm released a lengthy, prerecorded interview with him in which he laid out how he planned to attack the base using a bomb made from C4.¹⁸ Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, the number three in Al Qaeda, praised the suicide attack targeting the CIA officers, saying it was "to avenge our good martyrs" and listing several militant leaders felled by U.S. drone strikes,¹⁹ while the chief of the Pakistani Taliban, Hakimullah Mehsud, appeared alongside Balawi in a prerecorded video saying the attack was revenge for the drone strike that had killed his predecessor, Baitullah Mehsud, six months earlier.²⁰

Three Al Qaeda planners were responsible for recruiting Najibullah Zazi, the Afghan native and former New York City pushcart operator turned Denver airport limousine driver, as well as two of his former classmates from Flushing High School in New York, Zarein Ahmedzay and Adis Medunjanin.²¹ While in Pakistan, Zazi, Ahmedzay, and Medunjanin received instruction from Al Qaeda trainers in the fabrication of improvised explosive devices using such commercially available materials as hydrogen peroxide (e.g., hair bleach), acetone, flour, and oil to carry out the suicide bomb attacks planned for the New York City subway in September 2009. Zazi pleaded guilty to his role in the plot in February 2010; Ahmedzay similarly pleaded guilty on 23 April 2010.²²

Zazi and his co-conspirators were part of a continuing effort by Al Qaeda and its allies to target the United States. This was made clear in the superseding indictment filed by the U.S. Department of Justice on 7 July 2010, in connection with the plot to attack the New York City subway. That indictment details a plot directed by "leaders of al-Qaeda's external operations program dedicated to terrorist attacks in the United States and other Western countries" and involving an "American-based al-Qaeda cell." It further describes how the plot was organized by three long-standing and senior Al Qaeda operatives—Saleh al-Somali, Adnan El Shukrijumah, and Rashid Rauf.²³

Al-Somali was among Al Qaeda's earliest recruits from outside the inner circle of Saudis, Yemenis, and Egyptians who had either served or fought in Afghanistan during the 1980s and 1990s and formed the movement's original hardcore. He is believed to have joined Al Qaeda at least as far back as the early 1990s and may have recently been killed in a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan.²⁴

Shukrijumah is similarly well known to authorities. A 34-year-old native of Saudi Arabia, Shukrijumah lived in Brooklyn during the 1990s, where his father worked for Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, the so-called "Blind Sheikh," an Egyptian-born cleric who was implicated in a follow-on plot to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing that involved attacks on New York City bridges and tunnels, and the United Nations headquarters building. The younger Shukrijumah later moved to Florida and in 2003 was placed on the FBI's "Most Wanted" list as a result of his growing role in Al Qaeda attack planning. The subject of a \$5 million reward, Shukrijumah was described by American law enforcement at the time as an "imminent threat to U.S. citizens and interests."²⁵ That assessment remains highly relevant, if not prescient, today.

Finally, British-born Rashid Rauf has long been involved with Al Qaeda plots both in Pakistan and abroad. He played a key role in the two assassination attempts against Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in December 2003 and was regarded as a protégé of Abu Faraj al-Libi, then Al Qaeda's number three commander.²⁶ Rauf was also pivotal to the planning and orchestration of the 2006 plot to blow up seven U.S. and Canadian passenger

airliners en route from London to North America. Like al-Somali, he is now believed to have been killed in a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is significant that both Zazi and Faisal Shahzad, the would-be Times Square bomber, had tribal and family ties in Pakistan that they used to make contact with either Al Qaeda or the Pakistani Taliban. These links greatly facilitated their recruitment. British authorities have always regarded the high volume of traffic between Britain and Pakistan, involving upwards of 400,000 persons annually, as providing prime opportunities for the radicalization and recruitment of British citizens and residents.²⁷ These same concerns now exist among U.S. authorities, given the ease with which Zazi and Shahzad readily made contact with the Pakistan-based terrorist movements.²⁸

Bryant Neal Vinas and Abu Yahya Mujahdeen al-Adam, both American citizens, have been arrested during the past two years in Pakistan for their links to Al Qaeda. While it is easier to dismiss the threat posed by wannabes who are often snared without difficulty by the authorities, or to discount as aberrations the homicides inflicted by lone gunmen, these incidents show the activities of trained U.S. terrorist operatives who are part of an identifiable organizational command-and-control structure and are acting on orders from terrorist leaders abroad.

In addition to Zazi and Shahzad, five Muslim-Americans from Northern Virginia volunteered for *jihad* in the Afghanistan/Pakistan theater in 2009. As of early October 2010, they were in custody in Pakistan, charged with planning terrorist attacks. Similarly, a group of seven American citizens and residents of the town of Willow Creek, North Carolina, led by Daniel Boyd, a convert to Islam who had fought in the Afghan *jihad* against the Soviets, conceived of themselves as potential participants in overseas holy wars from Israel to Pakistan, and some traveled abroad to scope out their opportunities, according to federal prosecutors. Boyd purchased eight rifles and a revolver, and members of his group allegedly did paramilitary training on two occasions in the summer of 2009.²⁹

The Threat from Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has been looking to expand its terrorist attacks beyond Yemen and Saudi Arabia, as demonstrated by the failed attempt to explode a bomb on a flight over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was the group responsible for Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab's botched attempt to explode a bomb on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009. Abdulmutallab boarded the flight in Amsterdam, bound for Detroit with some 300 passengers and crew on board. Secreted in his underwear was a bomb made with 80 grams of PETN, a plastic explosive that was not detected by airport security in Amsterdam or the Nigerian city of Lagos, from where he had originally flown. He also carried a syringe with a chemical initiator to set off the bomb.³⁰ As the plane neared Detroit, the young man tried to initiate his bomb with the chemical, setting himself on fire and suffering severe burns. Some combination of his own ineptitude, faulty bomb construction, and the quick actions of the passengers and crew who subdued him and extinguished the fire prevented an explosion that might have brought down the plane near Detroit, killing all on board and also likely killing additional Americans on the ground.

ⁱⁱⁱIt is worth emphasizing that the U.S. counterterrorism measures targeting Al Qaeda's senior leadership do not appear to have impacted the intentions of the group's leaders: bin Laden and al-Zawahiri have long been opposed to the United States and its allies, and killing the long line of "Al Qaeda number threes" has not changed this appreciably.

Immediately after he was arrested, Abdulmutallab told investigators that the explosive device “was acquired in Yemen along with instructions as to when it should be used.”³¹

The Northwest Airlines plot had been presaged in virtually every detail a few months earlier, several thousand miles to the east of Detroit. On 28 August 2009, the Saudi deputy minister of interior, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, survived a bomb attack launched by AQAP. Because he leads Saudi Arabia’s counterterrorism efforts against Al Qaeda, the prince is a key target for the terrorist group. Prince Nayef was responsible for overseeing the kingdom’s terrorist rehabilitation program, and some two dozen important members of Al Qaeda had previously surrendered to him in person. Abdullah Hassan al-Asiri, the would-be assassin, was a Saudi who had fled to Yemen, and posed as a militant willing to surrender personally to Prince Nayef.³² During the month of Ramadan, traditionally a time of repentance in the Muslim world, Asiri gained an audience with the prince at his private residence in Jeddah, presenting himself as someone who could persuade other militants to surrender. Pretending that he was reaching out to those militants, Asiri briefly called some members of Al Qaeda to tell them that he was standing by Prince Nayef. After he finished the call, the bomb blew up, killing Asiri but only slightly injuring the prince, who was a few feet away. A Saudi government official characterized the prince’s narrow escape as a “miracle.”³³

According to the official Saudi investigation, Asiri had concealed in his underwear a bomb made of PETN, the same plastic explosive that would be used in the Detroit case, and he exploded the 100-gram device using a detonator with a chemical fuse, as Abdulmutallab would attempt to do on the Northwest flight. Prince Nayef’s attacker also had had to pass through metal detectors before he was able to secure an audience with the prince. Shortly after both of the failed attacks, AQAP asserted responsibility for the operations and released photographs of the bombers taken while they were in Yemen.

If Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab had succeeded in bringing down Northwest Airlines Flight 253, the bombing not only would have killed hundreds but also would have had a large effect on the U.S. economy, already reeling from the worst recession since the Great Depression, and would have devastated the critical aviation and tourism businesses. It also would have likely dealt a crippling blow to Barack Obama’s presidency. According to the White House’s own review of the Christmas Day plot, there was sufficient information known to the U.S. government to determine that Abdulmutallab was likely working for Al Qaeda’s affiliate in Yemen and that the group was looking to expand its terrorist attacks beyond the Arabian Peninsula.³⁴ As a senior Obama administration official responsible for counterterrorism explained shortly afterward, “AQAP was looked upon as a lethal organization, but one focused [only] on the Arabian Peninsula. We thought they would attack our embassy in Yemen or Saudi Arabia”—not a plane in the skies over America.³⁵ Yet the intelligence community “did not increase analytic resources working” on that threat, while information about the possible use of a PETN bomb by the Yemeni group was well known within the national security establishment, including to John Brennan, Obama’s top counterterrorism adviser, who was personally briefed by Prince Nayef about the assassination attempt against him.³⁶ As Obama admitted in a meeting of his national security team a couple of weeks after the Christmas Day plot, “We dodged a bullet.”³⁷

Several other recent incidents have been linked with AQAP. A shooting last June by a self-professed AQAP operative outside a military recruiting station in Little Rock, Arkansas, killed one recruiter and wounded another; a November 2009 massacre at Fort Hood, Texas, claimed the lives of 13 people. Both shooters—Abdulahakim Mujahid Muhammad (nee Carlos Bledsoe) and Army Maj. Nidal Hasan—were connected with this same local Al Qaeda franchise. And the American-born firebrand cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, now a key

AQAP operative, was involved in the radicalization of Abdulmutallab, Hasan, Shahzad, and several other persons arrested in locales as diverse as England, the United States, and most recently Singapore.³⁸

The Threat from al-Shabab

*Today, Shabab and its allies control about half of south-central Somalia. The group has managed to plant Al Qaeda–like ideas into the heads of even its American recruits, and has shown that it is capable of carrying out operations outside of Somalia.*³⁹

In September 2009, the Somali Islamist insurgent group al-Shabab formally pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden,⁴⁰ following a two-year period in which it had recruited Somali-Americans and other U.S. Muslims to fight in the war in Somalia. Six months earlier, bin Laden had given his imprimatur to the Somali *jihad* in an audiotape titled “Fight On, Champions of Somalia.”⁴¹ After it announced its fealty to bin Laden, Shabab was able to recruit larger numbers of foreign fighters; by one estimate, up to 1,200 were working with the group by 2010.⁴² Today, Shabab and its allies control about half of south-central Somalia.⁴³

Shabab managed to plant Al Qaeda–like ideas into the heads of even its American recruits. Shirwa Ahmed, an ethnic Somali, graduated from high school in Minneapolis in 2003, then worked pushing passengers in wheelchairs at the Minneapolis airport. During this period Ahmed was radicalized; the exact mechanisms of that radicalization are still murky, but in late 2007 he traveled to Somalia. About a year later, on 29 October 2008, Ahmed drove a truck loaded with explosives toward a government compound in Puntland, northern Somalia, blowing himself up and killing about 20 people, including United Nations peacekeeping troops and international humanitarian assistance workers. The FBI matched Ahmed’s finger, recovered at the scene, to fingerprints already on file for him.⁴⁴ Ahmed was the first American terrorist suicide attacker anywhere. It’s possible that 18-year-old Omar Mohamud of Seattle was the second. On 17 September 2009, two stolen UN vehicles loaded with bombs blew up at the Mogadishu airport, killing more than a dozen peacekeepers of the African Union. The FBI suspects that Mohamud was one of the bombers.⁴⁵

The chances of getting killed in Somalia were quite high for the couple of dozen or so Americans who had volunteered to fight there. In addition to the two young men who conducted suicide operations, six other Somali-Americans ages 18 to 30 were killed in Somalia between 2007 and 2009, as was Ruben Shumpert, an African-American convert to Islam from Seattle.⁴⁶ Given the high death rate of the Americans fighting in Somalia, as well as the considerable attention this group has received from the FBI, it is unlikely that American veterans of the Somali war pose much of a threat to the United States itself. It is plausible, however, now that Shabab has declared itself to be an Al Qaeda affiliate, that U.S. citizens in the group might be recruited to engage in anti-American operations overseas.

Indeed, Shabab has shown that it is capable of carrying out operations outside of Somalia, bombing two groups of fans watching the World Cup on television in Kampala, Uganda, on 11 July 2010, killing more than 70.⁴⁷ Eight months earlier, a 28-year-old Somali man armed with a knife and an ax had forced himself into the home of Kurt Westergaard—a Danish cartoonist who had depicted the Prophet Mohammed with a bomb in his turban—and tried unsuccessfully to break into the panic room where Westergaard was hiding. Danish intelligence officials say the suspect has links with Shabab and Al Qaeda leaders in eastern Africa.⁴⁸

The Threat from Al Qaeda in Iraq

Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) has lost the ability to control large swaths of the country and a good chunk of the Sunni population as it did in 2006, but the group has proven surprisingly resilient.

In 2008 there was a sense that Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Al Qaeda's Iraq-focused affiliate, was on the verge of defeat. The American ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, said, "You are not going to hear me say that al-Qaeda is defeated, but they've never been closer to defeat than they are now."⁴⁹ Certainly AQI has lost the ability to control large swaths of the country and a good chunk of the Sunni population as it did in 2006, but the group has proven surprisingly resilient, as demonstrated by the fact that it conducted large-scale bombings in central Baghdad in 2009 and 2010. AQI can also play the nationalist card quite effectively in the north, especially over the disputed city of Kirkuk, which is claimed by both Iraq's Arabs and Kurds, and Iraqi officials believe that AQI is entering into new marriages of convenience with Sunni nationalist groups that only three years ago it was at war with. It is worth noting that in the first three months of 2010, the National Counterterrorism Center found that there were more terrorist incidents in Iraq—566—than in any other country in the world; these attacks killed 667 people.⁵⁰ AQI proves that even a weakened and numerically reduced terrorist group, which has suffered successive losses of key top leaders, is still capable of inflicting severe pain on a targeted society, thus undermining public trust in the ability of the authorities to maintain order and protect its citizens.

The Threat from Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has so far not been able to carry out attacks in the West and is one of the weakest of Al Qaeda's affiliates, only having the capacity for infrequent attacks in North Africa.

In September 2006, the leader of the Algerian Salafist Group for Call and Combat, Abu Musab Abdul Wadud, explained that Al Qaeda "is the only organization qualified to gather together the mujahideen." Subsequently taking the name "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb," the group, which had traditionally focused only on Algerian targets, conducted a range of operations: bombing the United Nations building in Algiers, attacking the Israeli embassy in Mauritania, and murdering French and British hostages.⁵¹ AQIM has so far not been able to carry out attacks in the West and is one of the weakest of Al Qaeda's affiliates, only having the capacity for infrequent attacks in North Africa. But through kidnappings of Western tourists, aid workers, and others, it has demonstrated a stubborn capacity to raise operational funds through ransoms, which it reportedly has shared with like-minded *jihadi* groups elsewhere.⁵²

The Threat from Other Al Qaeda Allies

The Threat from the Taliban in Pakistan^{iv}

The Taliban in Pakistan has begun to reach beyond Pakistan's borders to plot attacks in Europe and the United States.

In 2008, for the first time,⁵³ the Taliban as a movement began planning seriously to attack targets in the West. According to Spanish prosecutors, Baitullah Mehsud, then

^{iv}The Taliban in Pakistan is distinct from the Taliban in Afghanistan, a locally focused insurgency that has not attempted to attack the American homeland.

the Pakistani Taliban's leader, sent a team of would-be suicide bombers to Barcelona to attack the subway system in January 2008.⁵⁴ Pakistani Taliban spokesman Maulvi Omar confirmed this later in a videotaped interview, in which he said that those suicide bombers "were under pledge to Baitullah Mehsud" and were sent because of the Spanish military presence in Afghanistan.

In March 2009, Baitullah Mehsud threatened an attack in America, telling the Associated Press by phone, "Soon we will launch an attack in Washington that will amaze everyone in the world." This was largely discounted at the time as bloviating, but by the end of the year the Pakistani Taliban were training an American recruit for just such an attack. Faisal Shahzad, who had once worked as a financial analyst in the accounting department at the Elizabeth Arden cosmetics company in Stamford, Connecticut, traveled to Pakistan, where he received five days of bomb-making training from the Pakistani Taliban in the tribal region of Waziristan.⁵⁵ During his time there, Shahzad also met with Hakimullah Mehsud, the new leader of the Pakistani Taliban following Baitullah's death, and a video of that meeting released by the Taliban's propaganda division shows the two shaking hands and hugging.⁵⁶

Armed with his training from the Pakistani Taliban and \$12,000 in cash, Shahzad returned to Connecticut, where he purchased a Nissan Pathfinder. He spent a fast four months from training to building his bomb, which he placed in the SUV and attempted to detonate in Times Square on 1 May 2010, around 6 p.m., when the sidewalks were thick with tourists and theatergoers. The bomb, which was designed to act as a fuel-air explosive, was a dud. Shahzad was arrested two days later as he tried to leave JFK Airport for Pakistan.⁵⁷

Media accounts have largely painted Shahzad as a feckless terrorist, but though his attack may have been rushed and therefore botched, that does not mean it was not deadly serious. The training he received was arguably too cursory and too compressed in terms of instruction to provide Shahzad with the requisite skills needed to succeed in Times Square last May. But in fact, Shahzad did a number of things indicating that he had received some at least rudimentary countersurveillance techniques: He eliminated one of the Vehicle Identification Numbers on his SUV; he purchased the type of fertilizer that would not trigger suspicions that he was building a fertilizer-based bomb; and he avoided building a hydrogen peroxide-based bomb, as large-scale purchases of hydrogen peroxide that do not appear to have a legitimate purpose are now likely to draw law enforcement attention in the United States. "A successful Faisal Shahzad," a senior local law enforcement official said, "is our worst case scenario."⁵⁸

The Threat from Lashkar-e-Taiba

The Mumbai attacks of 2008 showed that Al Qaeda's ideas about attacking Western and Jewish targets had also spread to Pakistani militant groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, which had previously focused only on Indian targets.

Over a three-day period in late November 2008, Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) carried out multiple attacks in Mumbai targeting five-star hotels housing Westerners, as well as a Jewish-American community center. Additional incidents involved the Pakistan-born U.S. citizen David Headley (who had changed his name from Daood Sayed Gilani). Headley's reconnaissance efforts on behalf of Lashkar-e-Taiba were pivotal to the attacks in Mumbai. Last year he also planned an operation to kill those responsible for the 2005 publication in a Danish newspaper of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, which many Muslims had deemed to be offensive.⁵⁹

One of the more predictable foreign policy challenges of the next years is a “Mumbai II”: a large-scale attack on a major Indian city by a Pakistani militant group that kills hundreds. The Indian government showed considerable restraint in its reaction to the provocation of the Mumbai attacks in 2008. Another such attack, however, would likely produce considerable political pressure on the Indian government to “do something.” That something would likely involve incursions over the border to eliminate the training camps of Pakistani militant groups with histories of attacking India. That could lead in turn to a full-blown war for the fourth time since 1947 between India and Pakistan. Such a war involves the possibility of a nuclear exchange and the certainty that Pakistan would move substantial resources to its eastern border and away from fighting the Taliban on its western border, so relieving pressure on all the militant groups based there, including Al Qaeda.

The Threat from Uzbek Militant Groups⁶⁰

*Among Al Qaeda’s affiliates in Pakistan’s tribal areas, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and its spinoff, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), seem to have attracted the most Westerners recently—several dozen in the last three years, the majority from Germany, including at least 30 Germans in 2009.*⁶¹

Unlike its parent organization, the IMU, whose primary goal is to establish an Islamic state in Uzbekistan and has not explicitly threatened the German homeland in its propaganda, the IJU has thrown its weight behind Al Qaeda’s global *jihad*, as demonstrated by the “Sauerland cell.” Two Germans and two Turks who received training in weapons, poisons, martial arts, and bomb-making from the IJU in North Waziristan in the summer of 2006 were arrested in September 2007 and accused of plotting to attack American facilities in Germany, including Ramstein Air Base, and clubs and bars popular with U.S. troops. German officials said the Sauerland cell had stockpiled 730 kg of hydrogen peroxide that, when mixed with other materials, could have made explosives equivalent to 550 kg of dynamite.⁶² In March 2010, three of the men were convicted of membership in a terrorist organization, and the fourth of supporting a terrorist organization; all four were convicted of conspiracy to commit murder and of preparing explosive devices. They received sentences of up to 12 years in prison.⁶³

The Sauerland cell set up a recruitment and facilitation network that has continued to serve as a pipeline to Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas for German would-be militants; there may also be similar networks for the IMU. Both groups regularly feature their German members in German-language recruitment videos, and one September 2009 tape showed an entire village of German *jihadists* and their families living in the mountains of Waziristan.⁶⁴ As of October 2010, German antiterrorism police officials said that some 220 people traveled from Germany to Pakistan and Afghanistan to seek militant training, and at least 70 received it.⁶⁵

Trends in the Changing Threat Environment

1. *Who are these jihadists? A key shift in the threat to the homeland since around the time President Barack Obama took office is the increasing “Americanization” of the leadership of Al Qaeda and aligned groups, and the larger numbers of Americans attaching themselves to these groups.*

Anwar al-Awlaki, the Yemeni-American cleric who grew up in New Mexico, is today playing an important operational role in Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula,⁶⁶ while Adnan Shukrijumah, the Saudi-American who grew up in Brooklyn and Florida, is now effectively Al Qaeda’s director of external operations. In 2009, Shukrijumah tasked Najibullah Zazi

and two other Americans to attack targets in the United States. Omar Hammami, a Baptist convert to Islam from Alabama, is both a key propagandist and a military commander for al-Shabab, the Somali Al Qaeda affiliate,⁶⁷ while Chicagoan David Headley played a role in scoping the targets for the Lashkar-e-Taiba attacks on Mumbai in late 2008 that killed more than 160 people.

There is little precedent for the high-level operational roles that Americans are currently playing in Al Qaeda and affiliated groups other than the case of Ali Mohamed, an Egyptian-American former U.S. Army sergeant, who was a key military trainer for Al Qaeda during the 1990s until his arrest after the bombings of the two American embassies in Africa in 1998.

Al Qaeda and like-minded groups have also successfully attracted into their ranks dozens of American citizens and residents as foot soldiers since January 2009. Most prominent among them are Najibullah Zazi and Faisal Shahzad.

2. *These would-be jihadists do not fit any particular ethnic, economic, educational, or social profile.*

Comforting theories about poverty, lack of education, and lack of opportunity have long figured prominently in explanations for the eruption of terrorism.⁶⁸ Indeed, in the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001, this debate over the “root causes” of terrorism acquired new relevance and greater urgency. A succession of global leaders seemed to fasten on poverty, illiteracy, and lack of education as the sources of worldwide terrorism and insurgency.⁶⁹ “We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terror,” President George W. Bush, for example, declared before the United Nations Financing for Development Conference in March 2002. “We will challenge the poverty and hopelessness and lack of education and failed governments that too often allow conditions that terrorists can seize and try to turn to their advantage.”⁷⁰ His statement was but one of a plethora of similar panaceas repeatedly provided in the wake of 9/11.^v

Nearly a decade later, such arguments are still heard. In February 2009, for example, Pakistani Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani attempted to rally support for his government’s controversial truce with Taliban fighters in the Swat Valley by claiming that, since illiteracy is the source of terrorism and insurgency, greater peace and stability in the region would now enable leaders in Islamabad to improve education in Swat and thereby eliminate political violence.⁷¹ Following the attempted Christmas Day bombing, President Barack Obama implied such a causal connection with respect to AQAP’s resurgence in Yemen.⁷²

But the historical and contemporary empirical evidence fails to support such sweeping claims—with Faisal Shahzad himself the latest example. Shahzad had a degree in computing and an MBA. Until he quit his job, he was gainfully employed. He had a wife and two children and, for all intents and purposes, seemed to be living the suburban American dream with a single-family home in Shelton, Connecticut.

Umar Farouq Abdulmuttalab—the Christmas Day would-be bomber—similarly defied the conventional wisdom about the stereotypical suicide terrorist. He was a graduate of University College, London, one of Britain’s best universities, and is the son of a wealthy Nigerian banker and former government official. Not only did he hold a degree in engineering from a very good university, but he was cosmopolitan: Having lived abroad, he was at ease traversing the globe without arousing suspicion.⁷³ As the

^vWorld figures as diverse as British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Pope John Paul II, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, Jordanian Prime Minister Ali Abul Ragheb, and Phillippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, as well as Nobel Peace Prize laureates Elie Wiesel, Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, Kim Dae-jung, and Oscar Arias Sanchez, similarly identified these same “root causes.”

terrorism expert Walter Laqueur explained seven years ago, for terrorists to survive, much less thrive, in today's globalized, technologically savvy and interconnected world, they have to be

educated, have some technical competence and be able to move without attracting attention in alien societies. In brief, such a person will have to have an education that cannot be found among the poor in Pakistani or Egyptian villages or Palestinian refugee camps, only among relatively well-off town folk.⁷⁴

Nor do the would-be *jihadists* fit any particular ethnic profile. According to the authors' analysis of the 57 Americans whose ethnicities are known who were charged or convicted of Islamist terrorism crimes in the United States or elsewhere between January 2009 and September 2010, 21 percent (12) were Caucasian-Americans, 18 percent (10) Arab-Americans, 14 percent (8) South Asian-Americans, 9 percent (5) African-Americans, 4 percent (2) Hispanic-Americans, and 2 percent (1) Caribbean-American. The single largest bloc was Somali-Americans at 31 percent, a number that reflects the recent crackdown by federal authorities on support networks for Americans traveling to Somalia to fight with Shabab.⁷⁵

The American "melting pot" has not provided a firewall against the radicalization and recruitment of American citizens and residents, although it has arguably lulled the United States into a sense of complacency that homegrown terrorism could not happen here. Before the 7 July 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 United Kingdom, who were better integrated, better educated, and wealthier than their counterparts on the Continent.

By stubbornly wrapping itself in this same false security blanket, the United States lost five years to learn from the British experience. Well over a year ago, federal authorities became aware of radicalization and recruitment occurring in the United States when Somali-Americans started disappearing from the Minneapolis–St. Paul area and turning up in Somalia with Shabab. Administration officials and others believed it was an isolated, one-off phenomenon. But it was not—as grand juries in Minnesota and San Diego can attest, along with ongoing FBI investigations in Boston, two locations in Ohio, and Portland, Maine. The number of Somali-Americans who left the United States to train in Somalia turned out to be far higher than initially believed, and once they were in Somalia some were indeed being trained by Al Qaeda.

In sum, the case of the Somali-Americans turned out to be a Pandora's Box. By not taking more urgently and seriously the radicalization and recruitment that was actually occurring in the United States, authorities failed to comprehend that this was not an isolated phenomenon, specific to Minnesota and this particular immigrant community. Rather, it indicated the possibility that even an embryonic terrorist radicalization and recruitment infrastructure had been established in the U.S. homeland. Shahzad is the latest person to jump out of this box.

3. *Where are the jihadists operating? The United States used to be generally the target of Sunni militant terrorists, but now the country is also increasingly exporting American militants to conduct jihad overseas.*

Not only was David Headley responsible for much of the surveillance of the targets for the 2008 Mumbai attacks, he also traveled in 2009 to the Danish capital, Copenhagen, where he reconnoitered the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper for an attack. A year earlier Osama bin

Laden had denounced the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in the *Jyllands-Posten* as a “catastrophe” for which retribution would be meted out. Following his trip to Denmark, Headley traveled to Pakistan to meet with Ilyas Kashmiri, who runs Harakat-ul-Jihad Islami, a terrorist organization tied to Al Qaeda.⁷⁶ Headley was arrested in Chicago in October 2009 as he was preparing to travel to Pakistan again. He told investigators that he was planning to kill the *Jyllands-Posten*’s editor who had commissioned the cartoons, as well as Kurt Westergaard, who had drawn the cartoon he found most offensive, the Prophet Mohammed with a bomb concealed in his turban.

Similarly, Colleen R. LaRose, a 46-year-old Caucasian-American high school dropout known in *jihadist* circles by her Internet handle “Jihad Jane,” traveled to Europe in the summer of 2009 to scope out an alleged attack on Lars Vilks, a Swedish artist who had drawn a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed’s head on the body of a dog.⁷⁷

By the end of 2009, 14 American citizens and residents (all but one of Somali descent) had been indicted for recruiting at least 20 others to fight in Somalia, or for fund-raising for Shabab. Zazi, Shahzad, the “Northern Virginia Five,” and allegedly Daniel Boyd are other examples of American citizens or residents who at one point sought to join *jihadist* groups abroad.

Al Qaeda’s Strategy

In assessing the proliferation of terrorist threats to the American homeland, senior U.S. counterterrorism officials now repeatedly call attention to Al Qaeda’s strategy of “diversification”—mounting 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 and intelligence agencies. “Diversity,” one senior local law enforcement official explained, “is definitely the word.”⁷⁸ Similarly, in a 30 June 2010, interview at the Aspen Security Forum, Michael Leiter, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, also identified this trend. “What we have seen, which is I think most problematic to me and most difficult for the counterterrorism community,” he explained,

is a diversification of that threat. We not only face al-Qaeda senior leadership, we do face a troubling alignment of al-Qaeda and some more traditional Pakistani militant groups in Pakistan, and, as is well known to this group and most Americans, the threat of Abdulmutallab that has highlighted the threat we see from al-Qaeda in Yemen, the ongoing threat we see from al-Qaeda elements in East Africa.⁷⁹

The variety of the perpetrators and nature of their U.S. plots is remarkable. As discussed above, these have included: trained Al Qaeda operatives like Najibullah Zazi, the Afghan-born U.S. resident who sought to replicate the 7 July 2005 suicide attacks on London transport in Manhattan; motivated but less competent recruits like the five youths from a Washington, D.C., suburb who in December 2009 sought training in Pakistan; dedicated sleeper agents like the U.S. citizen and Drug Enforcement Administration informant⁸⁰ David Headley, whose reconnaissance efforts on behalf of Lashkar-e-Taiba were pivotal to the 2008 attacks in Mumbai; bona fide “lone wolves” like Nidal Hasan, the U.S. Army major responsible for murdering 13 persons at Fort Hood, Texas; and other individuals with murkier terrorist connections like Abdulhakim Muhammad (nee Carlos Bledsoe), an

African-American convert to Islam who returned from Yemen last year and killed a U.S. military recruiter in Little Rock, Arkansas, and has now claimed in court to have done so on behalf of AQAP; and, finally, the clueless incompetents who are easily apprehended by the authorities, such as the Jordanian national who overstayed his U.S. tourist visa and plotted to bomb a downtown Dallas office tower last September, and the convert to Islam who wanted to blow up a federal building in Springfield, Illinois, that same month.

This is part and parcel of a strategy that Al Qaeda has also pushed on other groups. The strategy is deliberately designed to overwhelm, distract, and exhaust Al Qaeda's adversaries. There are two components: one is economic; the other, operational. Al Qaeda has rarely claimed it could or would defeat the U.S. militarily. Instead, it hopes to wear the United States down economically by forcing it to spend more on domestic security and remain involved in costly overseas military commitments. Given the current global economic downturn, this message arguably has greater resonance now with Al Qaeda's followers and supporters, and perhaps even with recruits. The operational dimension seeks to flood already stressed intelligence and law enforcement agencies with "noise": low-level threats from "lone wolves" and other *jihadist* "hangers-on." This "low-hanging fruit" is designed to distract law enforcement and intelligence personnel from more serious terrorist operations, allowing such plots to go unnoticed beneath the radar and thereby succeed.⁸¹

*Four of Al Qaeda's Strengths*⁸²

One strength is that the group's ideological influence on other *jihadist* groups is on the rise in South Asia. One of the key leaders of the Taliban as it surged in strength several years after 9/11 was Mullah Dadullah, a thuggish but effective commander who, like his counterpart in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, thrived on killing Shi'a, beheading his hostages, and media celebrity.⁸³ In interviews in 2006, Dadullah conceded what was obvious as the violence dramatically expanded in Afghanistan between 2005 and 2006: that the Taliban had increasingly morphed together tactically and ideologically with Al Qaeda. "Osama bin Laden, thank God, is alive and in good health. We are in contact with his top aides and sharing plans and operations with each other."⁸⁴ The Taliban also adopted the playbook of Al Qaeda in Iraq wholesale, embracing suicide bombers, but only began deploying suicide attackers in large numbers from 2005 forward after the success of such operations in Iraq had become obvious to all. Where once the Taliban had banned television, now they boast an active video propaganda operation named Umar, which posts regular updates to the Web mimicking those of Al Qaeda's production arm, Al-Sahab.

Second, Al Qaeda's influence has continued to extend beyond South Asia, as it inspires and gives guidance to Al Qaeda affiliates in eastern Africa, North Africa, Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia.

A third key pillar of Al Qaeda's resilience stems from the simple fact that its top leadership is still intact. Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, are still at liberty. This matters for several reasons. First, there is the matter of justice for the almost 3,000 people who died in the 11 September attacks and for the thousands of other victims of Al Qaeda's attacks around the world. Second, every day that bin Laden remains at large is a propaganda victory for Al Qaeda. Third, although bin Laden and al-Zawahiri are not managing Al Qaeda's operations on a daily basis, they guide the overall direction of the *jihadist* movement around the world, even while they are in hiding, through videotapes and audiotapes that they continue to release on a regular basis.

Those messages from Al Qaeda's leaders have reached untold millions worldwide via television, the Internet, and newspapers. The tapes have not only instructed Al Qaeda's

followers to continue to kill Westerners and Jews, but some also carried specific instructions that militant cells then acted on. In March 2008, for instance, bin Laden denounced the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in the Danish newspaper, which he said would soon be avenged. Three months later, an Al Qaeda suicide attacker bombed the Danish embassy in Islamabad, killing six.

A final strength is that Al Qaeda and affiliated groups can provoke a massive amount of overwrought media coverage based on attacks that do not even succeed—such as the near-miss on Christmas Day 2009. The person who seems to best understand the benefits of American overreaction is bin Laden himself, who in 2004 said on a tape that aired on Al-Jazeera, “All that we have to do is to send two mujahedeen to the furthest point east to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al Qaeda, in order to make generals race there to cause America to suffer human, economic and political losses without their achieving anything of note other than some benefits for their private corporations.”⁸⁵

American officials and the wider public should realize that, by the law of averages, Al Qaeda or an affiliate will succeed in getting some kind of attack through in the next years, and that the best response would be to demonstrate that the United States as a society is resilient and is not being intimidated by such actions.

Four Operational and Four Strategic Weaknesses Trouble Al Qaeda

First, drone attacks in Pakistan have degraded the group’s central leadership and operational capability in Pakistan. In 2007, there were three reported drone strikes in Pakistan; in 2008, there were 33; and, by the end of September 2010, the Obama administration had already authorized 127.⁸⁶ Since the summer of 2008, U.S. drones have killed scores of lower-ranking militants and at least a dozen mid- and upper-level leaders within Al Qaeda or the Taliban in Pakistan’s tribal regions.

Officials in both the Bush and Obama administrations have been leery of discussing the highly classified drone program on the record, but a window into their thinking was provided by the remarks of then-CIA director Michael Hayden on 13 November 2008, as the drone program was in full swing. “By making a safe haven feel less safe, we keep al-Qaeda guessing. We make them doubt their allies; question their methods, their plans, even their priorities.”⁸⁷ This strategy seems to have worked, at least up to a point. Since the summer of 2008 when the drone program was ramped up, law enforcement authorities have uncovered only two plots against American targets traceable back to Pakistan’s tribal regions (the Zazi and Shahzad cases mentioned earlier). However, Western militants have continued to travel to the tribal regions where, by one estimate, as many as 150 Westerners have sought training in recent years, including dozens of German citizens or residents.⁸⁸

The drone program has certainly put additional pressure on Al Qaeda’s propaganda arm and its top leaders. Al Qaeda takes its propaganda operations seriously; bin Laden has observed that 90 percent of his battle is waged in the media, and al-Zawahiri has made similar comments. In 2007, al-Qaeda’s video production arm Al-Sahab had a banner year, releasing almost 100 tapes. But in 2008, the year the drone program was dramatically expanded, the number of releases dropped by half, indicating that the group’s leaders were more concerned with survival than public relations. According to IntelCenter, a Washington-based group that tracks *jihadist* propaganda, in the first nine months of 2010 al-Zawahiri released the fewest tapes in seven years—only two audiotapes, as opposed to nine audiotapes and one video in 2009—while other Al Qaeda leaders such as Abu Yahya al-Libi similarly fell relatively silent in 2010. Bin Laden resurfaced in early October 2010 after several months of silence.

According to a counterterrorism official, the fact that bin Laden and al-Zawahiri are keeping such a low profile is causing some criticism of the leaders within Al Qaeda itself. These critics say it is worrisome that their leaders are saying so little and are not managing the organization. Some have gone so far as to say “it would be helpful if the boss gave a damn,” according to this counterterrorism official.⁸⁹

When Faisal Shahzad traveled to Pakistan to link up with the Taliban in the winter of 2009, he spent a total of 40 days in the Taliban heartland of Waziristan but only five days actually being trained, which likely accounts for his lack of skills as a bombmaker.⁹⁰ This abbreviated training schedule may have been the result of the pressure that the drone program is putting on militants in Pakistan’s tribal regions, including Waziristan.

The well-known fact that the drones have killed hundreds of militants in Pakistan’s border regions is also having an effect on where Western militants—including from the United States—are seeking training, as some are opting to go to Somalia or Yemen, according to a counterterrorism official.⁹¹

Second, Pakistanis have increasingly negative attitudes about the militants based on their territory, and Pakistan has made more concerted efforts to take on the extremists militarily. If there is a silver lining to the militant atrocities that have plagued Pakistan in the past several years, it is the fact that the Pakistani public, government, and military are increasingly seeing the *jihadi* militants there in a hostile light. The Pakistani Taliban’s assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the country’s most popular politician; Al Qaeda’s bombing of the Marriott hotel in Islamabad; the attack on the visiting Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore; the widely circulated video images of the Taliban flogging a 17-year-old girl—each of these has provoked real revulsion among the Pakistani public, which is, in the main, utterly opposed to the militants.⁹²

In fact, historians will likely record the Taliban’s decision to move in early 2009 from the Swat Valley into Buner District, only 60 miles from Islamabad, as the tipping point that finally galvanized the sclerotic Pakistani state to confront the fact that the *jihadi* monster it had helped to spawn was now trying to swallow it.⁹³

The subsequent military operation to evict the Taliban from Buner and Swat was not seen by the Pakistani public as the army acting on behalf of the United States, as was often the case in previous such operations, but something that was in their own national interest. Support for Pakistani army operations against the Taliban in Swat has increased from 28 percent two years ago to 69 percent today. Support for suicide bombings has dropped from 33 percent to 8 percent in Pakistan over the past several years, while the number of Pakistanis who feel that the Taliban and Al Qaeda operating in Pakistan are a “serious problem” has risen from 57 percent to 86 percent since 2007.⁹⁴

After having suffered three defeats in the tribal region of South Waziristan over the previous five years, the Pakistani army went in again in October 2009, this time with a force of at least 30,000 troops, following several months of bombing of Taliban positions.⁹⁵ These operations were conducted with the support of at least half of the Pakistani public.⁹⁶

The changing attitude of the Pakistani public, military, and government constitutes arguably the most significant strategic shift against Al Qaeda and its allies in the past several years, as it will have a direct impact on the terrorist organization and allied groups that are headquartered in Pakistan. However, the changing attitudes do not mean, for the moment, that the Pakistani military will do much to move against the Taliban groups there that are attacking U.S. and other NATO forces in Afghanistan, such as Mullah Omar’s Quetta Shura, the Haqqani Network, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-i-Islami.

Pakistan's massive and prolonged flooding, to which the military is responding on a large scale, is likely to give the militants on the Afghanistan–Pakistan border some breathing room.

A third key weakness of Al Qaeda is the increasingly hostile attitude toward the group and its allies in the Muslim world in general. This is because most of the victims of these groups are Muslim civilians.⁹⁷ This has created a dawning recognition among Muslims that the ideological virus that unleashed 11 September and the terrorist attacks in London and Madrid is the same virus now wreaking havoc in Muslim countries such as Pakistan and Iraq. Until the terrorist attacks of May 2003 in Riyadh, for instance, the Saudi government was largely in denial about its large-scale Al Qaeda problem. There have been some 20 terrorist attacks since then in the kingdom and, as a result, the Saudi government has taken aggressive steps—arresting thousands of suspected terrorists, killing more than a hundred, implementing an expansive public information campaign against them, and arresting preachers deemed to be encouraging militancy.

Polling around the Muslim world also shows sharp drops in support for Osama bin Laden personally and for suicide bombings in general. Support for suicide bombings has dropped in Indonesia, for instance, from 26 percent to 15 percent in the past eight years and in Jordan from 43 percent to 20 percent.⁹⁸

A fourth problem for Al Qaeda is that some *jihadist* ideologues and erstwhile militant allies have now *also* turned against it. They include religious scholars and militants whom the organization had relied upon in the past for various kinds of support. Around the sixth anniversary of 11 September, Sheikh Salman al-Awdah, a leading Saudi religious scholar, addressed Al Qaeda's leader on MBC, a widely watched Middle East TV network: "My brother Osama, how much blood has been spilt? How many innocent people, children, elderly, and women have been killed . . . in the name of Al-Qaeda? Will you be happy to meet God Almighty carrying the burden of these hundreds of thousands or millions [of victims] on your back?" What was noteworthy about Awdah's statement was that it was not simply a condemnation of terrorism, or even of 11 September, but that it was a personal rebuke of bin Laden himself.⁹⁹

Similarly, leaders of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which was once loosely aligned with Al Qaeda, in 2009 officially turned against Al Qaeda's ideology of global *jihad* and made a peace deal with the Libyan government.

In addition to the four operational problems facing Al Qaeda, the group has four key strategic issues that foreshadow its long-term implosion. First, Al Qaeda keeps killing Muslim civilians. This weighs especially heavily in the diminishing support for Al Qaeda among Muslims, since the Koran forbids killing civilians and fellow Muslims.^{vi} Second, Al Qaeda has not created a genuine mass political movement. Third, Al Qaeda's leaders have constantly expanded their list of enemies. Al Qaeda has said at various times that it is opposed to all Middle Eastern regimes; Muslims who do not share their views; the Shi'a; most Western countries; Jews and Christians; the governments of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Russia; most news organizations; the United Nations; and international

^{vi}It is a positive development that Al Qaeda's killing of Muslim civilians has turned popular opinion away from the group. However, historically, even when terrorist groups have killed more of their ethnic or religious brethren than their enemy—such as in Algeria in the 1950s, Northern Ireland in 1968–98, and Palestine since 1968—it has not really harmed their fortunes. The National Liberation Front came to power after torturing and killing far more Muslim Algerians than the French ever did; the Provisional Irish Republican Army killed over 2,000 civilians, the majority of whom were Roman Catholics, compared with only a few hundred British soldiers, police, and Protestants, yet its political wing, Sinn Fein, is now part of Northern Ireland's governing body. Palestinians have always killed far more of one another (not least during the past few years in Gaza infighting between Fatah and Hamas) than Israelis and Jews.

nongovernmental organizations. It's very hard to think of a category of person, institution, or government that Al Qaeda does not oppose. Making a world of enemies is never a winning strategy. And finally, Al Qaeda has no positive vision. It is known what bin Laden is against, but what's he really for? If you asked him, he would say the restoration of the caliphate. In practice that means Taliban-style theocracies stretching from Indonesia to Morocco. A silent majority of Muslims do not want that. Al Qaeda is, in short, losing the war of ideas in the Islamic world. Still, even terrorist groups with little popular support or legitimacy can continue to carry out infrequent but often highly consequential attacks, as the Red Army Faction demonstrated in West Germany in the 1980s and 1990s.

Potential Future *Jihadist* Attacks: Strategic Calculations, Operations, and Tactics

Strategic Calculations: Risk Assessment

Several disquieting trends converged in Times Square on 1 May 2010.¹⁰⁰ First, a foreign terrorist group, with a hitherto local agenda and otherwise parochial aims, once more stretched its wings and sought to operate on a broader, more ambitious global canvas. Second, the conventional wisdom, which has long held that the threat to the United States was primarily external, involving foreigners coming from overseas to kill Americans in this country as on 11 September 2001, was once again shattered. Third, the comforting stereotype that terrorists are poor, uneducated, provincial loners, and thus are both different from everyone else and can be readily identified, was again refuted. Fourth, the belief that the American "melting pot" would provide a firewall against radicalization and recruitment, given the historical U.S. capacity to readily absorb new immigrants, fell by the wayside. Finally, it became apparent that Al Qaeda and its allies have embraced a strategy of attrition that is deliberately designed to overwhelm, distract, and exhaust its adversaries. The Times Square incident, despite initial claims to the contrary, was not a "one-off" event perpetrated by a "lone wolf" but rather is part of an emerging pattern of terrorism that directly threatens the United States and presents new challenges to U.S. national security.¹⁰¹

This was precisely the message that Faisal Shahzad sought to convey when he appeared before a U.S. District Court in New York in June 2010. Declaring himself a "holy warrior" (*mujahid*) and a "Muslim soldier" who had been deployed by the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban) to wage what he called a "war" in the United States, Shahzad described himself as "part of the answer to the U.S. terrorizing Muslim nations and the Muslim people." He further promised that if Washington did not cease invading Muslim lands and did not withdraw from Iraq, Afghanistan, and other Muslim countries, more attacks on the United States would follow. Americans, Shahzad explained, "don't see the drones killing children in Afghanistan. . . . [They] only care about their people, but they don't care about the people elsewhere in the world when they die." In his view, this means that attacks on children and innocents are both justified and should be expected.¹⁰²

While it is perhaps tempting to dismiss Shahzad's threats as the irrelevant ranting of an incompetent wannabe terrorist, he and his likely successors present the most serious challenge to the security of the United States and the safety of its citizens and residents since the 11 September 2001 attacks. There are at least four good reasons for taking Shahzad at his word.

Cost-Benefit Analysis. Shahzad's attack may have been a failure, but the potential for damage was substantial. One can be certain that the terrorist movement responsible for deploying the next attacker to the United States will try to provide that person with the

requisite training to ensure the success of that attack. Terrorists play the odds, thus perhaps explaining the seeming “amateurish” dimension of the Times Square plot. What appeared “amateurish” to many Americans may in fact be more a reflection of the attack having been rushed and the perpetrator too hastily deployed. At a time when the capabilities of the Pakistani Taliban and Al Qaeda in Pakistan are being relentlessly degraded by U.S. drone attacks, this makes sense. Both groups may feel pressed to implement an operation either sooner or more precipitously than they might otherwise prefer. Fears of the would-be attacker being identified and interdicted by authorities may thus account for what appears to be a more compressed operational tempo and faster “soup to nuts” process by which a recruit is radicalized, trained, and operationally deployed.

The Pakistani Taliban as well as Al Qaeda may be prepared to accept the tradeoff of shorter training periods leading to accelerated plots though less reliable operations in order to dispatch “clean skin” recruits before they can be identified, detected, and stopped. For the terrorist groups behind such plots, this arguably represents an acceptable risk for a potentially huge return on a modest investment. They will have expended little effort and energy training operatives like Shahzad who present them with new, attractive low-cost opportunities to strike in the United States.

These groups may also pin their faith and hopes on eventually simply getting lucky. Over a quarter of a century ago, the Irish Republican Army famously taunted then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher after its bombers failed to kill her at the 1984 Conservative Party conference in Brighton, England, with the memorable words: “Today we were unlucky, but remember we only have to be lucky once. You will have to be lucky always.”¹⁰³ Al Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban, and their allies doubtless have embraced the same logic.

Terrorism is Inexpensive. A Times Square-style plot is by no means an expensive proposition for any terrorist group to undertake. The grand jury indictment details how two payments totaling approximately \$12,000—roughly the same cost of the 7 July 2005, suicide attacks on London’s public transportation system—were effortlessly transferred from overseas bank accounts to Shahzad via locations in Massachusetts and New York State. Given the minimal cost of orchestrating such an operation, foreign terrorist groups will likely continue to regard U.S. homeland operations as both desirable and at least financially feasible options. They also understand that even failed plots, such as Shahzad’s bungled effort, can still pay vast dividends in terms of publicity and attention.

An Ongoing Campaign. As mentioned earlier, Shahzad’s attempted attack should not be considered a “one-off,” but as a single component of an ongoing effort by Al Qaeda and its allies to target the U.S. homeland.

Smaller-Scale Attacks. As one counterterrorism official put it, “Abdulmutallab is not a very high barrier for terrorist groups to surmount. His attack demonstrated to other terrorists that you don’t have to be [9/11 operational commander] Khalid Sheikh Mohammed to carry out an attack.” Another counterterrorism official said terrorist groups now see the United States as more “gettable” because of the failed plots on Christmas Day 2009 and in Times Square in 2010. Smaller-bore plots and attacks by a wider range of *jihadist* groups are the likely pattern going forward, closer to the attacks that killed 52 commuters in London on 7 July 2005, than anything on the scale of 9/11.

Potential Future Targets

Commercial Aviation. A cell of British Pakistanis, some trained by Al Qaeda, plotted to bring down seven passenger jets flying to the United States and Canada from Britain during the summer of 2006. During the trial of the men accused in the “planes plot,” the prosecution

argued that some 1,500 passengers would have died if all seven of the targeted planes had been brought down, and most of the victims would have been Americans, Britons, and Canadians.¹⁰⁴

The U.K.-based planes plot did not stand alone. Four years earlier, an Al Qaeda affiliate in Kenya had almost succeeded in bringing down an Israeli passenger jet with a surface-to-air missile,¹⁰⁵ while in 2003 a plane belonging to the DHL courier service was struck by a missile as it took off from the Baghdad airport.¹⁰⁶ The same year militants cased the Riyadh airport and were planning to attack British Airways flights into Saudi Arabia.¹⁰⁷ In 2007, two British doctors with possible ties to Al Qaeda in Iraq tried unsuccessfully to ignite a car bomb at the Glasgow airport.¹⁰⁸ And if the Nigerian Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab had brought down the Northwest Airlines flight over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009, it would have been Al Qaeda's most successful attack on an American target since it destroyed the World Trade Center towers and part of the Pentagon.

According to several counterterrorism officials the authors spoke to, the skilled Yemeni-based bombmaker who built Abdulmutallab's explosive is still at large. He is likely to try to bring down another commercial jet with a concealed bomb that is not detectable by metal detectors. And Al Qaeda or an affiliate could also try to down a jet with a surface-to-air missile, as was attempted in Kenya in 2002.

Distinctive Western Brand Names, in Particular American Hotel Chains. Since the 9/11 attacks, Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups have increasingly attacked economic and business targets. The shift in tactics was in part a response to the fact that the traditional pre-9/11 targets, such as American embassies, warships, and military bases, are now better defended, while so-called soft economic targets are both ubiquitous and easier to hit. In 2002, a group of 11 French defense contractors were killed as they left a Sheraton hotel in Karachi, which was heavily damaged.¹⁰⁹ In 2003, suicide attackers bombed the J.W. Marriott hotel in Jakarta; bombers struck it again six years later, simultaneously also attacking the Ritz Carlton hotel in the Indonesian capital.¹¹⁰ In October 2004, in Taba, Egyptian *ihadists* attacked a Hilton hotel. In Amman, Jordan, in November 2005, Al Qaeda attacked three hotels with well-known American names—the Grand Hyatt, Radisson, and Days Inn.¹¹¹ Five-star hotels that cater to Westerners abroad are a perennial target for *ihadists*: in 2008 the Taj and Oberoi in Mumbai, the Serena in Kabul, and the Marriott in Islamabad, and in 2009 the Pearl Continental in Peshawar. Such attacks will likely continue, as hotels are in the hospitality business and cannot turn themselves into fortresses.

Israeli/Jewish Targets. This is an Al Qaeda strategy that has only emerged strongly post-9/11. Despite bin Laden's declaration in February 1998 that he was creating the "World Islamic Front against the Crusaders and the Jews," Al Qaeda only started attacking Israeli or Jewish targets in early 2002. Since then, Al Qaeda and its affiliated groups have directed a campaign against Israeli and Jewish targets, killing journalist Daniel Pearl in Karachi, bombing synagogues and Jewish centers in Tunisia, Morocco, and Turkey, and attacking an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa, Kenya, killing 13. Al Qaeda's North African affiliate attacked the Israeli embassy in Mauritania in 2008.

American Soldiers Fighting Wars in Two Muslim Countries. A few months before Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan's murderous spree in Texas, Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, an African-American convert to Islam, attacked two U.S. military recruiters in Little Rock, Arkansas, killing one and wounding the other. Despite the fact that the FBI had had him under surveillance following a mysterious trip that he had recently taken to Yemen, Muhammad was still able to acquire guns and attack the recruiting station in broad daylight.

When Muhammad was arrested in his vehicle, police found a rifle with a laser sight, a revolver, ammunition, and the makings of Molotov cocktails.¹¹²

Daniel Boyd, the alleged leader of the *jihadist* cell in North Carolina, obtained maps of the Quantico Marine base in Virginia, which he cased on 12 June 2009, for a possible attack. He also allegedly possessed armor-piercing ammunition, saying it was “to attack Americans,” and said that one of his weapons would be used “for the base,” an apparent reference to the Quantico facility.¹¹³

Potential Future Tactics

Suicide Operations. The fact that American citizens engaged in suicide operations in Somalia raises the possibility that suicide attacks could start taking place in the United States itself. To discount this possibility would be to ignore the lessons of the British experience. On 30 April 2003, two Britons of Pakistani descent launched a suicide attack in Tel Aviv; the first British suicide bomber, Birmingham-born Mohammed Bilal, blew himself up outside an army barracks in Indian-held Kashmir in December 2000.¹¹⁴ Despite those attacks, the British security services had concluded just months before the 7 July 2005, bombings of the London transport system that suicide bombings would not be much of a concern in the United Kingdom itself.¹¹⁵ The London attacks ended that complacent attitude.

Nidal Malik Hasan, a Palestinian-American medical officer and a rigidly observant Muslim who had made no secret to his fellow officers of his opposition to America’s wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, went on a shooting spree at the giant Army base at Fort Hood, Texas, on 5 November 2009, killing 13 and wounding many more. This attack seems to have been an attempted suicide operation in which Hasan planned a *jihadist* “death-by-cop.” In the year before his killing spree, Hasan had made Web postings about suicide operations and the theological justification for the deaths of innocents, and had sent more than a dozen e-mails to Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born cleric living in Yemen who is playing an operational role in the Al Qaeda affiliate there.¹¹⁶ Awlaki said he first received an e-mail from Hasan on 17 December 2008, and in that initial communication Hasan “was asking for an edict regarding the [possibility] of a Muslim soldier [killing] colleagues who serve with him in the American army.”¹¹⁷

“Fedayeen” Attacks. The “success” of Lashkar-e-Taiba’s 60-hour assault on Mumbai in late November 2008, which involved 10 gunmen all willing to die, is producing similar copycat operations known as “Fedayeen” (self-sacrificer) attacks. The long, drawn-out assault in Mumbai produced round the clock coverage around the globe, something other terrorist groups want to emulate. There are examples in attacks on Afghan government buildings and in a similar attack in October 2009 against GHQ, the Pakistani military headquarters in Rawalpindi. And an alleged plot disclosed in the fall of 2010 is said to have involved teams of Al Qaeda-linked militants planning “Mumbai-style” attacks in major European cities.¹¹⁸ Some reports suggest bin Laden personally approved the Europe plot.¹¹⁹

Assassinations of Key Leaders and U.S. Officials, and Those Who are Perceived as Insulting Islam. Because Al Qaeda and allied groups are rightly thought of as preoccupied by inflicting mass-casualty attacks, one tends to ignore their long history of assassinating or attempting to assassinate key leaders and American officials. Two days before 9/11, Al Qaeda assassinated the storied Afghan military commander Ahmad Shah Massoud; in December 2003 it tried to kill Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on two occasions; and in 2009, the top Saudi counterterrorism official, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, narrowly escaped being killed by an Al Qaeda assassin bearing a concealed bomb. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has been the subject of multiple Taliban assassination attempts, and the

leading Pakistani politician, Benazir Bhutto, was killed by a Taliban suicide bomber in 2007. In 2002 American diplomat Leonard Foley was murdered in Amman by Al Qaeda in Iraq, and six years later the Taliban killed Stephen Vance, an American working in Peshawar on an aid project funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development. It is worth noting here that since 9/11 the U.S. consulate in Karachi has been the subject of three serious attacks;¹²⁰ the U.S. consulate in Jeddah the subject of one large-scale attack¹²¹ and the U.S. embassy in Sana, Yemen, the subject of two such attacks.¹²² And as has been seen, Scandinavian artists who have drawn cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed are now frequently targeted by *jihadists*. For Al Qaeda and allied groups, the Danish cartoon controversy has assumed some of the same importance that Salman Rushdie's fictional writings about the Prophet did for Khomeini's Iran two decades earlier.

Attacks that are Unlikely to Happen

Mass-Casualty Attacks Involving True Weapons of Mass Destruction. As discussed in more detail earlier, despite Al Qaeda's long interest in acquiring chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons, on the infrequent occasions that it or affiliated groups have tried to deploy crude versions of these weapons their efforts have fizzled.

An Attack on a Mall in Some Midwestern Town or Other Less Populous Region of the U.S. For the Muslims around the globe whom Al Qaeda is trying to influence, an attack on an obscure town in the Midwest, for example, would have relatively little impact, which explains Al Qaeda's continuing fixation on attacks on cities and targets well known in the Islamic world. It explains Zazi's travel to Manhattan in September 2009 from his then home base in Colorado and Al Qaeda's many attempts in the past decade to bring down American passenger jets. That is not, of course, to say that someone influenced by bin Laden's ideas—but not part of Al Qaeda or one of its affiliates—might not attempt an attack in some obscure American town, but the terrorist organization and its affiliates remain focused on symbolic targets: New York, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and commercial airliners.

Preparedness Questions for the U.S. Government

It is fundamentally troubling, given this collection of new threats and new adversaries directly targeting America, that there remains no federal government agency or department specifically charged with identifying radicalization and interdicting the recruitment of U.S. citizens or residents for terrorism. As one senior intelligence analyst lamented, "There's no lead agency or person. There are First Amendment issues we're cognizant of. It's not a crime to radicalize, only when it turns to violence. There are groups of people looking at different aspects of counter-radicalization. [But it] has to be integrated across agencies, across levels of government, public-private cooperation"¹²³—which, unfortunately, it is not. America is thus vulnerable to a threat that is not only diversifying, but arguably intensifying.

The long-held belief that homegrown terrorism could not happen here has thus created a situation where the United States is today stumbling blindly through the legal, operational, and organizational minefield of countering terrorist radicalization and recruitment occurring here. Moreover, rather than answers, there is now a long list of pressing questions on this emerging threat, on the U.S. response, and on the capacity of the national security architecture currently in place to meet it.

On the Threat

What can be done when the terrorists are like everyone else? When they conform to the archetypal American immigrant success story? When they are American citizens or U.S.

residents? When they are not perhaps from the Middle East or South Asia and in fact have familiar-sounding names? Or, when they are self-described “petite, blue-eyed, blonde” suburban housewives who, as Colleen LaRose, a.k.a. Jihad Jane, boasted, “can easily blend in”?¹²⁴

On the U.S. Response

Who in fact has responsibility in the U.S. government to identify radicalization when it is occurring and then to interdict attempts at recruitment? Is this best done by federal law enforcement (e.g., the Federal Bureau of Investigation) or state and local jurisdictions working closely with federal authorities? What is the role of state and local governments? Is it a core mission for a modernized, post-9/11 FBI? Or for the Department of Homeland Security? Can it be done by the National Counterterrorism Center, even though it has only a coordinating function and relies on other agencies for intelligence collection, analysis, and operations? What is the role of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence in homegrown terrorism and recruitment and radicalization? Will coming to grips with these challenges be the remit of the next FBI director given the incumbent’s impending retirement?

On the U.S. Current National Security Architecture

Despite the reforms adopted from the 9/11 Commission’s report and recommendations and the 2004 Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act, have terrorists nonetheless discovered the Achilles’s heel of the United States in that it currently has no strategy to counter the type of threat posed by homegrown terrorists and other radicalized recruits? Did “the system work” on 1 May 2010, when Faisal Shahzad attempted to detonate explosives in Times Square? Or was a lot of luck involved because of the plot’s rushed nature? And finally, can Al Qaeda and its affiliates and associates be deterred from attacking in the United States? If even a “hard target” like New York City continually attracts terrorist attention, what does this say about vulnerabilities elsewhere in the country?

Conclusion

The conventional wisdom has long been that America was immune to the heady currents of radicalization affecting both immigrant and indigenous Muslim communities elsewhere in the West.¹²⁵ That has now been shattered by the succession of cases that have recently come to light of terrorist radicalization and recruitment occurring in the United States. And while it must be emphasized that the number of U.S. citizens and residents affected or influenced in this manner remains extremely small, at the same time the sustained and growing number of individuals heeding these calls is nonetheless alarming.

Given this list of incidents involving homegrown radicals, lone wolves, and trained terrorist recruits, the United States is arguably now little different from Europe in terms of having a domestic terrorist problem involving immigrant and indigenous Muslims as well as converts to Islam. The diversity of these latest foot soldiers in the wars of terrorism being waged against the United States underscores how much the terrorist threat has changed since the 11 September 2001 attacks. In the past year alone the United States has seen affluent suburban Americans and the progeny of hard-working immigrants gravitate to terrorism. Persons of color and Caucasians have done so. Women along with men. Good students and well-educated individuals and high school dropouts and jailbirds. Persons born in the United States or variously in Afghanistan, Egypt, Pakistan, and Somalia. Teenage boys

pumped up with testosterone and middle-aged divorcees. The only common denominator appears to be a newfound hatred for their native or adopted country, a degree of dangerous malleability, and a religious fervor justifying or legitimizing violence that impels these very impressionable and perhaps easily influenced individuals toward potentially lethal acts of violence.

The diversity of this array of recent terrorist recruits presents new challenges for intelligence and law enforcement agencies, already over-stressed and inundated with information and leads, to run these new threats to ground. There seems no longer any clear profile of a terrorist. Moreover, the means through which many of these persons were radicalized—over the Internet—suggests that these days you can aspire to become a terrorist in the comfort of your own bedroom.

In short, the threat that the United States is facing is different than it was nine years ago. It has also changed and evolved since the 9/11 Commission presented its report six long years ago. Today, America faces a dynamic threat that has diversified to a broad array of attacks, from shootings to car bombs to simultaneous suicide attacks to attempted in-flight bombings of passenger aircraft.

In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, the consensus within the national security and intelligence communities was that when it came to attacks on the U.S. homeland, Al Qaeda was intent on matching or besting the loss of life and destruction it caused that day. Since catastrophic-scale attacks require high levels of planning and coordination to succeed, they also generate more opportunities for detection and intervention. Now it is clear that terrorist groups see operational value in conducting more frequent and less sophisticated attacks that can place severe stress on finite intelligence and law enforcement resources. In addition, Al Qaeda has concluded that these attacks can have strategic value by generating a “big bang for the buck,” given that even a near-miss (e.g., the Christmas Day 2009 plot) can generate so much media and political fallout.

Improving the odds of effectively countering today’s increasingly dynamic and diversified terrorist threat will require a much greater degree of engagement of state and local public safety officials. As the ranks of U.S. recruits have grown, the new frontlines have become the streets of Bridgeport, Denver, Minneapolis, and other big and small communities across America. Making sure that the nation’s 50,000 public safety agencies are kept apprised of the changing face of terrorism poses a significant training and information-sharing challenge, but one that America neglects at its peril.

However, even if America’s intelligence, law enforcement, and homeland security communities are far better prepared to counter this new collection of adversaries, it still will not be enough. On Christmas Day 2009, it was not a federal air marshal, but the courageous actions of the passengers and flight crew aboard Northwest Flight 253 that helped disrupt the attack once it was underway. In Times Square, it was a sidewalk T-shirt vendor, not the New York Police Department patrolman sitting in a squad car directly across the street, who sounded the alarm about Faisal Shahzad’s explosive-laden SUV. It is reckless to leave the task of combating terrorism only to the professionals when the changing nature of the threat requires that ordinary Americans play a larger support role in detecting and preventing terrorist activities.

It is also important to acknowledge that how Americans respond to terrorist attacks can influence the worrisome trend by terrorist groups to radicalize and train recruits to carry out less sophisticated operations on U.S. soil. If any attack can succeed in generating significant political and economic fallout, then there is a greater motivation for undertaking these attacks. Alternatively, terrorist attacks that have limited potential to inflict serious casualties or cause disruption become less attractive if Americans display a greater degree

of resilience by being better prepared to respond to and recover from these attacks. Since as a practical matter it is impossible to prevent every terrorist attack, the United States should be working in any event to improve the capacity of its political system, along with citizens and communities, to better manage how America deals with such attacks when they occur.

When the United States demonstrates its national resilience in the face of terrorism, terrorist groups will have little to gain by attacking the American homeland. When federal agencies work well with one another and their counterparts at the state and local levels, and reach out to everyday Americans, the United States will be far better able to detect and prevent future attacks. In short, nine years after the 11 September 2001, attacks on New York and Washington, the changing nature of the terrorist threat makes clear that the United States must be willing to reexamine many of its counterterrorism assumptions and approaches. Only then can America succeed at maintaining the upper hand in the face of an adversary who continues to demonstrate the ability to learn and adapt.

Appendix A: Terrorist Incidents in the United States in 2009¹²⁶

The following 11 terrorist incidents in 2009 are divided into the following categories: terrorist attacks, serious plots, and Americans conspiring to take part in *jihadist* training or campaigns overseas. A “serious plot” is defined as involvement in a concrete plan to commit a terrorist attack, with specific chosen targets and other preparations, including target surveillance and the preparation of explosives or other weapons and travel or attempted travel to join a *jihadist* group.

- Terrorist attacks (2)
 - **Abdulahakim Mujahid Muhammad (Carlos Bledsoe)**—In June 2009 Muhammad, known as Carlos Bledsoe before his conversion to Islam, killed one soldier and wounded another at a U.S. military recruiting station in Little Rock, Arkansas. Muhammad had spent time in Yemen and claimed to be a member of the group Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.
 - **Nidal Malik Hasan**—On 5 November 2009, Maj. Hasan, a military psychologist stationed at Fort Hood, Texas, opened fire on the base with two handguns, killing 13 and wounding 43 before security officers shot and disabled him. Hasan was born in Virginia to Palestinian parents, and currently awaits trial in the military justice system.
- Serious plots (5)
 - **Michael Finton**—Finton, a convert to Islam, was arrested in September 2009 after attempting to set off an inert car bomb in front of a federal government building in Springfield, Illinois. Federal agents posing as Al Qaeda members supplied Finton with a fake bomb, and a friend working as an FBI informant recorded conversations where Finton expressed his hatred of the United States and his desire to engage in *jihad*.
 - **Hosam Maher Husein Smadi**—Smadi, a 19-year-old Jordanian, was arrested in a sting operation after trying to set off an inert car bomb in September 2009 in front of the Fountain Place office tower in Dallas. As with Finton, the FBI had been investigating Smadi, supplied him with harmless materials disguised as explosives, and recorded Smadi’s conversations with undercover agents where he discussed his plan to commit a terrorist attack in the United States.

- **Najibullah Zazi et al.**—Zazi, an Afghan immigrant and permanent U.S. resident, was arrested in September 2009 while preparing to attack targets including the New York City subway system. Zazi had stockpiled chemicals, including hydrogen peroxide, needed to make an explosive compound known as TATP. He pleaded guilty in February 2010 to conspiring to commit a terrorist act using a “weapon of mass destruction.” He also admitted to having received training in Pakistan. Zazi had gone originally to fight American forces in Afghanistan, but Al Qaeda leaders convinced him to return to the United States. Zazi’s friend Zoran Ahmedzay pleaded guilty to involvement in the plot, while another friend, Adis Medunjanin, is currently awaiting trial on charges of involvement.
- **David Coleman Headley**—Headley, a Pakistani-American who changed his name from Daood Gilani, was arrested along with Tawahhur Rana in October 2009 on charges that he helped scope out targets for the 2008 Mumbai attacks, conducted by the Pakistani militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba. Headley pleaded guilty in March 2010, also admitting to having helped plot an attack that never took place against the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, in retaliation for the paper’s publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed.
- **Umar Farouq Abdulmutallab**—Abdulmutallab, a 23-year-old Nigerian affiliated with Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, botched an attempt to explode a bomb with plastic explosives on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009. Abdulmutallab boarded the flight in Amsterdam, bound for Detroit with some 300 passengers and crew on board. As the plane neared Detroit, the young man tried to detonate his bomb with a chemical initiator, setting himself on fire and suffering severe burns. Some combination of his own ineptitude, faulty bomb construction, and the quick actions of the passengers and crew who subdued him and extinguished the fire prevented an explosion that might have brought down the plane near Detroit. Immediately after he was arrested, Abdulmutallab told investigators that the explosive device “was acquired in Yemen along with instructions as to when it should be used.” He has been charged in a six-count criminal indictment including attempted use of weapons of mass destruction and attempted murder, and faces life in prison if convicted.¹²⁷
- Americans seeking to join or aid foreign terrorist organizations (4)
 - **The “DC 5”**—In November 2009 five young Americans of Pakistani, Arab, and African descent were arrested in Pakistan after their families reported them missing and found what appeared to be at least one “martyrdom video.” The five reportedly had tried to join multiple Pakistani militant groups, without success, before being picked up by Pakistani police. They were charged in Pakistan and convicted in June 2010 of criminal conspiracy and funding a banned terrorist organization. The five are Umar Chaudhry, Ramy Zamzan, Waqar Hassan Khan, Ahmad Abdullah Minni, and Amein Hassan Yemer.
 - **Minnesota Somalis**—Federal prosecutors in 2009 indicted two groups of men (eight in one indictment, six in another) for recruiting young men in Somali communities in Minnesota and fund-raising for the Al Qaeda-linked group al-Shabab. Some of the men are currently believed to be in Somalia, and seven of those charged as part of the ongoing investigation were indicted in August 2010 on additional charges of providing material support to Shabab. Those indicted include Abdow Munye Abdow, Khalid Abshir, Salah Osman Ahmad, Adarus Abdulle Ali, Cabdulaahi Ahmed Faarax, Khalid Abshir, Salah Osman Ahmad, Kamal Hassan, Mohamed Hassan, Abdifatah Yusef Isse, Abdiweli Yassin Isse,

Zakaria Maruf, Omer Abdi Mohamed, Ahmed Ali Omar, Mahanud Said Omar, and Mustafa Salat.

- **North Carolina Cluster**—Daniel Boyd, a convert to Islam, was arrested in July 2009 along with six others, including two of his sons, and charged with plotting to wage “violent *jihad*” abroad. He allegedly performed reconnaissance on the U.S. Marine base at Quantico, Va., while planning a possible attack on the base. Members of the “North Carolina Cluster” allegedly traveled to Gaza, Israel, and Jordan in the past several years in the hope of fighting Israeli forces. Besides Boyd, those arrested were his sons Zakariya and Dylan, Anes Subasic, Mohammad Omar Aly Hassan, Ziyad Yaghi, and Hysen Sherifi.
- **Tarek Mehanna**—Boston resident Mehanna was arrested in October 2009 on charges that he had plotted to join insurgents fighting U.S. troops abroad, attack a shopping mall in the United States, and kill two U.S. politicians. Mehanna was also charged in June 2010 with seeking to provide material support to Al Qaeda. An alleged accomplice in Mehanna’s nascent plots, Ahmed Abousamra, is currently believed to be in Syria.

Appendix B

2009 and 2010* terrorism-related arrests and indictments of American citizens or residents in the U.S. and abroad¹²⁸

Last name	First name	Ethnicity (where known)
2009–43		
Abousamra	Ahmad	Arab
Abdow	Abdow Munye	Somali
Abshir	Khalid	Somali
Ahmed	Salah Osman	Somali
Ali	Adarus Abdulle	Somali
Boyd	Daniel	Caucasian
Boyd	Dylan	Caucasian
Boyd	Zakaria	Caucasian
Chaudhry (Farooq)	Umar	South Asian
Cromitie	James	African American
Faarax	Cabdullaahi Ahmed	Somali
Finton	Michael	Caucasian
Hammami	Omar	Arab
Hasan	Nidal Malik	Arab
Hassan	Mohammad Omar Aly	—
Hassan	Kamal	—
Hassan	Mohamed	Somali
Headley	David Coleman	Pakistani father, Am. mother
Isse	Abdiweli Yassin	Somali
Isse	Abdifatah Yusuf	Somali

(Continued on next page)

Last name	First name	Ethnicity (where known)
Kaziu	Betim	Albanian
Khan	Waqar Hussain	South Asian
LaRose	Colleen R.	Caucasian
Maruf	Zakaria	Somali
Mehanna	Tarek	Arab
Minni	Ahmad A.	African American (Eritrean)
Mohamed	Omer Abdi	Somali
Muhammad	Abdulahakim Mujahid	African American
Omar	Ahmed	Somali
Omar	Mahamud Said	Somali
Payen	Laguerre	Haitian
Rana	Tahawwur Hussain	South Asian
Salat	Mustafa	Somali
Sherifi	Hysen	Kosovar
Smadi	Hosam Maher Husein	Arab
Subasic	Anes	Serbian
Vinas	Bryant Neal	Hispanic
Williams	David	African American
Williams	Onta	African American
Yaghi	Ziyad	Arab
Yemer	Aman Hassan	Arab
Zamzam	Ramy	Arab
Zazi	Najibullah	South Asian
2010–20		
Abdi	Abdikader Ali	Somali
Ahmedzay	Zarein	South Asian
Alessa	Mahmoud	Arab
Almonte	Carlos	Hispanic
Beledi	Farah Mohamed	Somali
Bujol	Barry	—
Chesser	Zachary	Caucasian
Hasanoff	Sabirhan	—
Medunjanin	Adis	Bosnian
Ouazzani	Khaled	Arab
Rockwood	Paul	Caucasian
Shahzad	Faisal	South Asian
al-Hanafi	Wasam	—
Ali	Abdisalam Hussein	Somali
Masri	Shaker	—
Mostafa	Jehad	Caucasian
Ali	Amina	Somali
Hassan	Hawo	Somali
Khan	Raja Lahrasib	South Asian
Mobley	Sharif	Somali-American

*Through 10 September 2010.

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