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## Al Qaeda and Radicalization: The Lone Wolf, The Sleeper and the Evolving Terrorism Threat

*On December 9, 2009, five young Muslim American men were arrested in Pakistan en route to the Taliban sanctuary in Pakistan's tribal areas, with the intention of training to fight against American troops. These men, a close circle of friends in their late teens and 20s from the Washington, D.C., suburbs, had watched jihadist training films posted online on a popular Internet video site, through which they had been in contact with a Pakistani militant with links to al Qaeda.*

*While al Qaeda has been unable to mount any large-scale attacks since 9/11, the terrorist threat has clearly taken on another — equally dangerous — dimension. Nasir al Wahayshi, the leader of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, recently called for jihadists to conduct simple, smaller-scale attacks against soft targets in the Muslim world and the West. Wahayshi also noted how relatively easy it is to conduct such attacks using improvised explosive devices, guns, or even knives and clubs. The very next day, a lone gunman — United States Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan — opened fire on a group of soldiers at Fort Hood, Texas, killing 13 people and wounding 42.*

*For eight years Americans have waged a global war on terrorism. The recent massacre at Fort Hood was a plot that had little chance of being foiled because it was hatched inside a fanatic's head, leaving no clues or trail. America has adapted its laws and intelligence services to make it easier to infiltrate terrorist cells, allowing officials to monitor their e-mails, phone calls and Web traffic. It is this heightened level of surveillance that allowed authorities to discover the link between Chicago businessman David Coleman Headley and the Mumbai attacks, one year after the event. It appears that this campaign has successfully crippled al Qaeda's ability to deliver a massive blow. In consequence, however, al Qaeda's new strategy is to empower and motivate individuals to commit acts of violence individually and in stealth, outside any terrorism chain of command. This issue of The Lipman Report® will explore this new face of terrorism — of Lone Wolves, Sleepers and quiet community and Internet radicalizations — examine the more decentralized structure of al Qaeda and discuss the escalating challenges of these very dangerous threats.*

### **The Lone Wolf**

The concept of the Lone Wolf has always been a frightening one for law enforcement officers. In terrorism parlance, the Lone Wolf is the individual who

unexpectedly carries out a successful terrorist act because he has maintained the ultimate in operational security. He, or she, has no obvious or active co-conspirators, leads a relatively exemplary life, is at least moderately successful, generally keeps his feelings to himself, and perhaps most importantly, almost never comes to the attention of law enforcement. And should any suspicious reports about him come before counterterrorism agents, there would most likely be no real follow-up investigation — a lack of evidence, combined with the suspect's good reputation and seemingly harmless demeanor, would induce most law enforcement authorities to shrug off their concerns.

Individual terrorists and small cells are very difficult for the government to detect. This challenge is greatly increased if an individual does indeed act alone and does not give any overt clues through his behavior or communications of his intentions. In order to be fingered and stopped, Lone Wolves must somehow identify themselves by contacting a government informant or another person who reports them to the authorities, attending a militant training camp or corresponding with a person or organization under government scrutiny. Obviously, it is tactically impossible for law enforcement to identify every Lone Wolf and prevent all acts of violence.

The emergence of these self-generated violent Islamist extremists who are radicalized online presents added challenges — Lone Wolves researching or plotting on the Internet are even less likely to come to the attention of the authorities. Some terrorism experts say that Major Hasan may be the latest example of an increasingly common type of terrorist who fits this mold, one who acts alone with the help of the Internet or with inspiration from a charismatic leader, without support from overseas networks.

The Hasan case may also represent the new terrorist template that fuses psychological damage with jihadist ideology. Obviously, at least some if not most suicide bombers fit into this category; such cases have appeared at a growing rate in the last year, most of them involving people with no direct ties to foreign terrorists but who fit the profile of mental or emotional instability. In the Hasan case, the only significant connection to foreign insurgents the authorities have confirmed so far is a dozen or so e-mail messages he sent to the radical cleric, Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen. Awlaki, who was born in New Mexico, served as an Imam in two mosques in San Diego that were visited by

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three of the 9/11 hijackers. He is known as a compelling preacher in English and Arabic, with a powerful influence that has been documented in several cases of homegrown terrorism, including one plot to bomb government buildings in Canada — the “Toronto 18” terror plot — and another to shoot up Fort Dix, New Jersey. A small minority embraces Anwar al-Awlaki’s view of the world, but this group — despite its modest size — has caused an unbelievable amount of suffering within the Muslim world, Israel, the United States and elsewhere. With their suicide bombers and terrorist acts, adherents to al-Awlaki’s views have made themselves central to international politics and national security.

### **The Sleeper**

Like the Lone Wolf, the Sleeper is another phenomenon that greatly concerns counterterrorist officials. Unlike traditional terrorist groups, Sleepers represent an evolving pattern of individuals with different backgrounds and experience teaming up to plot and carry out attacks. Members of a Sleeper cell are elements of various militant groups or organizations that have spent time together, fought together and perhaps trained together, and have since dispersed but reunite with the help of facilitators to plan and execute attacks. A classic and terrifying example of this new pattern is the arrest in October of two Chicago men, initially accused of planning an attack on a Danish newspaper. David Headley and Tahawwur Hussain Rana raised flags for investigators because they were suspected of plotting against employees of a newspaper in Copenhagen that published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Headley, who changed his name from Daood Gilani in 2006, is an American-born United States citizen who has spent time in Pakistan but was based in Chicago. Rana is a Canadian citizen who lived legally in Chicago, where he operated a travel agency and other businesses. According to investigators, Headley and Rana reported to Ilyas Kashmiri, an Islamic militant commander associated with al Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Taiba, a Pakistani militant group suspected in the deadly attacks in Mumbai of November 2008. Subsequent investigations confirmed the connection between the Mumbai attacks and the two men’s repeated trips to India — including boat trips into the Mumbai harbor and visits to the targeted hotels, a popular café and a remote Jewish community center — and on December 7, 2009, Headley was officially charged with helping to plan the operation. The scenario as we know it now reads as follows: Headley, an

American businessman with an Anglo-Saxon name, resided comfortably below the radar in Chicago while coordinating with a Pakistani member of al Qaeda to plan deadly terrorist acts in places as diverse as India and Denmark.

The Sleeper — when activated — is more vulnerable to detection than the Lone Wolf, but still very difficult to stop. Law enforcement officials eventually identify most sleepers; however, as in the case of Headley and Rana, a great deal of damage can still be done prior to an arrest.

### **The Al Qaeda Corporation**

The composition of al Qaeda differs significantly from that of other terrorist groups and organizations. Osama bin Laden, perhaps reflecting his training in business management, in effect serves as the chairman of the board of a holding company, which can be termed “Radical Islam, Inc.” — a loose umbrella organization composed of semi-autonomous terrorist groups and isolated radicalized individuals such as Major Hasan. At the head of this continually shifting and expanding network is bin Laden, providing guidance, coordination and financial and logistical facilitation. Bin Laden has established a flat and dispersed organizational structure in which subordinates are entrusted with clearly designated responsibilities, and members are promoted for effective work.

The group was revamped in 1998 to enable it to more effectively manage its assets and pursue its goals. The updated al Qaeda structure had four distinct but interconnected elements: a pyramidal structure to facilitate strategic and tactical direction; a global terrorist network; a base force of guerrilla warfare inside Afghanistan and now Iraq, Pakistan and Yemen; and a loose coalition of transnational terrorist and guerrilla groups. Al Qaeda’s global network consists of permanent or independently operating cells of al Qaeda-trained militants, established in over 75 countries worldwide, as well as allied Islamist military and political groups. Its strict adherence to a cell structure has allowed al Qaeda to maintain an impressively high degree of secrecy and security.

Moreover, al Qaeda does not waste its human resources. In the al Qaeda structure, locals who have been trained but are not official members of al Qaeda may still be activated to support outside operatives

carrying out attacks, taking care of needed tasks such as establishing safe houses and procuring cars and local resources. Although these local affiliates are not official members of al Qaeda, they are Islamic fanatics who share the organization's convictions and goals. This use of local, non-member support was certainly the case in Africa with the al Qaeda bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. At the 2001 trial of the al Qaeda terrorists responsible for the United States embassy bombings, it was proven that the targets were painstakingly surveyed for more than 18 months by these local "helpers."

Al Qaeda's success in allying itself with various existing terrorist groups around the world has enhanced its transnational reach. In essence, bin Laden and his senior leaders have grown the al Qaeda Corporation through mergers and acquisitions, spurred on by an effective and enticing branding and marketing campaign. Unlike other charismatically led terrorist organizations, such as Abimael Guzman's Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) of Peru, or Abdullah Ocalan's PKK (Kurdistan's Workers Party) of Turkey that were mortally wounded when their magnetic and controlling leaders were captured, al Qaeda will survive with or without bin Laden. Its organizational structure, diffuse nature, broad-based ethnic composition, emphasis on training, expansive financial networks and technological and military capabilities make al Qaeda a formidable — and stealthy — force with an unprecedented international nature that is proving a major challenge to law enforcement officials.

Despite the destruction of its Afghan base and dispersal of its leadership in the offensive following 9/11, al Qaeda's cellular structure clearly remains intact with both active and sleeper cells throughout the world, as evidenced by the attacks in Madrid, Bali, London and Mumbai — to name only a few. And the Afghanistan post 9/11 offensive may have benefited al Qaeda in the long run. While the organization lost a recruiting magnet and a training, command and operations base, it was compelled to disperse and become even more decentralized — "virtual" and "invisible." No good deed goes unpunished, and as a consequence of the 2001 war in Afghanistan, al Qaeda has progressively morphed from what has been called al Qaeda Version 1.0 into al Qaeda Version 2.0, operating much more autonomously — out of hubs and nodes without the centralized hierarchical control.

Contributing to the resilience of al Qaeda is that it is an adaptive learning organization, regularly reviewing and pursuing lessons from both successful and failed operations. A less adaptive organization would have been all but destroyed by the focused attack in Afghanistan. However, as previously noted, bin Laden had taken courses in business management — at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia — and learned about the delegation of authority, flat organizations and the dispersal of organizational functions. Following the Afghan offensive, bin Laden sent out a communiqué in the fall of 2002, dispersing his group and establishing a regional command structure, which said, in effect, "We have shown you the way. From now on it is up to you to plan and fund your own organizations."

The cells around the globe responded. Since 9/11, at least 27 terrorist conspiracies have been disrupted by United States law enforcement. In Europe, this phenomenon has been exemplified by the March 11, 2004, Madrid train station bombings and the July 7, 2005, London transit bombings as well as the foiled August 2006 coordinated attack on America-bound planes from Heathrow Airport outside of London. Clearly, the unique and far-reaching transnational nature of al Qaeda represents one of the greatest threats currently facing international security.

### **The Global Salafi Jihad**

While retaining a broad-based organization, al Qaeda 2.0 has become an ideology that provides inspiration for the global Salafi jihad movement. Salafis believe that the fundamentals of the first generations of Muslims should be practiced today. One of the more alarming recent developments, posing profound counterterrorism challenges, is the increase in recruitment to the global Salafi jihad of second and third generation émigrés in Europe, now also evidenced in the United States. As a key catalyst for the subsequent carnage in Iraq and Afghanistan, 9/11 initially helped to fuel Salafi jihad propaganda to "drive the infidel" out of the Middle East and re-establish an Islamic government under Sharia, an Islamic legal framework. Throughout Europe, there is now a mounting radicalization and recruitment of terrorists from émigrés to the global Salafi jihad, with an estimated 87 percent of new recruits coming from among those who have been permanently displaced.

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There is a growing population of discontented Muslim immigrants who have been secondarily radicalized within their host country — from whose culture they remain excluded and alienated. Although most of them are not stateless, many suffer from the existential sense of loss, deprivation and alienation from the countries where they live. They are then exposed to extreme ideologies that radicalize them, enticing them on the path of terrorism. While there is a greater concern about this phenomenon in Europe, the United States — which has done a much better job of assimilating this population — is now beginning to witness this trend.

The 2004 Madrid train bombing, the London transport bombings of 2005, the foiled 2006 American-bound airliner plot, the assassination of the Dutch playwright Theo van Gogh, the 9/11 plot planned by Mohamed Atta and his colleagues who attended a radical mosque in Hamburg and — more recently and closer to home — the Fort Hood murders, the arrest of David Coleman Headley and Tahawwur Hussain Rana and the indictments of youthful Somali émigrés in Minneapolis all attest to this development. The aforementioned individuals were all Muslims but of several different nationalities: Middle Eastern Arabs, Pakistanis and members of the Muslim diasporas originally from countries in Northern Africa.

### The Dangers of Alienation

The December 9 arrests of the five American teenagers and men strongly underscore the dangers of the sense of alienation experienced by Muslim émigrés. Not particularly religious, secular first, second and even third generation Muslim immigrants in Western Europe and America who feel alienated and socially isolated in the Western social structure drift back to the mosque to find companionship and acceptance, along with a needed sense of meaning and significance. This in turn makes them vulnerable to the views of extremist religious leaders, who aim to radicalize them. These émigrés are inundated with the propaganda and outright lies about America that have taken hold in the Arab-Muslim world since 9/11. Propagated by jihadist Websites, mosques, Arab intellectuals, satellite news stations and books, these views are emphatically endorsed by some Arab regimes who claim that America has declared war on Islam as part of a grand “American-Crusader-Zionist conspiracy” to keep Muslims “in their place.” These immigrant populations are bombarded with the notion that the West — primarily the United States — is single-handedly responsible for all the

grievances of the Arab and the Muslim worlds. The vast majority of these media outlets targeting these communities are Arab-government owned, mostly from the Gulf, and it is a simple matter for the al Qaeda Corporation to disperse this propaganda over the Web and satellite television, where it manipulates humiliated, frustrated or socially alienated Muslim males such as Major Hasan. Some experts even see this Internet-facilitated movement as a trend toward the unidentifiable leadership of a global jihad.

*The aforementioned scenarios — Lone Wolves, Sleepers, cells radicalized on American soil at community centers or on the Internet — drastically increase the challenges confronting all involved in security. If an unknown militant is going to conduct even a simple attack against one of the targets al-Wahayshi suggests — such as an airport, train or a specific leader or media personality, a dangerous stealth and anonymity can blind watching authorities. Normally, a planning cycle must be followed if an attack is going to be successful. The prospective attacker must observe and study a target, construct a plan for an attack and then execute it. The demands of this process may force the attacker into a position where he is vulnerable to discovery. If the attacker does this while people are watching for such activity, he will likely be seen. But if he carries out his plans while there are no watchers present, or if the planner looks and acts like a local resident going about his daily business, the plan may not be thwarted. In this age of terrorism where destruction can originate from unexpected directions, the need for recognition and vigilance has never been more apparent. Al Qaeda continues to seek unsuspected ways to conduct attacks and circumvent security procedures, and it is imperative that law enforcement and security personnel stay abreast of these changing developments and remain alert for indications of attacks — even from sources that may seem innocuous or involving potential targets that appear at first glance to be unlikely. The tragic events of September 11, Fort Hood and Mumbai showed us that we cannot always predict where, how and from whom the next attack will appear — we need to remember this hard lesson and keep our eyes wide open. **The time for urgency is now.**®*



The Lipman Report Editors