

October 15, 2009

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## Terrorism on Main Street: Al Qaeda's Relentless and Continuing War Against the West The Rising Trend of the "Homegrown" Threat

*The recent events in New York and Colorado — culminating in the arrests of two members of a terrorist cell in Colorado and another in New York — along with concurrent arrests of suspected terrorists in Dallas, Texas and Springfield, Illinois, point again to the ongoing threat posed by al Qaeda's determination to strike at the West. Somewhere in America are a number of terrorist cells that are driven by schemes of death and destruction, even as their members live among us. They are motivated not, as some believe, by feelings of disenfranchisement, a disdain for freedom or economic envy, but by a fierce ideological hatred. These individuals and cells plot not just mayhem, but paralyzing terror — the very kind that can virtually shut down a country. Initial information from the Colorado and New York arrests suggests the primary players legally residing in the United States were trained in Pakistan, but conspired in Colorado to attack New York. Apparently, the targets were stadiums, hotels and possibly the New York subway system, reminiscent of the October 2008 attacks on Mumbai that resulted in the deaths of scores of people, as well as of the deadly London transit attack of 2005. The Mumbai attack was orchestrated by Laskar-e-Taiba, an al Qaeda affiliate that historically targeted India, while the London attack was carried out by an al Qaeda-inspired affiliate in Britain that was trained in Pakistan. The Colorado investigation is, unfortunately, clear evidence of al Qaeda's interest in striking at New York.*

*During the years since 9/11, a significant number of terrorist cells have been interdicted in various parts of the United States, while the cooperation between the intelligence and law enforcement communities successfully continues to prevent another terrorist attack. However, the threat from al Qaeda looms as powerful as ever, and authorities must remain vigilant. Contrary to popular perception, terrorist cells are not always groups of fumbling amateurs searching for a charismatic leader who has what it takes to compose and conduct a complex symphony of violence. The nation's concerns must be directed not only toward agents of al Qaeda, but also toward these surprisingly destructive lone wolves, cults and radical movements — all of whom are not just operating overseas, but right here on "Main Street." This issue of The Lipman Report® will address these "homegrown" threats in the wake of both the recent arrests of terrorists residing in the United States and the convictions in the United Kingdom of an al Qaeda-affiliated cell in the West Midlands that planned to bomb several trans-Atlantic flights traveling to the United States.*

### Terrorist Cells

Anti-American terrorist activity has not abated since 9/11; in fact, overwhelming evidence points to the contrary. We are safe today for one primary reason — America in cooperation with our allies has thus far been able to detect and crush the cells that would do us harm before they could fulfill their purpose. Rather than being a peripheral unit, the clandestine cell is the essential building block of a terrorist operation. Any terrorist cell is difficult to stop once it has devised a plan and assembled a weapon without detection.

Effective terrorist cells are usually very small and tightly managed, generally comprising three or four people and rarely involving more than 10 or 20. The reason for this is that when cells grow larger than just a few members, they become much more vulnerable to penetration by law enforcement or detection by alert citizens. The 9/11 operations, for example, were conducted by four cells composed of roughly three to five people each, all of which were led by Mohamed Atta. Only Atta — who turned out to be a master of operational security — knew about all four cells. This highly disciplined group operated stealthily and achieved its tragic intent because the nation was either unaware of or complacent to the threat it posed.

Despite al Qaeda's fixation on New York, America offers an open and democratic society that is a virtual cornucopia of attractive targets. It is obvious that terrorists will attack vulnerable targets; however, the immediate and paramount goal of United States counterterrorism efforts should be not only to secure these targets, but also to detect and dismantle terrorist cells before they can attack — and in a way that will allow authorities to gather the most information possible. The Colorado scenario is a case in which authorities became aware of the group and were monitoring its activities, but rather than choosing an opportunity that would allow for greater access to the entire cell, elected to confront the suspected individual upon his lone arrival in New York. This action certainly prevented the group from carrying out its plan, but the full scope of the cell — its members, targets, funding, weapons and connection to a hierarchical structure — is still unknown. To date, prosecutors in this case have been unable to charge several other suspected co-conspirators, as many as 24 according to some reports. It is relatively easy to spot and stop foreign agents, but far more difficult to detect a group of locals.

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### "Homegrown" Threats in the United States

The recent events in the United States seem to indicate a dangerous trend of increased activity on the part of homegrown individuals dedicated to initiating destruction in the homeland through terrorist acts. Law enforcement officials who are concerned about how to protect the borders of a free society from terrorists find in Mr. Najibullah Zazi a particularly harrowing challenge: a homegrown operative who was born in Afghanistan but grew up on the streets of New York City. The arrests in Colorado appear to be the most ominous event; however, around the same time, a Jordanian man was arrested and charged with trying to blow up a Dallas skyscraper. The Justice Department stated that this individual, Hosam Smadi, had declared his willingness to serve as a "soldier for Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda". He allegedly stated that he traveled to the United States specifically to commit "Jihad for the sake of God," and has been charged with attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction. It also recently came to light that Smadi had prepared a video about his planned attack for Osama bin Laden two months before he tried to carry it out.

During the same week of the arrests in Colorado and Dallas, an arrest occurred in Springfield, Illinois, of a would-be terrorist for allegedly attempting to detonate a truck bomb to blow up the federal building and cause harm to its inhabitants. The affidavit in this case revealed that this person — Michael Finton — had received funds from an individual in Saudi Arabia, which he used for a month-long trip to that country in 2008. It also emerged that Finton idolized convicted terrorist John Walker Lindh, an American who was captured fighting for the Taliban in Afghanistan. Like Lindh, Finton wanted to travel abroad to a training camp to become a jihadist fighter. In Finton's twisted mind, civilian casualties resulting from the bombing would be justified, a rationale that sounds eerily similar to the "collateral damage" statement attributed to the American domestic terrorist and truck bomber Timothy McVeigh regarding the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, information recently surfaced indicating that one of the suicide bombers who attacked an African Union base in September was from the United States — making him the second known American to carry out a suicide attack in Somalia. This suicide bomber resided in the state of Washington until 2007, when he left the United States to join the Shabab, a

terrorist group operating in Somalia that has growing ties to al Qaeda. He was one of several suicide bombers who infiltrated an African Union base in Somalia's capital of Mogadishu, resulting in the deaths of 15 peacekeepers. The Shabab is currently waging an intense guerrilla war against Somalia's moderate Islamic transitional government and is trying to turn Somalia into a factory for global jihad. According to American and Somali officials, high-ranking al Qaeda agents are training Somali militants and recruiting terrorists from around the world to fight in Somalia. One of the most disconcerting results of this conflagration in a far-off land is the realization that around 20 young Somali-American men have disappeared from the Somali community in Minnesota over the past two years to join the Shabab. One of them — Shirwa Ahmed — blew himself up in northern Somalia last October, becoming the first known American suicide bomber. Ahmed was 'radicalized' in his hometown in Minnesota. Mohamed Hassan, another Somali-American from Minnesota, was killed during fighting in Mogadishu several weeks ago.

Yet another recent case — one that involved the arrest of an American-born young man of Albanian ethnicity — was that of Betim Kazui, who flew to Cairo, Egypt, earlier this year in the first leg of a journey that would take him to Pakistan for military training. While in Egypt, he made repeated attempts to buy weapons and attempted to join a terrorist group linked to al Qaeda. Kazui has been charged with conspiracy to commit murder in a foreign country and to provide material support to terrorists. Here again, we have an American-born individual who — like the Somalis from Minnesota — embraced radical Islam, became radicalized and traveled abroad to join an al Qaeda affiliate.

All of these recent terrorist cases have an American nexus, pointing increasingly to al Qaeda's efforts to spread their jihad to the American homeland. Previously, the primary concern centered on Europeans from Islamic fundamentalism "hot spots," the Middle East and Western Asia. Although this is still a concern, there is mounting evidence that people even from these areas of the world are also being radicalized in the United States in order to further the cause of al Qaeda's jihad against the West.

Moreover, due to some earlier cases that were written off as marginal, a dangerous complacency had developed before these recent arrests, since the "aspirational" terrorists of these earlier cases appeared

amateurish and lacking in professional training and funds. More often than not, these earlier suspects emerged as angry, rootless young men inflamed by al Qaeda rhetoric. In a 2006 case, a group of men residing in Miami who had spoken of attacking the Sears Tower in Chicago were finally convicted in May after a third trial. Another “aspirational” terrorist — Daniel Boyd — and several other men were detained in North Carolina, while another group was arrested in 2007 in New York in a foiled attempt to blow up John F. Kennedy International Airport. It is important to remember, however, that even cases that appear initially to be insubstantial can emerge as more dangerous and complex after additional investigation. For example, if the September 11 hijackers — some of whom were unsophisticated recent arrivals to the United States — had been interrupted early on, they too might have looked amateurish and disorganized to an outside observer.

The intelligence regarding the young Somali men from Minnesota involved in suicide bombings in Somalia is particularly disturbing, given that many may have planned to return to the United States and organize clandestine cells in the Midwest. This is precisely the kind of reach that al Qaeda has in the United Kingdom and is working toward emulating in the United States. We need to consider whether we are dealing with a limited group of lunatics or a dangerous new phenomenon of radicalized young men of foreign ethnicity from Muslim countries who live in the United States and aspire to join al Qaeda and become involved in a holy jihad against the West. We should also remember that we cannot depend on the calming power of assimilation to help neutralize the destructive activities of terrorists and cells residing on our soil.

### **Dangerous Ingredients**

The most recent investigation and arrests in Colorado have all the worst-case scenario ingredients. The subject, Najibullah Zazi — a legal immigrant from Afghanistan — attended an al Qaeda training camp in Pakistan, received training in explosives and stored nine pages of instructions in his laptop computer for making bombs from the same kind of chemicals one can purchase at a beauty supply store. These products can be transformed into one of the key ingredients used to make the powerful explosive triacetone triperoxide, or TATP, a home brew that is a central element of al Qaeda explosives training. Groups that do not have access to other explosives often

use this substance; TATP was used in the 2005 London subway and bus bombings, which killed 52 and injured hundreds. The “shoe bomber,” Richard Reid, also used this explosive in 2002 in his failed attempt to bring down a jetliner. Experts agree that no one manufactures homemade TATP explosives without the intent to kill people and destroy infrastructure. Fortunately, in the case of Mr. Zazi, authorities noticed his suspicious purchases and behavior and began to investigate. Again, Mr. Zazi is a legal immigrant who became radicalized on American soil and traveled to Pakistan to join and be trained by al Qaeda. He then returned to the United States and moved from his hometown New York to Colorado to more securely organize a cell to attack New York with homemade explosives.

### **Radicalization**

Radicalization is a relatively new term that has entered the vocabulary of those concerned with security issues. Normally linked with political violence and terrorism, radicalization is a process that occurs when an individual or group becomes consumed with rage over a real or imagined injustice or personal grievance and is moved to exact revenge through a violent act that often supports a political or spiritual cause. The radicalization process is gradual, influential and persuasive. Religion sometimes provides a general framework and sense of identity, but other factors and events frequently drive the transformation. Since the tragic events of 9/11, it has become clear that radicalization and the resulting political violence and terrorism represent two of the greatest challenges to international peace and stability. Al Qaeda and other radical fundamentalist Islamic groups are more dangerous enemies today than they have ever been before, as terrorist groups around the world are organizing and training with radicalized recruits for jihad based on al Qaeda’s model and successes.

It is clear that radicalization does not occur by accident. There is increasing evidence that terrorists and extremists gain recruits by manipulating the grievances of alienated youth or immigrant populations and then exploiting their problems. Prisons, traditional hotbeds of frustration and anger, have been identified by homeland security experts as dangerous breeding grounds for terrorists; law enforcement organizations are becoming increasingly concerned that one or more radical fundamentalist groups are radicalizing inmates and gaining terrorist recruits within prison walls. Michael Finton of the Springfield bomb plot converted to Islam and became

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radicalized while in an Illinois prison from 2001 to 2006, while shoe bomber Richard Reid became radicalized in a United Kingdom prison. The radicalization and recruitment process is incremental, converting recruits to express extremist viewpoints and developing them in stages from sympathizers, to supporters, and ultimately to full membership in terrorist networks. The Internet is relied on extensively as a tool in this process.

### Cells and Countermeasures

Sadly, the aforementioned events provide inarguable proof that al Qaeda is managing to radicalize a small segment of America's alienated youth, sweeping them into the tide of radical Islam. The United States counterterrorism authorities must continue the excellent work that has thwarted every attempt since 9/11. However, all members of society need to participate in America's counterterrorism program. Terrorist operations begin with extensive planning, and everyone can help prevent terrorism and other types of crime by staying alert for suspicious activities and reporting them to the proper authorities. Common terrorist activities that can be signs or "flags" of pre-attack actions for authorities are:

**Surveillance:** The sighting of recording or monitoring activities, including drawing diagrams, note taking, and use of cameras, binoculars or other vision-enhancing devices or possessing floor plans or blueprints of key facilities.

**Elicitation:** Noting attempts to obtain operational, security and personnel-related information regarding a key facility. These attempts may be by mail, fax, e-mail, telephone or in person.

**Tests of security:** The sighting of attempts to measure reaction time to security breaches or to penetrate physical security barriers or procedures in order to assess strengths and weaknesses.

**Acquiring supplies:** Observing attempts to improperly procure items that could be used in a terrorist attack. These may include the acquisition or stockpiling of explosives, weapons, harmful or even ordinary chemicals, flight manuals, law enforcement and military equipment, uniforms, identification badges or the equipment for the manufacture of false identification.

**Suspicious persons:** Noticing someone who does not appear to belong in a workplace, neighborhood or business establishment due to their behavior, including unusual questions or statements they make.

**Dry runs/trial runs:** Identifying behavior that appears to

be in preparation for a planned event. Activities could include mapping out odd routes and determining the timing of traffic lights and flow.

**Deploying assets:** Observing the placing of people, equipment and supplies into position to commit an act. This is the last opportunity to alert the authorities before the terrorist act occurs.

*The West must never underestimate the very real threat of radical Islamic terrorism, led by al Qaeda. While we have made significant progress in containing the strategic threat from al Qaeda since 9/11, it is time to put the terrorist threat in perspective. The reality is fairly simple — there is a small, determined group of killers out there, who form small but dangerous cells that reside both here at home and abroad. These cells are bent on attacking the United States and its interests, and recent events suggest that they remain strong, vital and growing. Al Qaeda continues to appeal to a wider audience than many people believe and remains particularly tempting to its core demographic: young, frustrated "hotheads" aged 16 to 28. No matter what measures we take, this small and determined group will be focused on attacking us for at least another 20 years, probably longer. The recent attempted attacks attest to the existence of a generation of dispersed but determined terrorists linked largely by the Internet who still pose a great danger. Radicalization within our prisons also remains of great concern. Until this generation and movement subside, al Qaeda and related groups will continue their attempts to annihilate our culture, our economy and our very lives. With radicalized cells sprouting up in our very backyard, it would be a grave error at this time to mistake the lack of attacks on our soil since 9/11 for a dissipating of the threat. The 9/11 attacks took years for cells to plan and organize, and we have ample evidence that other events are even now in the works. Nor can we rely on the lure and relative comfort of American culture to assimilate these aspirational terrorists and derail them from their malicious intent. The United States and its allies must cooperate, find and disarm these cells at every opportunity, with focus, strategy and relentless determination. **The time for urgency is now®.***



The Lipman Report Editors