

June 15, 2005

## Sleeper cells

### Potential terrorists pose threat from within and without the United States

On February 16, 2005, Robert S. Mueller III, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Intelligence that three areas caused the FBI the greatest concern:

- The threat from covert operatives – “sleeper agents” – within the U.S.
- Indications that al Qaeda wants to obtain and use chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear or high-energy explosives in an attack against the U.S.
- Al Qaeda’s potential for exploiting radical American converts and other indigenous extremists in its terrorist plots.

Mueller made it clear he is pleased with the progress that has been made against the presence of terrorist groups like al Qaeda in the United States, with this qualifier: “I remain very concerned about what we are not seeing.”

What authorities are not seeing is concrete evidence of terror “sleeper cells” in the United States. The term sleeper cells describes terrorist agents who quietly embed themselves into society, running terrorism support networks or waiting until called to initiate an attack. One could argue that the lack of significant terror activity on U.S. soil since September 11, 2001, is evidence that no sleeper cells exist in the United States, yet the presence of the 19 individuals who orchestrated the 9/11 attacks did not attract significant attention to thwart their plan. The recent arrests of two U.S. citizens charged with conspiracy to provide material support to al Qaeda demonstrates that there are those in this country with harmful intent. The two, a martial arts expert and a doctor, were arrested as part of a two-year operation seeking to identify people disposed to provide aid to terrorists. They spoke of a failed attempt to attend training camps in Afghanistan, offering to teach hand-to-hand combat and treat injured jihadists.

One security expert noted, “There has been enormous, enormous damage done to the al Qaeda network. It is not what it was on September 10, 2001.” Consider some past arrests:

- Earlier this month, a father and son in Lodi, Calif., were arrested after the younger man allegedly acknowledged that he attended an al Qaeda camp in Pakistan to learn “how to kill Americans,” and the father was charged with financing the terror camp.

- Eleven Virginia residents were charged in June 2003 with training to fight with Islamic extremists in Kashmir. Six men pleaded guilty, three were convicted at trial and two were acquitted. Another man connected to the group was arrested in Saudi Arabia and is now being held for trial in the U.S.
- Six Portland, Ore., men were charged in October 2002 with trying to go to Afghanistan to fight U.S. troops. A seventh reached Afghanistan and died fighting. The other six pleaded guilty and received prison sentences.

These successes have forced al Qaeda to change its structure, with smaller factions planning their own attacks rather than receiving directions from upper leadership, making it more difficult for law enforcement to infiltrate terror groups. As Director Mueller pointed out, just because terrorist cells have not been found does not mean they do not exist. Some law enforcement authorities believe terror cells based in Europe pose an even greater threat than any that might be in the United States. As long as U.S. troops are stationed in the Middle East, experts believe terrorists will target U.S. interests. Yet an attack does not have to occur on U.S. soil to have a debilitating effect on its citizens and the global economy. The Lipman Report this month examines the threat posed by sleeper cells, whether based in the United States or abroad.

### Threats from within, threats from without

Two types of terrorist attacks are typically used against Western interests: the hit squad that comes into a country with a specific mission and a sleeper cell already embedded in the target country’s society. The 9/11 hijackers represent an example of a hit squad, which came to the U.S. solely for the purposes of committing the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Another potential threat, the “lone wolf” who operates without instructions from a terrorist organization, can be seen in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.

A sleeper cell is a group of individuals put in place months or years in advance of a mission, who have assimilated into society while awaiting a call to action from an umbrella organization. They conduct themselves as any other person

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would, attending school, working, paying bills, until they are activated. Some sleeper cells exist solely to run terrorism support networks such as charities, foundations, fictitious organizations or even safe houses. Investigators of the March 11, 2004, bombings in Madrid, Spain, say they were committed by a sleeper cell comprised of Moroccans, with 24 men currently on trial for the attacks. In several U.S. cases, the suspects have been accused of being part of a sleeper cell.

Sleeper cell members only know each other and do not know the members of any other cells or anyone in the hierarchy of the organization. This makes it difficult for anyone to infiltrate the organization, or for a member to compromise the entire terror network since they know nothing about it.

#### The 9/11 hijackers and other cells

While they arrived in the United States months prior to the attacks, the 9/11 hijackers do not fit the classic pattern for a sleeper cell. They did not assimilate into society and lead “normal” lives prior to the attacks. All their activities were focused on preparing for their mission. The first pair of hijackers arrived in the United States in January 2000, flying into Los Angeles and then moving on to San Diego after about two weeks.

Three members of the so-called Hamburg group, which included Mohamed Atta, the leader of the operation, arrived in the United States in the early summer of 2000. These men had reportedly become acquainted in Hamburg, Germany, where they had gone to study. It was there that they apparently adopted their radical views. Their affiliation with al Qaeda began after they went to Afghanistan for training. This first group of five consisted of the men who would pilot the planes on September 11, 2001. The remainder of the hijackers would not arrive until later. The early arrivals spent much time traveling, but also enrolled in flight training.

The remaining hijackers were recruited to storm the cockpits and control the passengers. They trained in Afghanistan in late 2000 and early 2001 and began arriving in the U.S. in April 2001, usually traveling in pairs on tourist visas. By the end of June 2001, most of the terrorists had arrived in the United States. The majority of the group lived quietly in Florida, although a few of the hijackers were living in New Jersey for part of the time. To avoid detection, they did not visit mosques or interact with the Middle Eastern community.

Experts believe that sleeper terror cells are more likely to exist in Western Europe than the United States because of the ease with which borders can be crossed in the European Union. If a European terror cell were to target the United States, it is likely they would conduct themselves in much the same way as the 9/11 hijackers, residing in metropolitan areas with large transient populations.

The U.S. Department of State, in its annual report on terrorism, said that the global jihadist movement – of which al Qaeda is the most prominent group – is the biggest terror threat to the United States. Al Qaeda’s power may have been diminished, but groups that share its poisonous ideology are capable of carrying out smaller, more localized attacks, and some are attempting to replicate its ability to cause mass casualties. The continuing influx of foreign volunteers as suicide bombers in Iraq demonstrates there is no shortage of people committed to attacking U.S. interests and halting the spread of democracy and freedom in areas controlled by despots and religious fanatics.

For example, surveillance tape of two terror suspects in Germany indicated the men were discussing ways to obtain uranium to make a dirty bomb, and they were recruiting men from Germany’s Muslim community to be suicide bombers in Iraq. The pair was arrested in January 2005.

A terror cell in France was broken up in February 2005 when a plot to blow up the Eiffel Tower, as well as other Paris targets, was exposed by police. A total of 20 men were arrested and were

believed to be connected to Chechen terrorists in Russia. The plot involved chemical bombs composed of ricin, botulism and cyanide that were disguised as soft drink bottles and transported from Lyon to Paris. Explosives also had been smuggled into France by the Lyon terror cell. Terrorists contemplating the use of biological or chemical weapons could create catastrophic losses with minimal effort.

### **Continued threats**

Some experts do not think al Qaeda has sleeper cells currently in the United States. However, that could change should Abu Faraj al-Libbi begin talking. The Libyan was arrested April 22, 2005, in Pakistan. He was the number three man in al Qaeda, and in 2004 was reported by Pakistani officials to be running sleeper cells in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Al-Libbi, who was once Osama bin Laden's personal assistant, was said to have taken over as al Qaeda's third in command after the 2003 arrest of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. Authorities discovered that al-Libbi had been sending coded messages to extremists in London, indicating that he was planning attacks in the United States prior to the 2004 election and in the United Kingdom.

The Pakistani government blames al-Libbi for several attacks, including two December 2003 assassination attempts on Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf. Pakistan plans to try al-Libbi for the assassination attempts rather than turning him over to the United States, as it did Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, 9/11 conspirator Ramzi Binalshibh and al Qaeda recruiter Abu Zubaydah.

The threat from militant jihadists stationed in Europe is expected to increase over time, due in part to the ballooning Islamic population in Western Europe. According to expert testimony before the House International Relations Committee Subcommittee on Europe on April 27, 2005, the European populations are declining and being replaced by Muslim immigration. While

there were less than 1 million Muslims living in Europe in 1945, now there are about 20 million. Many of these Muslims have not integrated into the society of their host countries, causing second and third generation Muslims to feel isolated. That is exacerbated by a high rate of unemployment among Muslim communities, which is even higher among Muslim youth. These economic and social conditions create a ripe environment for recruitment by jihadist groups.

A study of 373 radical Muslim terrorists arrested or killed between 1993 and 2004 showed that 41 percent were Western nationals, either naturalized or second generation Europeans, or were converts to Islam. More French nationals were arrested than Pakistani and Yemeni combined. Zacarias Moussaoui, the "20th hijacker" in the 9/11 attacks, is a French citizen. Arrested prior to the attacks after he aroused suspicion at a flight school, Moussaoui pleaded guilty and faces possible execution. Richard Reid, the "shoe bomber" sentenced to life in prison for attempting to blow up an American Airlines flight in December 2001, is British. Because of the visa waiver program between the United States and European countries, citizens of European Union countries can move easily around the continent and have open access to the United States. Islamic terrorists recruit intensively from citizens of the 27 countries, mostly European, who can enter the United States for 90 days without a visa. Once they enter the country, they could possibly remain indefinitely if they avoid detection.

### **Detecting threats, reducing vulnerabilities**

While U.S. law enforcement agencies continue to make arrests and pursue leads into potential sleeper cells or other terrorist threats, the private sector must also participate in protecting the nation's interests. The business community – particularly those organizations responsible for the U.S. critical infrastructure, including utilities, refineries, energy plants, ports and water treatment facilities –

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should take steps to ensure the safety and security of their people and property. Implementing a security program can address this concern in two ways: one, to reduce vulnerabilities that make a facility a “soft target” for a terrorist attack, and two, to help ensure that members of sleeper cells are not employed at and gaining valuable information from an organization.

**Public awareness contributes to enhanced security.** Company employees and visitors should understand the importance of following a facility’s security procedures to help protect their safety, as well as the safety of others. In addition, each individual can assist in homeland security simply by being aware of his or her surroundings and identifying and reporting potential causes for concern.

People cannot determine a possible terrorist by that person’s skin color or country of origin, but patterns of suspicious behavior should be reported to local authorities. For example, when Zacarias Moussaoui arrived in the United States and began taking flying lessons, two staff members at the flight school alerted law enforcement. Things they cited as unusual included his questions about shutting off oxygen to airplane passengers and his discussions about an aircraft accident.

While no single characteristic can indicate that an individual is a potential sleeper agent, several combined factors may suggest cause for concern: frequent travel to and from countries with high levels of militant Islamic activity; frequently changed names or spelling of names; and adamantly negative attitudes expressed toward the United States and various religious groups.

**Vigilance can help detect and deter suspicious activity.** In most cases, a terrorist act will be preceded by surveillance. Targets are evaluated for security measures and for their potential for disruption. Observant security officers and employees who know what to look for can help detect vehicles or individuals lingering near client

facilities. Adhering to strict physical security measures, particularly access control procedures, also plays a key role in reducing vulnerabilities. Specific questions regarding security policies or attempts to take photographs of sensitive areas should prompt concern.

**Rigorous background screening may detect applicants with malicious intent.** A stringent selection process can help ensure that employees do not join the company to gain inside information for a terrorist plot or other criminal act. The use of detailed life-history applications, proof of eligibility to work in the United States, education and military record verification and employer and neighborhood references should be used. Where permitted by law, polygraph testing can also prove useful. The interview process can be made more effective with the use of individuals who are knowledgeable about how to detect comments or facts that suggest an applicant should be investigated further, even with an apparently clean background.

*Despite the amount of time that has passed since a terrorist act within the United States, the threat of future attacks is very real – whether from sleeper cells in the United States, overseas groups, hit squads or lone wolf terrorists. The private sector cannot rely solely on efforts by the U.S. government to protect the nation’s borders. Organizations must adhere to core security tenets to help protect their people and property, as well as to ensure business continuation; the consequences of inaction are too great to be ignored.*



The Lipman Report Editors