

Muslim “Homegrown” Terrorism in the United States

Risa A. Brooks

How Serious Is the Threat?

Are Muslims born or living in the United States increasingly inclined to engage in terrorist attacks within the country’s borders? For much of the post–September 11 era, the answer to that question was largely no. Unlike its European counterparts, the United States was viewed as being relatively immune to terrorism committed by its residents and citizens—what is commonly referred to as “homegrown” terrorism—because of the social status and degree of assimilation evinced by American Muslims.¹ In 2006, in the long shadow cast by the Madrid 2004 and London 2005 attacks perpetrated by European homegrown terrorists, there was a perceptible shift in the characterization of the threat posed by American Muslims.² Public officials began to speak more regularly and assertively about the potential threat of some Muslims taking up terrorism, elevating it in their discussions alongside threats from foreign operatives and transnational terrorist organizations.³ By 2009, in part catalyzed by a surge in terrorist-related arrests and concerns that they could portend a growing radicalization of the American Muslim population, policymakers and terrorist analysts seemed increasingly worried about homegrown terrorism.⁴ When U.S. Special Forces

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1. See, for example, Robert S. Leiken, “Europe’s Angry Muslims,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 4 (July/August 2005), pp. 120–135; Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-first Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); and Pew Research Center, “Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream” (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, May 22, 2007).

2. See David Schanzer, Charles Kurzman, and Ebrahim Moosa, “Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans,” Doc. No. 229868 (Washington, D.C.: National Criminal Justice Reference Service, 2010), p. 8.

3. Congress began to take increasing notice, too. In 2007, for example, Rep. Jane Harman sponsored the “Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism Prevention Act of 2007,” which, among other things, sought to establish a national commission, a grant program, and university centers of excellence.

4. Forty-three people were arrested in 2009 on a variety of terrorist-related offenses. For examples of links made between the arrests and the threat of homegrown terrorism, see Peter Bergen and Bruce Hoffman, “Assessing the Terrorist Threat: A report of the Bipartisan Policy Center’s Na-

killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011, some members of Congress and other commentators argued that the threat of homegrown terrorism would become even more important.⁵

Thus, in the decade since the September 11 attacks, homegrown terrorism has evolved from a peripheral issue to a major theme in contemporary debates about the terrorist threats facing the United States. Public officials such as Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Robert Mueller, and Attorney General Eric Holder regularly counsel that the number of Americans engaging in terrorist activity has risen.⁶ As Napolitano cautions, "One of the most striking elements of today's threat picture is that plots to attack America increasingly involve American residents and citizens."⁷ According to Holder, "The American People would be surprised at the depth of the [homegrown terrorist] threat."⁸

Concerns about homegrown terrorism, in turn, have generated a variety of think tank reports and associated warnings by many of the country's most accomplished terrorism researchers.⁹ Analysts such as Peter Bergen, Paul

tional Security Preparedness Group" (Washington, D.C.: Bipartisan Policy Center, September 10, 2010), p. 5; Schanzer, Kurzman, and Moosa, "Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans," p. 10; and J. Scott Carpenter, Mathew Levitt, Steven Simon, and Juan Zarate, "Fighting the Ideological Battle: The Missing Link in U.S. Strategy to Counter Violent Extremism" (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2010), pp. 1–2.

5. See, for example, Meredith Shiner, "Lieberman Fears 'Lone Wolf' Retaliation," *Politico.com*, May 2, 2011, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0511/54115.html>; and comments by Michael Leiter, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, in David Wood, "National Counterterrorism Center: How a Little-Known Spy Agency Helped Track Down Osama Bin Laden," *huffingtonpost.com*, May 2, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/02/osama-bin-laden-national-counterterrorism-center_n_856642.html.

6. See Janet A. Napolitano, Robert S. Mueller III, and Michel E. Leiter, "Nine Years after 9/11: Confronting the Terrorist Threat to the Homeland," testimony before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 111th Cong., 2d sess., September 22, 2010; and "Home-grown, Solo Terrorists as Bad as Al Qaeda: FBI Chief," *Agence France-Presse*, April 15, 2010.

7. Janet A. Napolitano, "Understanding the Homeland Threat Landscape—Considerations for the 112th Congress," testimony before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, 112th Cong., 1st sess., February 9, 2011.

8. Quoted in Pierre Thomas, Jason Ryan, and Theresa Cook, "Holder: Homegrown Terror Threat Increasing" *abcnews.com*, July 29, 2009. Also quoted in Schanzer, Kurzman, and Moosa, "Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans," p. 10.

9. Bergen and Hoffman, "Assessing the Terrorist Threat"; Brian Michael Jenkins, *Would-be Warriors: Incidents of Jihadist Terrorist Radicalization in the United States since September 11, 2001* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2010); Schanzer, Kurzman, and Moosa, "Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans"; Jerome P. Bjelopera and Mark A. Randol, "American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat" (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress, December 7, 2010), Order No. R41416; Rick "Ozzie" Nelson and Ben Bodurian, "A Growing Terrorist Threat? Assessing 'Homegrown' Extremism in the United States" (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2010); and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Laura Grossman, *Homegrown Terrorists in the U.S. and U.K.: An Empirical Examination of the Radicalization Process* (Washington, D.C.: FDD Press, April 2009).

Cruickshank, Bruce Hoffman, and Marc Sageman have all expressed concern about a potential rise in terrorism initiated by Muslim Americans.¹⁰ Indeed, Bergen and Hoffman call the year 2009 a "watershed in terrorist attacks and plots in the United States."¹¹

Clearly, public officials and analysts are worried about the prospect that Americans will face a growing trend of violent attacks from extremist elements within the country's Muslim population. Less certain, however, is whether those warnings and the sense of urgency associated with the homegrown terrorism threat are warranted. In fact, the threat of Muslim American terrorism may not be especially serious or growing. It could remain a modest challenge, similar to what it was for much of the decade following September 11.

The stakes for Americans in an accurate assessment of the threat of Muslim homegrown terrorism are significant. If the threat is overstated, the United States risks becoming preoccupied with this incarnation of terrorism and could make unwarranted investments in intelligence and law enforcement to address it, while underemphasizing other terrorist or nonterrorist threats. Overstating or miscasting the homegrown threat could also undermine society's resilience to terrorism, while feeding a climate of fear and misunderstanding between Muslims and other Americans. In addition, overestimating the threat could contribute to the adoption of counterproductive counterterrorism methods, especially those that threaten to alienate Muslim communities from law enforcement. Given that cooperation from these communities has proven a major safeguard against the homegrown threat, any breach of trust between their members and government authorities would be a worrisome development.

It is therefore essential that Americans have a clear picture of the magnitude of the threat they face from Muslim homegrown terrorism. This article aids in that endeavor by systematically analyzing the argument that Muslim residents or citizens of the United States represent a serious and growing terrorist threat to American society, particularly in their supposed willingness or capacity to execute deadly attacks in the United States. I structure my analysis around three alternative pathways, or conditions, that alone or in combination could in principle contribute to a growing threat of homegrown terrorism. In so doing, I probe what is known about the motivations and capacity of American

10. See Paul Cruickshank and Nic Robertson, "Analysis: The Spread of U.S. Homegrown Terrorism," *CNN.com*, May 11, 2010; Bergen and Hoffman, "Assessing the Terrorist Threat"; Bruce Hoffman, "American Jihad," *National Interest*, No. 107 (May/June 2010), pp. 17–28; Marc Sageman, "The Next Generation of Terror," *Foreign Policy*, No. 168 (March/April 2008), pp. 36–42; and "How to Prevent Home Grown Terrorism," *Talk of the Nation*, December 15, 2009.

11. Bergen and Hoffman, "Assessing the Terrorist Threat," p. 4.

Muslims to execute deadly attacks in the United States and thus provide a comprehensive analysis of that threat.

My conclusion should be generally reassuring to Americans: Muslim homegrown terrorism does not at present appear to constitute a serious threat to their welfare. Nor is there a significant analytical or evidentiary basis for anticipating that it will become one in the near future. It does not appear that Muslim Americans are increasingly motivated or capable of engaging in terrorist attacks against their fellow citizens and residents.

The article begins with a brief overview of homegrown terrorism, as the phenomenon is typically characterized. It defines my usage of the concept and specifies the conditions that could contribute to a growing homegrown threat along those lines. The three sections that follow survey evidence and analyze relevant arguments that bear on whether these facilitating conditions are present in the United States. A penultimate section brings together the conclusions from prior sections, posing and answering the question of whether the homegrown threat is truly serious and growing. I conclude with a discussion of the risks that come with overstating or mischaracterizing this threat.

The "Homegrown" Threat

Analysts who speak and write about homegrown terrorism are generally referring to terrorist activity undertaken by Muslim citizens or residents of the United States.¹² Because the status of the perpetrator as an American is the defining feature of homegrown terrorism, the category encompasses individuals involved in a range of terrorist activities, including training with or joining foreign insurgencies such as those in Afghanistan or Somalia, providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization, and engaging in terrorist attacks within the United States. Moreover, though potentially inspired by a global jihadist movement and its propaganda, these individuals often plan, prepare, and carry out their plots or undertake other activities without the central guidance or assistance of formal terrorist organizations. As such, even when aimed at American targets, homegrown terrorism excludes attacks orchestrated and executed by foreign operatives of transnational terrorist organizations, such as the attempted shoe bombing in 2001 by Richard Reid and the 2009 effort by the Christmas Day bomber, Abdul Farouk Abdulmutallab.

12. For definitions, see Bjelopera and Randol, "American Jihadist Terrorism," p. 1; "Terrorist Trial Report Card: September 11, 2001–September 11, 2010" (New York: Center on Law and Security, New York University Law School, 2010), p. 3; and Bergen and Hoffman, "Assessing the Terrorist Threat," p. 5.

Although Muslim Americans are not the only perpetrators of terrorism against domestic targets in the United States, I focus on the potential threat posed by this segment of the population because it is the basis of growing public alarm and legal and policy initiatives, and because of the considerable risks I anticipate could come from mischaracterizing terrorism by Muslim Americans. I also focus on terrorist activity in the incarnation of attacks intended for targets (people and facilities) within the territorial United States. Specifically, I frame my assessment of the homegrown threat in the following terms: I analyze the logical and evidentiary basis for the thesis that growing numbers of American Muslims, motivated by political or ideological ends, are endeavoring and able to execute attacks that result in the physical harm of individuals or destruction of property within the United States, which in turn generate fear in the larger American population.¹³

Three conditions together or separately could result in a growing terrorist threat defined in these terms. First, the threat of homegrown terrorism could be growing if Muslims are increasingly inclined to plot deadly attacks. In the lexicon of the debate, American Muslims could be radicalizing and committing to violence in greater numbers. If more individuals initiate plotting deadly attacks, despite the high rates of premature detection and implementation failure discussed below, more violent attacks could occur in the United States.

Second, the threat of homegrown terrorism could be increasing if the attacks pursued by Muslim Americans are less likely to be foiled through premature arrests. Aspiring terrorists, for example, could be increasingly able to safeguard their planning activities and prepare their plots without being monitored and apprehended by authorities. More lethal attacks could consequently occur in the United States—attacks that in the past might have ended in arrests.

Third, the homegrown terrorism threat could be increasing if those plots that advance to the execution phase are carried out with greater proficiency: that is, even if undetected plots remain few in number, the threat to American lives could grow if the attacks executed by militants are more successfully implemented. This could occur, for example, if militants become better skilled at engaging in pre-operational activity and fabricating weapons (e.g., bombs might be more likely to explode and weapons to hit their intended targets).

Below I examine what is known about the motivations and capabilities of

13. The term “homegrown terrorism” is usually associated with terrorism perpetrated by Muslims. Members of other groups are commonly referred to as “extremists” or “domestic terrorists.” See, for example, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), “Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment,” IA-0257-09 (Washington, D.C.: Extremism and Radicalization Branch, DHS, April 2009).

American Muslims to engage in terrorist activity. I then evaluate whether these three conditions are observed in the United States.

American Muslims and the Propensity to Engage in Terrorism

I begin my analysis of homegrown terrorism by exploring the thesis that Muslim Americans could be increasingly inclined to initiate terrorist activity in the United States. I examine what the scholarship on “radicalization” reveals about this phenomenon and whether the 2009 surge in arrests of American Muslims is indicative of a growing trend in terrorist activity by this segment of the population.

INSIGHTS FROM STUDIES OF RADICALIZATION

In contemporary debates about terrorism in the United States and Europe, the concept of radicalization is often used to describe the phenomenon of citizens or residents of Western countries choosing to undertake terrorist activity.¹⁴ “Radicalization,” in turn, may be understood as involving a transformative process or a conjunction of behavioral and belief changes that may precede an individual’s engagement in terrorist activity. There have been a variety of exploratory studies and analytical efforts to understand radicalization.¹⁵ Yet, despite advances in this research, extant empirical studies provide only limited guidance in efforts to assess the prospects for Muslim American terrorism in the United States.¹⁶

Consider, for example, the studies by Mitchell Silber and Arvin Bhatt, Marc Sageman, and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Laura Grossman.¹⁷ Analyzing

14. Mark Sedgwick shows how the concept of radicalization has increased coincident with concerns about homegrown terrorism. Sedgwick, “The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (October 2010), p. 480. For examples of the association, see Bergen and Hoffman, “Assessing the Terrorist Threat,” p. 16; Jenkins, *Would-be Warriors*; and Bjelopera and Randol, “American Jihadist Terrorism.”

15. In addition to works discussed in the text, see studies of European militants in Tomas Precht, “Home Grown Terrorism and Islamist Radicalisation in Europe: From Conversion to Terrorism,” research report funded by the Danish Ministry of Justice, December 2007; “Radicalisation Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism,” European Commission’s Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation, May 15, 2008; Edwin Bakker, “Jihadi Terrorists in Europe: Their Characteristics and the Circumstances in Which They Joined the Jihad: An Exploratory Study” (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations, Clingendael, December 2006); and Petter Nesser, *Jihad in Europe: A Survey of the Motivations for Sunni Islamist Terrorism in Post-millennium Europe*, FFI/Rapport, 2004/01146 (Kjeller: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2004).

16. For critiques, see Sedgwick, “The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion”; and Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, “Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (September 2010), pp. 797–814. For promising work on radicalization, see Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, *Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

17. Mitchell D. Silber and Arvin Bhatt, “Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat” (New York: NYPD Intelligence Division, City of New York Police Department, August 2007);

samples of Westerners known to have been involved in terrorism, these researchers study the changing pursuits and convictions observed in individuals prior to their violent activities. Among the patterns they observe are viewing ideological propaganda, interacting with activists or like-minded aspiring militants, adopting more conservative variants of Islam, and manifesting politicization of their religious views. These commonalities in beliefs or activities may be taken as evidence that militants have undergone a similar (although not necessarily identical) experience of radicalization, which then explains how they came to be terrorists. In short, by illuminating the details of aspiring terrorists in the West, these studies provide important insights into the diversity of individuals drawn to violence and the pathways that led them there.¹⁸

While there may be evidence of common changes or behaviors observed within these samples of militants, it is unclear whether evidence of similar changes in the present-day Muslim American population would reliably indicate that its members will initiate terrorist activity. How or when such actions or beliefs will lead to terrorism is not yet well understood. Analysts, for example, acknowledge that "only a tiny minority of radicalized individuals actually cross over to become terrorists."¹⁹ Although the problem of anticipating when people will turn to violence is understandably complex, without a better grasp of that process, arguments about when terrorist acts will occur based on observed changes in thought or actions will suffer from analytical indeterminacy. This, in turn, makes it difficult to hypothesize about when a set of individuals—such as American Muslims—is inclined to engage in terrorist-related activity.

Moreover, it is unclear whether analysts are at present able to provide insight into what to look for in the beliefs and behaviors of American Muslims, even in a preliminary or exploratory effort to assess any propensity for violence. General arguments about how radicalization results in individuals becoming involved in terrorism are derived from the experiences of a sample of individuals known to have engaged in terrorist activity. To establish that these patterns in beliefs and behaviors are causally related to the turn to terrorism and generalizable across cases, however, the arguments need to be evaluated against new data, beyond that from which the patterns were initially induced.

Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*; and Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman, *Homegrown Terrorists in the U.S. and U.K.*

18. Precht, "Home Grown Terrorism and Islamist Radicalisation in Europe," p. 11; Nelson and Bodurian, "A Growing Terrorist Threat?"; and Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*.

19. Many analysts are cautious about claiming that radicalization inevitably leads to terrorism. See Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*; Nelson and Bodurian, "A Growing Terrorist Threat?"; and Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman, *Homegrown Terrorists in the U.S. and U.K.* The quotation is from "Countering International Terrorism: The United Kingdom's Strategy," Cm 6888 (July 2006), p. 10, <http://www.iwar.org.uk/homesec/resources/uk-threat-level/uk-counterterrorism-strategy.pdf>.

Another limiting factor is a research design in which analysts of radicalization select cases to study on the dependent variable—that is, they analyze only cases of individuals charged with terrorism. By not also looking at individuals who have forgone violence, analysts cannot determine if they have isolated what is unique or distinctive about those individuals who engage in terrorism. Many people could be doing or thinking things similar to those committed to violence, but never take actions related to terrorism. They may listen to radical sermons and engage with activists, discuss with friends Muslim persecution across the globe, and exhibit the signifiers of extremist modes of thinking, without considering plotting an attack or otherwise aiding a terrorist organization. Two recent studies of militant Muslims in Europe that do employ control groups of nonmilitants, for example, suggest that the beliefs of those inclined toward violence and those who pursue nonviolent political change may not be very different.²⁰

DO TERRORIST ARRESTS INDICATE A GROWING THREAT?

If studies of radicalization shed little light on the propensities toward violence of Muslims in the United States, then what should Americans make of the surge in terrorism arrests observed in 2009? Do they indicate a growing trend of radicalization and propensity toward terrorist violence among American Muslims?

Focusing on a surge in arrests as an indication of radicalization could be misleading for at least two reasons. First, there could be alternative explanations: more terrorist offenses could have come to official attention, and produced arrests, as a result of more aggressive law enforcement. Second, the spike could be the result of factors related to the timing of those arrests and the other details of the cases, which would suggest that the increase is more an artifact of the data than indicative of a larger trend in the population.

Since the September 11 attacks, the Department of Homeland Security and other entities have invested significant resources aimed at monitoring and investigating terrorist activity within the United States (see table 1). In turn, there are two ways that this “grassroots” law enforcement effort could be contributing to an increase in arrests and the appearance that homegrown terrorism is on the rise, even if the incidence of terrorist activity within the Muslim population has not actually increased. First, a more comprehensive law enforcement effort could result in more cases being detected than in the past might have been missed. For example, incidents in which individuals travel

20. See the discussion of these two studies in Dalgard-Nielsen, “Violent Radicalization in Europe.”

Table 1. Domestically Focused Federal, State, and Local Counterterrorism Initiatives

Budgets and Personnel of Key Federal Agencies		
Government spending on homeland security (all agencies) ¹	\$69 billion (FY 2009)	
Department of Homeland Security (DHS)	DHS overall budget: \$53 billion (FY 2009) homeland security budget: \$34 billion (FY 2009) *excludes other functions ²	growth in DHS overall budgets: \$31 billion (FY 2003) \$40 billion (FY 2005) \$43 billion (FY 2007) \$47 billion (FY 2008) \$56 billion (FY 2010)
Federal Bureau of Investigation (lead agency for domestic terrorism)	FBI budget: \$7.9 billion (FY 2010) personnel: 35,394 total (FY 2011) 13,911 special agents, 21,483 supporting staff (e.g., intelligence, language specialists, scientists)	growth in FBI budgets: \$3.3 billion (FY 2001) \$5.6 billion (FY 2005) personnel: \$22,311 (FY1990); 9,848 special agents; 119 intelligence officers \$26,997 (FY 2000); 11,289 special agents; 1,027 intelligence officers \$29,755 (FY 2006); 12,354 special agents; 2,074 intelligence officers
Major Initiatives		
	Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs)	Led by the FBI, JTTFs are joint federal/state/local investigative teams. In 2001 there were approximately 30 JTTFs; in 2011 the number had expanded to more than 100.
	Fusion centers	State and urban-area fusion centers are run by state and local authorities with federal support. The goal is information sharing about terrorist activity across local and national levels. Few in number in 2006, there were 72 fusion centers spread across the country in 2011.
	Nationwide Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR) initiative	This initiative creates a standard process for law enforcement to identify, vet, and share reports of suspicious incidents. In February 2011, the initiative was implemented at 33 sites nationwide, and 13,000 frontline enforcement personnel were trained. By the fall of 2011, virtually all frontline law enforcement personnel (numbering in the hundreds of thousands) will have received training.

Table 1. (Continued)

"See Something, Say Something" initiative	This initiative is aimed at increasing societal vigilance and is being expanded across the country (especially in key transportation sectors).
Terrorist Screening Center	This center is an FBI-administered multi-agency organization that consolidates watchlists and provides operational support to federal, state, and local officials in screening individuals. According to the General Accountability Office, as of May 2007, the center contained 755,000 records (up from 158,000 in 2004 and 288,000 in 2005).

SOURCES: Office of Management and Budget, "Fiscal Year 2010—Analytical Perspectives: Budget of the U.S. Government" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2012/assets/spec.pdf>; Department of Homeland Security, "Budget in Brief"—for FY 2005, 2009, 2011, and 2012 figures, see http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/FY_2005_BIB_4.pdf, http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/budget_bib-fy2009.pdf, http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/budget_bib_fy2011.pdf, and <http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/budget-bib-fy2012.pdf>, respectively; Eric Lichtblau, "The President's Budget: Justice Department; Big Rise for FBI in Antiterror War," *New York Times*, February 8, 2005; Federal Bureau of Investigation (FY 2010 figures), <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/quick-facts>; "FBI Staffing Trends," 1986–2006, <http://trac.syr.edu/tracfbi/newfindings/v05/include/20yearstaffingtable.html>; Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Fusion Centers," March 2009, http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2009/march/fusion_031209; and Government Accountability Office report (GAO-08-110), "Terrorist Watch List Screening," November 2007. For details on the programs and initiatives, see Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, "Understanding the Homeland Threat Landscape—Considerations for the 112th Congress," testimony before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, February 9, 2011; and "DHS: Secretary Napolitano Announces Rail Security Enhancements, Launches Expansion of 'See Something, Say Something' Campaign," *Homeland Security Department Documents and Publications*, July 1, 2010.

¹The Homeland Security Act of 2002 mandates that all federal agencies identify and report the components of their budgets that support homeland security. The \$69 billion figure represents funding across thirty-one agencies and entities. Figures for 2009 appear in "Analytical Perspectives: Budget of the U.S. Government," Office of Management and Budget, FY 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2012/assets/spec.pdf>.

²The \$34 billion figure refers to the portion of the budget devoted to homeland security and was part of an overall DHS budget for 2009 of \$53 billion (the remainder of the budget is earmarked for other DHS components, such as responses to natural disasters and Coast Guard search-and-rescue operations).

overseas to join or aid a terrorist organization, such as those related to the Somali terrorist group al-Shabaab, which, over the 2009–10 period amounted to thirty-one cases, could conceivably have been missed and never found their way into terrorist statistics without a comprehensive law enforcement effort to detect terrorist activity (see the online appendix).

Second, some terrorist acts might be detected and produce arrests, which in the past might never have become known to law enforcement because the militants abandoned their plots or failed to progress beyond the "talking" or aspirational stage without taking actions monitored by authorities. There is, in fact, evidence that authorities might be better prepared to detect potential terrorist activity in its initial phases.²¹ In December 2008, the Justice Department provided new guidance to federal agents that allows the FBI to initiate "assessments" to "proactively" pursue information against a potential terrorist outside of a formal investigation, and therefore without supplying a particular factual justification for the evaluation.²² Among the activities authorized under an assessment are employing human sources or informants.²³ According to documents provided by the FBI to the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Patrick Leahy, from December 2008 through March 2009, the FBI initiated 11,667 assessments of persons and groups, which produced 427 more intensive investigations.²⁴ In the summer of 2011, the FBI further loosened restrictions, rendering it easier for agents to employ lie detector tests, comb through people's trash, and search databases prior to initiating an assessment.²⁵

One piece of evidence that also suggests that detection has been occurring at early stages is the declination rates observed in terrorism cases (i.e., the rate of terrorism matters referred by law enforcement for criminal prosecution that prosecutors decline to pursue). The declination rate rose to 73 percent in fiscal year (FY) 2008 from 61 percent in FY 2005 and from 31 percent in 2002.²⁶ These cases often lack sufficient evidence and are too weak for prosecutors to pursue.²⁷ One cause for the increase in declination rates is that authorities could

21. Alejandro J. Beutel, "Data on Post-9/11 Terrorism in the United States" (Los Angeles, Calif.: Muslim Public Affairs Council, January 2011); and Charles Kurzman, "Muslim-American Terrorism since 9/11: An Accounting" (Durham, N.C.: Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, February 2, 2011).

22. For a copy of the new guide, see Charlie Savage, "Loosening of F.B.I. Rules Stirs Privacy Concerns," *New York Times*, October 28, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/29/us/29manual.html?adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1303409734-SALKQetmchALzjucMyGscQ> (pp. 44–45 of the document reader). See also Bjelopera and Randol, "American Jihadist Terrorism," p. 38.

23. Paul Vitello and Kirk Semple, "Muslims Say F.B.I. Tactics Sow Anger and Fear," *New York Times*, December 17, 2010.

24. For the FBI document, see <http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/politics/20110326-FBI.pdf>. See also Charlie Savage, "F.B.I. Casts Wide Net under Relaxed Rules of Terror Inquiries, Data Show," *New York Times*, March 27, 2011.

25. Charlie Savage, "F.B.I. Agents Get Leeway to Push Privacy Bounds," *New York Times*, June 12, 2011.

26. "Who Is a Terrorist? Government Failure to Define Terrorism Undermines Enforcement, Puts Civil Liberties At Risk" (Syracuse, N.Y.: Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse [TRAC], September 2009). The declination rate includes all terrorism cases referred for prosecution in the United States.

27. TRAC found that in more than half of the declined cases, the reasons given were "weak or insufficient admissible evidence," "lack of criminal intent," or "no federal offense" evident.

be unearthing terrorist-related activity at earlier stages, when it is less likely to form the basis of a substantial case. If, as a result, even some number of these cases that might in the past have gone under the radar result in arrests, then the actions of law enforcement, independent from any actual change in the amount of terrorist activity being undertaken by the population, could be producing larger numbers of recorded terrorist incidents.

Equally important, law enforcement may not just be detecting more cases; it could also be generating more cases through its actions in two ways. First, law enforcement could be seeking to build more substantial cases against those accused of terrorism-related offenses, which could increase the number of incidents counted in the data. Law enforcement officials might, for example, hope to push down the high prosecutorial declination rate noted above by investing more resources in investigations or holding out longer before making arrests. One expert captures this rationale, “[I]f you nip [the case] too early in the bud, then you may not have credible evidence to use in court.”²⁸ Alternatively, officials might be motivated to build stronger cases, so that defendants can be charged with serious terrorism violations, rather than lesser or “preventive charges” such as immigration violations.²⁹ For example, the Center for Law and Security reports that between September 2001 and September 2010, only 31.6 percent of defendants in cases associated with terrorism (defined as cases in which the word “terrorism” is mentioned in indictments or press releases) were charged on core terrorism statutes, while an additional 12.2 percent were charged with national security violations.³⁰

The case of Hosam Smadi, who was accused of trying to blow up a Dallas office building in 2009, is instructive in this regard. As a special agent involved in the case reported, Smadi had overstayed his visa, and “law enforcement could have arrested and deported him.” Instead, the FBI decided to use undercover agents “to set up a sting.”³¹ Given the political pressure over declination rates that the FBI has experienced in the past, it makes sense that officials might seek to build the most substantial cases possible whenever they suspect that an individual is seriously inclined toward militancy.³² In turn, if cases that

28. Quoted in Mike Robinson, “FBI Stays Undercover Longer to Aid Prosecution of Alleged Plotters,” *Virginian-Pilot*, September 26, 2009.

29. See Robert M. Chesney, “Federal Prosecution of Terrorism-Related Offenses: Conviction and Sentencing Data in Light of the Soft Sentence and Data Reliability Critiques,” *Lewis and Clark Law Review*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter 2007), p. 855.

30. See “Terrorist Trial Report Card,” pp. 4–5.

31. “Terror Plot Foiled: Inside the Smadi Case,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, November 5, 2010, <http://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2010/november/terror-plot-foiled/terror-plot-foiled>.

32. See letter from the Committee on the Judiciary to Attorney General Ashcroft and Director Mueller, June 14, 2002, <http://trac.syr.edu/tracatwork/articles/congress/senatejudcom020614>

might otherwise have ended in lesser or no charges being filed are instead pursued by agents to the point where they seem viable, this could yield an increase in the number of terrorist-associated offenses recorded in the data.³³

There is a second, more controversial way that law enforcement could be generating terrorist cases. By relying heavily on the use of informants and undercover agents, law enforcement may inadvertently be helping to advance some terrorist plots, such that aspiring militants are better prepared or more motivated to carry the plot forward to the point where the suspects warrant arrest on terrorism-related charges. To observe that officials could be helping to promote plots does not mean that they are illegally entrapping the militants.³⁴ Rather the effect of law enforcement's involvement may be more subtle.

Militants may be enthusiastic about the prospect of waging an attack, but they may lack the focus, skills, and discipline to do it alone. Law enforcement, in turn, could be helping to advance a plot by supplying people who engage the militant at its aspirational or formative stage, and then spend time (in some cases over many months) with the perpetrator, all the while acting as sounding boards and addressing logistical issues. Agents and informants could be assisting with practicalities and also contributing to the militants' sense of purpose, focus, and efficacy through the (artificial) social relationships they may form with the militants. Given the importance of relationships in helping to bring individuals closer to the act of violence, as described by scholars such as Sageman, the latter effect may be especially significant.³⁵

To illustrate how law enforcement could be helping militants advance their plots, consider the 2009 case of Michael Finton, who was accused of attempting to bomb the Paul Findley Federal Building in Springfield, Illinois. In the months leading up to Finton's arrest, an FBI informer met with him more than a dozen times, often at his home or workplace, where the men frequently discussed Finton's plans and militant ambitions. In addition, undercover agents joined the effort in the guise of expert facilitators, discussing with Finton his intended target, visiting the building prior to the attack, providing the funds for him to purchase equipment for his bomb, fabricating the explosive device for him, and accompanying him on the day he attempted to detonate it.

Alternatively, consider the case of Mohamed Osman Mohamud, the Oregon

.pdf. The letter questioned the high declination rates. Building stronger cases might also be desirable if this allows the FBI to neutralize claims of entrapment.

33. "Terrorist Trial Report Card."

34. There have been no successful defenses based on claims of entrapment. *Ibid.* On informants as potential "enablers," see Jenkins, *Would-be Warriors*, p. 24.

35. Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

man accused of trying to blow up the Christmas tree lighting ceremony in Portland's Pioneer Square in November 2010.³⁶ In meetings with undercover agents, Mohamud declared that he hoped to become "operational" in pursuit of his militant activities, but reported "that he needed help doing so." The agents provided much of that help, meeting with Mohamud repeatedly over several months, helping him to pay for an apartment, supplying a trial bomb (which was exploded in a remote area), and providing the final fake bomb and the van used to transport it. Repeatedly, the agents asked the young man if he wanted to abandon the plot, trying to give him a way out.³⁷ At no point does it appear that the aspiring terrorist doubted his actions. Still, the question remains about whether, absent the practical help offered to the young man or the inspiration of interacting with what he believed were "real-life" militant coconspirators, that plot would have been realized and then been counted in official terrorism statistics.

Similar dynamics are apparent in several other cases, including the 2009–10 cases of the Newburgh Four, Hosam Smadi, Farooque Ahmed, and Antonio Martinez.³⁸ The final column of table 1 reveals that each case involved a significant role for undercover agents or informants from the plot's formative stage until arrests were made.

Finally, it is worth considering the nature of the particular cases that represent the surge of arrests to see what they reveal about a supposed growing trend in Muslim homegrown terrorism. Several features of that data cast doubt on whether they represent the "watershed" in plots that some analysts fear.

From 2002 to 2008, the number of arrests involving Muslim Americans varied considerably, from a low of 5 individuals charged in 2008 to a high of 23 in 2003.³⁹ Estimates for 2009 cite 11 to 13 terrorist incidents, involving 43 Americans charged in the United States or abroad.⁴⁰ In 2010 the number charged was 32, or 33 if one ambiguous case is included. (See the online appendix and table 1 for details on 2009–10 cases.) Those numbers clearly represent a major slice of the 175 total number of individuals charged from 2001 to 2010.

36. Details on the role of undercover agents and informers in the Finton and Mohamud cases can be found in court documents. See *United States v. Finton*, Complaint, No. 09-3048-M (C.D. Ill., September 29, 2009); and *United States v. Mohamud*, Affidavit, Special Agent Ryan Dwyer (D.C. Ore., November, 26, 2010).

37. Bjelopera and Randol, "American Jihadist Terrorism," pp. 47–48.

38. See "Post-9/11 Jihadist Terrorism Cases Involving U.S. Citizens and Residents: An Overview" (Washington, D.C., and Syracuse, N.Y.: New America Foundation and Maxwell School, Syracuse University, n.d.), pp. 29–30; and Bjelopera and Randol, "American Jihadist Terrorism."

39. "Post-9/11 Jihadist Terrorism Cases Involving U.S. Citizens and Residents," pp. 14–18.

40. Jenkins, *Would-be Warriors*, pp. 1–3; and Schanzer, Kurzman, and Moosa, "Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans," p. 10.

Consider, however, that although terrorist indictments against Muslim Americans in 2009 involved an unusually large number of individuals, many were charged in groups. For example, 14 individuals were charged in two groups with joining or aiding a foreign insurgency, Somalia's al-Shabaab; a group of 5 Americans was charged with seeking terrorist training in Pakistan; and another group of 7 North Carolina men, led by Daniel Patrick Boyd, was charged with seeking to aid foreign insurgencies in Israel and Kosovo (this group was also suspected of plotting an attack against the Marine base at Quantico, Virginia).

The 2009 figures could also represent a clustering of arrests for terrorist cases that had been unfolding for years prior, such as that of Bryant Neal Vinas, who traveled to Waziristan, Pakistan, in 2007 only to be apprehended in 2008 and charged in January 2009. Similarly, Terek Mehanna's long odyssey to become a terrorist allegedly began in 2002, although he was not arrested until 2009. The charges against Boyd and his cohort include acts committed as early as November 2006 (and his militant actions allegedly long predate those activities).⁴¹

The al-Shabaab cases raise an additional issue. On definitional grounds, it makes sense to include them as instances of Muslim homegrown terrorism in that the cases represent Americans engaging in terrorist activity. Conceptually grouping these cases with all other terrorist offenses, however, might obscure very different phenomena that fall under the rubric of homegrown terrorism. There are reasons why officials worry about the al-Shabaab cases (especially that the individuals will someday return to the United States and do harm). Leaving the United States to join a group engaged in a regional insurgency, such as al-Shabaab or the Taliban, however, may be different from plotting to attack Americans within their own borders even if the intent is to attack American soldiers or Marines overseas.⁴² This means that the 43 arrests in 2009 do not really represent a singular threat, but rather the conglomeration of actors with somewhat different militant aspirations.

Finally, if 2009 represents a watershed year, one might expect to see a continuation in the upward trend in Muslim American terrorist activity in 2010. Although still elevated, especially compared with 2008 (which represented a low point in terrorism arrests), the number of arrests in 2010 fell to 33, which suggests that 2009 could have been an empirical anomaly.

41. See also "Terrorist Trial Report Card," p. 14.

42. See Andrea Elliott, "A Call to Jihad, Answered in America," *New York Times*, July 12, 2009; and "Islamist Group Threatens Attacks on Countries with Troops in Somalia," *BBC Monitoring Africa*, August 4, 2010.

Preparing Plots While Avoiding Detection

In this section, I explore the implications of the security environment in the United States for the assessment of the threat of Muslim homegrown terrorism. I analyze evidence that militants increasingly might be able to avoid detection as they plot attacks in the United States, which could allow them to more frequently advance their attacks to the execution phase, rather than being foiled by premature arrests. Even if no more plots are initiated, if more militants avoid detection when preparing their attacks, more Americans could perish in those attacks, assuming all the attacks do not fail because of operative error.

I identify two ways that militants might seek to avoid detection as they prepare terrorist acts. First, they could try to exploit pockets of complicity in Muslim communities. Second, they could seek to avoid detection by blending into communities or by residing outside them in rural or urban areas. In either scenario, whether militants seek security by embedding in complicit communities or residing anonymously inside or outside them, that environment must be sufficiently protective to allow an individual to avoid the extensive monitoring and investigative activities in which federal, state, and local law enforcement are presently engaged.

COMPLICITY

I first consider the possibility that militants could find a complicit environment within American Muslim communities that could constitute a form of community or local sanctuary. The conventional wisdom, as noted above, has been that Muslim communities are inhospitable to militancy, especially compared with those in Europe, because American Muslims are more thoroughly assimilated and enjoy middle-class status.⁴³

Studies of Muslim communities provide little evidence of changes or trends that suggest they are becoming any less resilient against the threat of militancy in their midst.⁴⁴ For example, one major effort funded by the Department of Justice, in which researchers resided for periods of two to three months in four

43. For examples, see Leiken, "Europe's Angry Muslims"; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*; and Nina Bernstein, "In American Mill Towns, No Mirror Image of the Muslims of Leeds," *New York Times*, July 21, 2005.

44. Schanzer, Kurzman, and Moosa, "Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans"; Ihsan Bagby, "The American Mosque in Transition: Assimilation, Acculturation, and Isolation," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (March 2009), pp. 473–490; Task Force on Muslim American Civic and Political Engagement, *Strengthening America: The Civic and Political Integration of Muslim Americans* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2007); and Pew Research Center, "Muslim Americans," pp. 3, 19.

midsized Muslim American communities, found that several features of these communities rendered them intrinsically resistant to militancy, including, in particular, the strength of their communal organizations and social networks. In addition, there were efforts expressly geared toward preventing and exposing any signs of militancy, including both outreach programs and a variety of internal monitoring, or self-policing, practices.⁴⁵

In particular, two forms of self-policing underscore Muslim American resistance to militancy. First is the willingness of members to voluntarily alert authorities, through unsolicited tips, when an individual professes extreme views or is engaging in suspect behavior. In table 1, I detail the central role played by informers and tips from the community in exposing militants. In addition, a study by Syracuse University found that from 2001 through 2010, in 22 percent of all cases in which defendants were charged with some terrorist-related offense, tips from family or community members brought the person to law enforcement’s attention.⁴⁶ Another indication that communities—or at least some crucial subset of their members—are repulsing rather than embracing militants is the (not uncontroversial) success that law enforcement has had in cultivating informants. Informants are individuals who are engaged by law enforcement to covertly monitor people and activities in their communities. The Syracuse University study, for example, found that 35 percent of terrorist cases have involved an informant. Another 9 percent of cases involved undercover officers exposing plots.⁴⁷

Finally, even if some Muslims sympathize with militant causes, and believe that violence might occasionally be justified in some political contexts,⁴⁸ atti-

45. Schanzer, Kurzman and Moosa, “Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans,” pp. 12–16.

46. Note that the cited study includes all “post-9/11 jihadist cases” involving terrorist-related offenses, not just attacks in the United States. “Post-9/11 Jihadist Terrorism Cases Involving U.S. Citizens and Residents,” p. 4. See also Schanzer, Kurzman, and Moosa, “Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans,” pp. 1, 24; Kevin Strom, John Hollywood, Mark Pope, Garth Weintraub, Crystal Daye, and Don Gemeinhardt, “Building on Clues: Examining Successes and Failures in Detecting Terrorist Plots, 1999–2009” (Research Triangle Park, N.C.: Institute for Homeland Security Solutions, October 2010).

47. “Post-9/11 Jihadist Terrorism Cases Involving U.S. Citizens and Residents,” pp. 3–9. The percentage of cases involving an informant excludes al-Shabaab cases, in which informants may have also played an important role. See Josh Meyer, “U.S. Says 8 Lured Somali Terror Recruits,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 24, 2009.

48. In 2007 a Pew poll found that 8 percent of American Muslims believed that suicide attacks on civilian targets could be justified in defense of Islam. See Pew Research Center, “Muslim Americans.” Consider, however, that in a December 2006 survey by the University of Maryland’s Program on International Public Attitudes, 24 percent of all Americans questioned stated that they believed “bombing and other attacks intentionally aimed at civilians” are “often or sometimes justified.” Reported in Kenneth Ballen, “The Myth of Muslim Support for Terror,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 23, 2007. See also Clark McCauley and Sarah Scheckter, “What’s Special about U.S. Muslims? The War on Terrorism as Seen by Muslims in the United States, Morocco,

tudes alone do not indicate a willingness to support terrorism, especially when aimed against fellow citizens.⁴⁹ Beyond any moral or ethical considerations it raises, supporting terrorism is a costly act that can result in the perpetrator and his or her community becoming objects of suspicion.⁵⁰

ANONYMITY

A second option for militants hoping to avoid detection is to seek anonymity by living in population centers where individuals of similar backgrounds reside, or in places where social norms or environmental factors render them less likely to be observed (e.g., urban areas, rural/remote places, or commuter/transient neighborhoods). For example, depending on their ethnicity, some militants could conceal themselves in immigrant population centers where they blend in demographically.⁵¹ In the United States, there are both moderately sized and several large population centers of Muslims (e.g., Chicago, Los Angeles, the Bay Ridge neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, and Dearborn, Michigan).

The mere existence of such large population centers, however, does not mean it is easy to hide within them, especially given the social norms and intracommunal patterns of engagement observed within these communities. According to one survey, American Muslims engage in social services at their mosque at a rate equivalent to U.S. congregations in general and are slightly more likely to engage in activities in the community beyond (38 percent vs. 32 percent).⁵² These patterns suggest that there are interconnections among individuals that heighten the odds that individuals who withdraw from the community or exhibit changes in belief or behavior will be noticed. Especially when militants are young and inexperienced—as in the 2010 case of the accused Portland bomber, whose family apparently tipped off authorities about his increasingly extreme views—they may be especially likely to do and say things that draw attention to themselves.⁵³

Enhanced societal vigilance and awareness of terrorism after the

Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 31, No. 11 (November 2008), pp. 1024–1031.

49. Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 92–101.

50. Schanzer, Kurzman, and Moosa, "Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans," p. 28. For an example, see A.G. Sulzberger, "Imam and Informant Tells Why He Lied," *New York Times*, April 15, 2010.

51. Ronald V. Clarke and Graeme R. Newman, *Outsmarting the Terrorists* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International), p. 144.

52. Bagby, "The American Mosque in Transition."

53. Jesse McKinley and William Yardley, "Suspect in Oregon Bomb Plot Is Called Confused," *New York Times*, November 28, 2010.

September 11 attacks may also render it harder for militants to remain anonymous. Compare the environment in which the September 11 hijackers operated to that in the present-day United States. Despite warnings by the plot’s mastermind, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, to avoid Muslim communities—warnings that underscore the recognized dangers of living within them—some of the operatives did just the opposite, without provoking the suspicions of those around them.⁵⁴ Zacarias Moussaoui befriended members of a Norman, Oklahoma, mosque who apparently did not question his potential pursuit of terrorist activity even when he professed extreme views.⁵⁵ Similarly, in San Diego, two of the September 11 hijackers relied on the hospitality of members of a local mosque to find them an apartment and purchase a car.⁵⁶

Contrast the reaction of members of a Hawaiian mosque who in October 2010 reported a new member to authorities after they became suspicious about his recent move to the area.⁵⁷ Consider, also, the case of Khalid Aldawsari, the Saudi student who in February 2011 was charged with plotting bomb attacks on U.S. targets after he was reported to the FBI and local police by, respectively, employees at a chemical company and a freight vendor.⁵⁸ Or take the example of the Circuit City employee who helped to foil the 2007 Fort Dix plot after observing disturbing footage on a video and informing authorities.⁵⁹ In each case, alert citizens, otherwise unacquainted with the militants, helped to expose their potential interest in violent activity.

“HOMELAND SECURITY STARTS WITH HOMETOWN SECURITY.”

To fully appreciate the obstacles facing homegrown terrorists in evading detection, it is also useful to consider the increasing investments that law enforcement has made in establishing an investigative and monitoring apparatus aimed at exposing terrorist activity at the grassroots level.⁶⁰ In February 2011, Secretary of Homeland Security Napolitano described her agency’s philosophy to members of Congress: “The threat of homegrown violent extremism

54. Sarah Downey and Michael Hirsh, “A Safe Haven?” *Newsweek*, September 30, 2002; and National Commission on Terrorism Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorism Attacks upon the United States* (hereafter *The 9/11 Commission Report*) (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), pp. 215–222.

55. Downey and Hirsh, “A Safe Haven?”

56. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 215–222.

57. Gary T. Kubota, “FBI Terror Case Aided by Hawaii Muslims,” *Honolulu Star Advertiser*, October 27, 2010.

58. *United States v. Aldawsari*, Complaint, 5:11-MJ-017 (N.D. Tex., February 23, 2011).

59. John P. Martin, “Jury Sees Informer and Hears Terror Talk on Tape,” *Star Ledger*, October 28, 2008.

60. For the quotation that introduces this paragraph, see Napolitano, “Understanding the Homeland Threat Landscape” (emphasis in original).

fundamentally changes who is most often in the best position to spot terrorist activity, investigate, and respond. More and more, state, local and tribal front-line enforcement officers are most likely to notice the first signs of terrorist activity. This has profound implications for how we go about securing our country against the terrorist threat, and requires a new kind of security architecture that complements the structure we have already built to protect America from threats coming from abroad.⁶¹ Table 1 documents some of this “architecture” in the form of programs and initiatives aimed at expanding federal, state, and local capacity in detecting and investigating terrorist activity (it also lists overall growth in relevant agency budgets and personnel for broader perspective). As with many government programs, not all of these initiatives are equally efficient or comprehensive, but they do represent a significant and steadily increasing focus on and investment in initiatives aimed at the grass-roots level.⁶²

EXPOSING TERRORIST PLOTS: THE ROLE OF INFORMANTS AND TIPS

Finally, to assess the permissiveness of the security environment and therefore the ease of avoiding detection, I examined the empirical record on how attacks plotted in the United States have been resolved. If communities are repulsing militants and law enforcement is rooting them out, a large number of plots should be ending in arrests in which information supplied through tips from the community, informants, and undercover agents is central to exposing the plot initially or in the course of the investigation.⁶³

Table 2 contains all operational plots aimed at targets within the United States from September 11, 2001, through December 31, 2010. I compiled the list using two criteria.⁶⁴ First, consistent with the focus of this article, within the sample of individuals accused of terrorist offenses of any kind, I identified

61. Ibid. For the FBI’s description of its post-September 11 changes, see “The Intel-Driven FBI: New Approaches,” <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/intelligence/intel-driven/new-approaches>.

62. Even troubled programs such as the Terrorist Screening Center have experienced improvements. See Office of the Inspector General, U.S. Department of Justice, “Follow-Up Audit of the Terrorist Screening Center,” Audit Report 07-04, September 2007; and Eileen R. Lawrence and Stephen M. Lord, “Homeland Security: Better Use of Terrorist Watchlist Information and Improvements in Deployment of Passenger Checkpoint Technologies Could Further Strengthen Security,” GAO-10-401T (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Accountability Office, January 2010). For example, in 2005 the FBI began processing all background checks for firearms and explosives against watchlists. Eileen R. Lawrence, “Terrorist Watchlist Screening: FBI Has Enhanced Its Use of Information from Firearms and Explosives Background Checks to Support Counterterrorism Efforts,” GAO-10-703T (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Accountability Office, May 5, 2010).

63. See Strom et al., “Building on Clues.”

64. I draw on court records, official documents, news reports, and information available in studies such as Jenkins, *Would-be Warriors*; “Post-9/11 Jihadist Terrorism Cases Involving U.S. Citizens and Residents”; and Schanzer, Kurzman, and Moosa, “Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans.”

those involved in plots against targets within the United States.⁶⁵ Second, drawing on Petter Nesser's work, I included plots that reach a particular threshold of having at least some defined, actionable targets and concrete activities undertaken in support of the plot.⁶⁶ To isolate cases that ended in arrests, I distinguished among plots that were foiled (i.e., the plot was exposed and militants arrested before the bomb could be planted or the attack executed); plots that failed (the bomb or attack was undetected, but the explosive device failed); and plots that were successful (the bomb went off, or the militant successfully fired the weapon at the target). I also note whether an informant or undercover agent became involved in the plot at a formative stage.

Table 2 reveals that information supplied by tips, informants, and undercover agents has exposed large numbers of homegrown plots. This observation underscores the degree to which militants have had difficulty finding sanctuary or making their plans without law enforcement being alerted. Moreover, this finding likely understates the significance of these phenomena. Not included are cases in which community outreach succeeded in turning individuals away from violent activity, or in which the prospect of exposure and arrest deterred potential offenders.⁶⁷ In short, these data suggest that the United States continues to be a difficult place for militants to conceal themselves as they prepare their attacks.

The Capabilities of Muslim Homegrown Terrorists

In this section, I analyze how improvements in the skills of militants could contribute to the Muslim homegrown terrorism threat. Even if plots are not

65. Note that I have excluded three ambiguous cases. Two involved individuals suspected of mental illness: Mohammed Reza Taheri-Azar, who drove his SUV into a crowd of University of North Carolina students in March 2006; and Naveed Haq, who engaged in a shooting at a Seattle Jewish community center in 2006. The third case involved a shooting at an El Al counter in July 2002 by Hesham Hadayet in which he and two people were killed. Questions were raised about Hadayet's motives, and the FBI equivocated about whether to call his acts terrorism. Tracy Johnson and Vesseea Ho, "Retrial Promised in Haq Case Mistrial: Issue of Insanity Left Jurors Hopelessly Deadlocked," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, June 4, 2008; Rick Lyman and Nick Madigan, "Officials Puzzled about Motive of Airport Gunman Who Killed 2," *New York Times*, July 6, 2002; and Jessica Rocha, "Outburst Reveals 'Other' Taheri-Azar," *News & Observer*, March 6, 2007. On "lunatic" assassins versus terrorists, see Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 2d ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 37.

66. Petter Nesser's criteria, which he applies in a study of European plots, require that plots be planned and prepared (i.e., surveillance undertaken, a weapon acquired, targets defined, or some combination of these). Nesser, "Chronology of Jihadism in Western Europe 1994–2007: Planned, Prepared and Executed Terrorist Attacks," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 31, No. 10 (October 2010), pp. 924–946.

67. See, for example, Schanzer, Kurzman, and Moosa, "Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim Americans," pp. 23–24; and Michael Jacobson, "Terrorist Dropouts: Learning from Those Who Have Left," Policy Focus, No. 101 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2010) p. 17.

Table 2. Muslim American Homegrown Plots and Attacks, September 2001–December 2010

	Details of Plot	Outcome: Foiled, Failed, or Successful	If Foiled, How? (Was offender or plot being monitored beforehand?)	Informant or Agent Involved at Formative Stage? ¹
Herald Square subway station (2004)	2 men plot to bomb station; undertake surveillance/planning	foiled	New York Police Department informer penetrates group.	yes
Albany, New York (2004)	2 men attempt to acquire weapons to assassinate Pakistani diplomat	foiled	Informant recruited by government; befriends men.	yes
California prison plot (2005)	3 men plan to bomb various targets in California: U.S. military facilities, Israeli consulate, Los Angeles-area synagogues	foiled	After investigating 2 men arrested in gas station robbery, FBI contacts head of local mosque, who acts as an informant; indictments issued 2 months later.	no
Fort Dix (2006)	6 men from southern New Jersey plot to attack Fort Dix	foiled	Video clerk observes suspicious footage copied to a DVD and tips off the FBI; FBI then hires informant to monitor conspirators.	yes
Miami Seven; Sears Tower plot (2006)	7 men plot to bomb Sears Tower and sites in Florida	foiled	Informant posing as al-Qaida operative exposes plot.	yes
Derrick Shareef (2006)	Shareef accused of attempting to buy handguns and grenades for suicide attack at Illinois mall	foiled	Informant records conversations by Shareef; in a sting operation, FBI agent trades grenades for stereo speakers.	yes
JFK Airport plot (2007)	4 men accused of plotting to explode fuel tanks at airport	foiled	Informant recruited by New York Police Department; infiltrates group.	yes
Bronx synagogue and Newburgh, New York, plots (2009)	4 men accused of plotting to bomb synagogues and use missiles to shoot down military aircraft at Stewart International Airport in Newburgh, New York	foiled	Informant met men at mosque and subsequently infiltrated the group by posing as a member of a Pakistani terrorist group; men arrested when placing fake bombs in Bronx, New York, supplied by FBI.	yes
Michael Finton (2009)	Finton accused of plotting to blow up federal building in Springfield, Illinois	foiled	Conversations recorded by paid FBI informant; arrest made after fake explosives supplied by FBI used in detonation in Illinois.	yes

Little Rock recruiting center shooting/ Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad (2009)	Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad (a.k.a. Carlos Bledsoe) shoots 2 soldiers outside army recruiting center in Little Rock, Arkansas; kills one and injures a second	successful	Muhammad had been interviewed twice by FBI (once when in Yemen), but no action is taken and attack takes place.	no
Hosam Smadi (2009)	Smadi attempts to blow up office building in Dallas, Texas with fake explosives supplied by government informant	foiled	FBI detected Smadi on extremist website; 3 undercover agents communicated/met with him for 3 months; arrest made after fake explosives supplied by FBI used in detonation in Dallas, Texas.	yes
Nidal Malik Hasan (2009)	U.S. Army psychiatrist shoots army personnel, killing 13 and injuring 31	successful	Beginning in December 2008, FBI monitored 10–20 emails between Major Hasan and Anwar al-Awlaki (information not passed to military).	no
New York subway plot/Najibullah Zazi and 2 associates (2009)	Zazi and associates accused of seeking to bomb New York subway with TATP explosives	foiled	British intercept email, pass information to U.S. officials; FBI contacts informant (New York imam) in September 2009; shortly thereafter, Zazi abandons plan when he believes he is under surveillance.	no
North Carolina/Daniel Patrick Boyd network (2009)	7 men arrested on weapons counts and other crimes; accused of plotting attacks overseas and against Marines Corps base in Quantico, Virginia	foiled	Tip from Muslim community alerts authorities; informant recruited and group put under surveillance for 3 years.	no
Times Square bomber/Faisal Shahzad (2010)	Shahzad sought to explode car bomb in Times Square	failed	Shahzad not monitored beforehand; serious flaws in bomb, does not detonate.	no
Washington, D.C., Metro plot/Farooque Ahmed (2010)	Ahmed sought to bomb Washington, D.C. Metro stations	foiled	Tip from Muslim community led to sting with undercover agents posing as al-Qaida operatives.	yes
Portland holiday plot/ Mohamed Osman Mohamud (2010)	Mohamud accused of seeking to bomb Portland holiday celebration	foiled	Mohamud put on terror watchlist (likely as a result of a relative's tip) and email monitored; 2 undercover agents then assisted him in plot.	yes
Maryland recruiting center plot/Antonio Martinez (2010)	Martinez accused of seeking to bomb an armed forces recruiting center in Maryland	foiled	Tip from informant leads to sting operation involving informant and undercover agent.	yes

¹The formative stage occurs before weapons are acquired or specific targets are developed, or both; the key is whether law enforcement interacted with militant(s) and provided assistance (e.g., logistical support/surveillance/funding) during the period when the plan moved from its aspirational to its (at least somewhat) operational phase. This column is significant in that it reveals the central role that authorities and informants have played in plots as they develop from an aspirational to an operational phase. The issue is discussed in the article's analysis of how to interpret the surge of terrorist arrests in 2009.

initiated in greater numbers and are no more likely to avoid detection, if those that reach the execution stage are undertaken with more sophistication and with less risk of implementation failure, more American lives could be at risk.

There are two reasons that militants' capabilities to execute deadly attacks could be growing. First, the internet has increased the accessibility of technical and training manuals and could otherwise make it easier for militants to fabricate weapons and prepare attacks. Second, aspiring terrorists could seek overseas training from established terrorist organizations and return home better skilled and prepared to launch deadly attacks. As a result of these enhanced skills and resources, manufactured bombs might be more likely to explode and pre-operational activities to be competently carried out, reducing the chance that attacks will fail because of operative error and increasing the threat they pose to innocent lives.

THE INTERNET AS A TECHNICAL AND INSTRUCTIONAL RESOURCE

The proliferation of online training and explosives manuals has raised serious concerns that these materials could enhance the skills of aspiring terrorists. Director of the National Counterterrorism Center Michael Leiter captured these worries, "[I]ncreasingly sophisticated English language jihadist propaganda remains easily downloadable via the internet and provides young extremists with guidance to carry out Homeland attacks." As Gabriel Weimann contends, the internet constitutes an "online terrorism university."⁶⁸

These concerns aside, there are analytical and empirical reasons to question how much online resources can improve militant capabilities. One set of problems relates to the quality of information available from training and explosives manuals. In a survey of online Arabic- and English-language training materials, for example, Anne Stenerson found that the information in her sample was often poorly conveyed or organized.⁶⁹ In a separate study, Jennifer Yang Hui found that many of the technical instructions for explosives appearing on Indonesian militant websites were patchy and incomplete.⁷⁰ Although analysts at Jane's Intelligence Weekly observed improvements over time in online materials, they nonetheless concluded as recently as 2006 that

68. Napolitano, Mueller, and Leiter, "Nine Years after 9/11"; "Finding Nemo," *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor*, July 4, 2008; and Gabriel Weimann, "Virtual Training Camps: Terrorists' Use of the Internet," in James J.F. Forest, ed., *Teaching Terror: Strategic and Tactical Learning in the Terrorist World* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), p. 112.

69. Anne Stenerson, "The Internet: A Virtual Training Camp?" *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (April 2008), pp. 215–233.

70. Jennifer Yang Hui, "The Internet in Indonesia: Development and Impact of Radical Websites," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (February 2010), pp. 171–191, at p. 184.

"it is probably fair to say that the jihadist online infrastructure is still in its infancy."⁷¹

In addition to shortcomings in training manuals, militants may have a difficult time employing technical information effectively, especially when, as Michael Kenney describes, they lack practical experience and the capacity to tailor abstract information to local conditions.⁷² Failed attacks in Europe (where attempted attacks have been more plentiful than in the United States) provide numerous examples of these difficulties. In 2006 two Lebanese men left suitcase bombs on German trains that failed to detonate because of errors in the fabrication of the explosives. In 2007 a British engineer and medical doctor set gas cylinder bombs in automobiles outside London nightclubs, which also exhibited technical flaws.⁷³ Most striking is Nesser's finding: in his detailed survey of plots in Western Europe, Nesser could not find a single example of terrorist cells developing operational capabilities, including building working bombs, solely from instructions downloaded from the internet.⁷⁴ Consider that even members of technically capable organizations often make errors, including the leader of the Basque nationalist group ETA, who was killed by his own bomb,⁷⁵ or the operatives maimed by the Provisional Irish Republican Army's "own goals."⁷⁶

Moreover, in evaluating the implications of online manuals, it is essential to consider the security context in which militants in the United States operate and how this bears on their capacity to capitalize on those resources. In a permissive security environment, militants might be able to experiment, train over time, and perfect their skills and capacity to translate abstract information into practical know-how. In a less secure environment, however, efforts to practice, especially with explosive devices, generate risks that the militants will be observed and exposed. Consider the network responsible for the Madrid bombings on March 11, 2004. When members of the network rented a farm house to train and practice using detonators, their activities were noticed by the local population; although not reported, the fact that they were observed underscores the risk inherent in such activities.⁷⁷ In the United States,

71. Brynjar Lia, "Al-Qaeda Online: Understanding Jihadist Internet Infrastructure" *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (January 2006), pp. 14–19, at p. 16.

72. See Michael Kenney, "Beyond the Internet: *Mētis*, *Techné*, and the Limits of Online Artifacts for Islamist Terrorists," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (April 2010), p. 180.

73. See *ibid.*, p. 185.

74. Petter Nesser, "How Did Europe's Global Jihadis Obtain Training for Their Militant Causes?" *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (April 2008), p. 235.

75. "ETA Chief Killed by Own Bomb" *Scottish Daily Record*, August 9, 2000.

76. David E. Smith, "The Training of Terrorist Organizations," 1995, *GlobalSecurity.org*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1995/SDE.htm>.

77. Nesser, "How Did Europe's Global Jihadis Obtain Training for Their Militant Causes?" p. 245.

the 2003 Virginia paintball network was uncovered as a result of a tip about its efforts to enhance its skills through paramilitary training.⁷⁸ Even seemingly inconspicuous bomb-making activities can be detected. Producing chemicals can leave telltale signs on interior spaces, changing paint colors and generating fumes, which may be observed by alert hotel operators or landlords.⁷⁹

Acquiring equipment, or simply storing materials, generates yet another set of risks of being exposed. Recall the case of the Saudi student, Khalid Aldawsari, who was arrested in February 2011 after he was reported to authorities, first by the chemical company from which he ordered a large quantity of phenol and second from the freight-forwarding company he hoped to use to receive the shipment.⁸⁰ According to the New York City Police commissioner, Shahzad purchased fertilizer with an inferior grade of ammonium nitrate and bought M-88 fireworks rather than more powerful equipment to lessen the chance his expenditures would be detected.⁸¹ Shahzad's example illustrates how the security environment could indirectly elevate the capabilities required for attacks by forcing militants to rely on obscure or difficult-to-work-with materials in order to evade detection.⁸²

Finally, fabricating viable explosive devices is not the only obstacle that terrorists must overcome to prepare and execute deadly attacks. Preparing attacks often entails pre-operational activity, including identifying and surveilling targets while maintaining operational security. Errors in pre-operational activity are common even among established or well-resourced terrorist networks and organizations and are likely to be pervasive among less experienced militants.⁸³ Take, for example, the 2003 Casablanca suicide bombings. In that case, the plotters had a secure community sanctuary and a skilled coordinator (and, at least according to the Moroccan authorities, help from al-Qaida).⁸⁴ Yet they still made serious errors in surveillance and planning, in-

78. Mary Beth Sheridan, "Hardball Tactics in an Era of Threats," *Washington Post*, September 3, 2006.

79. Scott Stewart, "How to Tell If Your Neighbor Is a Bombmaker," *Stratfor.com*, April 7, 2011.

80. Office of Public Affairs, Department of Justice, "Texas Resident Arrested on Charge of Attempted Use of Weapon of Mass Destruction," press release, February 24, 2011; and Charlie Savage and Scott Shane, "U.S. Arrests Saudi Student in Bomb Plot," *New York Times*, February 24, 2011.

81. Anahad O'Connor, "Weak Times Sq. Car Bomb Is Called Intentional," *New York Times*, July 21, 2010; and Peter Grier, "Why the Times Square Bomb Failed Spectacularly," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 3, 2010.

82. Craig Whitlock, "Homemade, Cheap, and Dangerous: Terror Cells Favor Simple Ingredients in Building Bombs," *Washington Post*, July 5, 2007.

83. Kenney, "Beyond the Internet"; Michael Kenney, "'Dumb' Yet Deadly: Local Knowledge and Poor Tradecraft among Islamist Militants in Britain and Spain," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 33, No. 10 (October 2010), pp. 914–915; Daniel Byman and C. Christine Fair, "The Case for Calling Them Nitwits," *Atlantic*, July/August, 2010, pp. 106–108; and Timothy Noah, "The Terrorists Are Dumb Theory," *Slate.com*, February 25, 2009.

84. See Rogelio Alonso and Marcos Garcia Rey, "Evolution of Jihadist Terrorism in Morocco," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (December 2007), pp. 581–582.

cluding blowing up a Jewish community center on a Saturday. Fortunately, no one was killed, because the plotters did not consider that the center would be closed for the Sabbath.⁸⁵

Although arguably of limited use for building explosives and training, the internet could help militants implement their attacks more effectively in another way: it could mitigate the risks of exposure inherent in pre-operational activity, especially by facilitating communications and substituting for on-the-ground surveillance.⁸⁶ Maps and satellite imagery, for instance, can be helpful in gathering information about targets. Shahzad, for example, reportedly tracked pedestrian traffic in Times Square with real-time video feeds.⁸⁷ Also, communications may be facilitated through the use of methods such as "electronic dead-drops," in which militants leave messages in the draft folder of an email account and others retrieve the information without sending the message.⁸⁸

Nonetheless, there are limits to the utility of the internet for these purposes. Take, for example, the 2008 Mumbai attack by Lashkar-e-Taiba. In preparing for the attack, leaders employed satellite maps, GPS, mobile phone applications, and a variety of other technologies.⁸⁹ Those leaders, however, also sent an American, David Headley, on five surveillance trips to Mumbai during which he scouted targets and hired fishermen for private tours of the harbor to determine landing points for the attackers.⁹⁰ Despite being trained in surveillance techniques, Headley made several errors in a subsequent plot aimed at the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, and he was ultimately apprehended because of his activities in preparation for that attack.⁹¹

As one U.S. military study observes, figuring out the details of local targets and their defenses often requires some physical surveillance.⁹² Consider the re-

85. See Jack Kalpakian, "Building the Human Bomb: The Case of the 16 May 2003 Attacks in Casablanca," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (March/April 2005), pp. 113–127. See also Jamey Keaten, "Moroccan Bombers Suspected of Making Planning Mistakes in Casablanca Attacks," Associated Press, May 19, 2003; and Ali Alonzla, "Unclaimed Sources: Al Qaida Leader al-Zarqawi Planned Riyadh, Casablanca Bombings," *World News Connection*, July 3, 2004.

86. Jarret Brachman and James J.F. Forest, "Exploring the Role of Virtual Camps," in Michael Innes, ed., *Denial of Sanctuary: Understanding Terrorist Safe Havens* (New York: Praeger, 2007), p. 134.

87. *United States v. Shahzad*, Government Memorandum in Connection with the Sentencing of Faisal Shahzad, No. 10, Cr. 541 (S.D.N.Y., September 9, 2010), p. 7.

88. Craig Whitlock, "Terror Suspects Hone Anti-Detection Skills," *Washington Post*, January 5, 2008.

89. Emily Wax, "Gunmen Used Technology as a Tactical Tool," *Washington Post*, December 3, 2008.
90. U.S. Attorney's Office, Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Chicagoan Charged with Conspiracy in 2008 Mumbai Attacks in Addition to Foreign Terror Plot in Denmark," December 7, 2009; and Mike Harvey, "Google Earth: Don't Blame Us for Terrorist Attacks," *Sunday Times*, January 30, 2009.

91. On mistakes, see Scott Stewart, "Learning from Terrorist Tradecraft," *Stratfor.com*, December 17, 2009.

92. "A Military Guide to Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century," U.S. Army Training and Doctrine

quirements of a 2004 plot in which two men sought to bomb the subway station in Herald Square by leaving explosive devices in refuse containers and under benches. Before undertaking the attack, the plotters “wanted to know the number and location of cops on the platforms at different times of the day. Which areas were covered by video cameras? Since the likeliest place to hide a bomb was a garbage can, they needed to know how many there were, where they were located, and when they got emptied. And they needed to find the best path to go in and then get out quickly after planting the device.”⁹³ Growing advances in the technology and methodology of countersurveillance increase the risks inherent in such surveillance activities.⁹⁴

This discussion, in fact, underscores an overarching constraint facing militants in the United States, which originates in the country’s significant investment in security and dearth of community sanctuaries. Assume that an individual is able to connect with an acquaintance and they can securely interact and discuss in the abstract a terrorist plot. As soon as they attempt to recruit others, seek training or resources, or undertake surveillance, they create security risks that threaten to expose themselves to authorities. In this sense, terrorist plotting in the United States may be self-limiting: the greater the number and layers of complexity in the campaign, the more it requires resources and activities that render the plotters vulnerable to exposure.⁹⁵

THE DIFFICULTY OF ACQUIRING EXPERTISE OVERSEAS

What if homegrown terrorists do not need to acquire skills or plan and prepare their attacks in the United States and can instead travel overseas to train and then return to execute them?⁹⁶ Some analysts contend that training Westerners who travel overseas to then attack targets in their countries of residence is a favored strategy of al-Qaida Central, and that this is contributing to a growing homegrown terror threat.⁹⁷

Command, TRADOC G2, ver. 5.0, August 15, 2007, Appendix A Terrorist Planning Cycle, A-1 to A-6.

93. Craig Horowitz, “Anatomy of a Foiled Plot,” *New York Magazine*, May 21, 2005.

94. Joseph Straw, “Countersurveillance Foils Attacks,” *SecurityManagement.com*, <http://www.securitymanagement.com/article/countersurveillance-foils-attacks>; Scott Stewart and Fred Burton, “Counterterrorism: Shifting from ‘Who’ to ‘How,’” Stratfor Global Security and Intelligence Report, November 4, 2009; and Stephen Handelsmann, “Special Report: Technology vs. Terrorism,” *Popular Science*, September 1, 2006, <http://www.popsoci.com/scitech/article/2006-09/special-reporttechnology-vs-terrorism#>.

95. On self-limiting properties of homegrown terrorism, see Marc Sageman’s discussion in David Ignatius, “The Fading Jihadists,” *Washington Post*, February 28, 2008.

96. See Nelson and Bodurian, “A Growing Terrorist Threat?” p. v; Bergen and Hoffman, “Assessing the Terrorist Threat,” p. 24; and Napolitano, Mueller, and Leiter, “Nine Years after 9/11,” p. 4.

97. See Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, “Al Qaeda Priority: Western Targets,” *CNN.com*,

There are, however, considerable obstacles to receiving remote training that cast doubt on whether it offers such unmitigated benefits to aspiring terrorists. To start, leaving the United States and reentering requires navigating significant post-September 11 security regimes in Western countries; similarly, entering and exiting a terrorist camp in the foreign country without exposing one's identity can be a complicated process.⁹⁸ According to Nesser, many activists in Europe in the last decade who traveled overseas to obtain training were exposed or captured before they could undertake their missions.⁹⁹

In addition, Western "self-recruits" have to connect with terrorist organizations in their base countries, and leaders have to accept them for training. Take the case of five Muslim American suspects who traveled to Pakistan for training but were repeatedly turned down "because they were foreigners and had no local references."¹⁰⁰ Or consider the case of Terek Mehanna, whose associate sought to solicit training, only to be turned down by two Pakistani militant groups.¹⁰¹ Even someone with significant personal ties to Pakistan, such as Faisal Shahzad, can encounter problems; he reported that establishing his connection with the Tehrik-e-Taliban organization took six months.¹⁰² Indeed, from the perspective of militant groups, as much as American or European citizens represent an opportunity to train Westerners and send them back to wreak havoc in their home countries, they also represent serious security risks to the organization.¹⁰³

Finally, even if a recruit is accepted for training, the practical value of that remote instruction once the militant is back home may be limited.¹⁰⁴ The cases of Najibullah Zazi and Faisal Shahzad, the respective New York subway and Times Square bombers, are instructive. Zazi was extensively trained and guided by an al-Qaida operative.¹⁰⁵ Still, he ran into technical problems while

July 30, 2009; Spencer S. Hsu, "Arrest of VA. Man Spotlights al-Qaeda's New American Recruiters," *Washington Post*, August 1, 2010; and Sami Yousafzai, Ron Moreau, Mark Hosenball, Zahid Hussain, and Emily Flynn Vencat, "The Regathering Storm," *Newsweek*, December 25, 2006, pp. 44–47.

98. See Devin R. Springer, James L. Regens, and David N. Edger, *Islamic Radicalism and Global Jihad* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), pp. 155–156.

99. Nesser, "How Did Europe's Global Jihadis Obtain Training for Their Militant Causes," p. 250.

100. See Jim Sciutto and Pierre Thomas, "Terror Wannabes? Arrested Americans Rejected for Jihad Training," *ABC News*, December 10, 2009.

101. Mark Clayton, "How FBI Traced Terek Mehanna in His Quest to Become a Jihadi," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 22, 2009.

102. Aaron Katersky, "Faisal Shahzad Pleads Guilty in Times Square Car Bomb Plot, Warns of More Attacks," *ABC News*, June 21, 2010; *United States v. Shahzad*, Government Memorandum in Connection with the Sentencing of Faisal Shahzad, No. 10, Cr. 541 (S.D.N.Y., September 9, 2010).

103. See William K. Rashbaum, "One U.S. Prosecutor in Brooklyn Is Behind Many Terrorism Convictions," *New York Times*, July 6, 2010.

104. Bergen and Hoffman make this point in "Assessing the Terrorist Threat."

105. According to prosecutors, Zazi was aided by a high-level al-Qaida operative. See *United*

fabricating his TATP bombs in a hotel kitchenette and was forced to contact his associates in Pakistan for instruction; those communications were intercepted.¹⁰⁶ Or consider that Faisal Shahzad was trained by the Pakistani Taliban for forty days, in which five were devoted to explosives training and yet, leaving aside his use of nonexplosive fertilizer, his device was poorly constructed.¹⁰⁷ He also made several errors in operational security, including failing to destroy one VIN number on his vehicle, as well as leaving behind car keys and a prepaid cellphone used to receive calls from Pakistan and to call the fireworks store where he purchased bomb-making materials—errors that helped to ensure he would be unable to repeat his attempt, despite his professed plans to do so.¹⁰⁸ Even if Shahzad's training was cursory or incompetent, it underscores the necessity and difficulty of bringing together professional experts with capable students.¹⁰⁹ Finally, trainees still face the self-limiting conditions of their untrained counterparts once they are back home, which will also complicate their efforts to undertake pre-operational activity and execute attacks without first being detected; for all his overseas training, for example, Zazi's plot was still detected by authorities in the United States.

Evaluating the Threat of Muslim Homegrown Terrorism

In this section, I integrate the arguments of the three prior sections to determine how they illuminate the threat of Muslim homegrown terrorism, especially in its most worrisome incarnation: the possibility that American Muslims will carry out deadly attacks in the United States.

IS THE MUSLIM HOMEGROWN TERRORISM THREAT GROWING?

Despite the concerns expressed by many analysts and public officials, the evidence does not support the conclusion that Americans face a growing threat of deadly attacks plotted by Muslims in the United States. First, it is unclear that more American Muslims are intent on mounting such attacks. Although it may yet prove to be the case, the evidence at present does not substantiate such a finding. The exploratory nature and approach of studies of

States v. El Shukrijumah, Superseding Indictment, Cr. No. 10-1019 (E.D.N.Y.). Shahzad was trained by Tehrik-e-Taliban. *United States v. Shahzad*, p. 5.

106. Peter Bergen, "Reassessing the Evolving Threat to the Homeland," testimony before the House Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing, and Terrorism Risk Assessment, 111th Cong., 1st sess., November 19, 2009.

107. *United States v. Shahzad*, p. 5.

108. *United States v. Shahzad*, Complaint, Cr. 1:10-cr-00541 (S.D.N.Y., May 4, 2010), p. 4.

109. David E. Sanger, "U.S. Pressure Helps Militants Overseas Focus Efforts," *New York Times*, May 7, 2010.

radicalization provide limited tools for evaluating whether Muslim Americans are increasingly exhibiting cognitive and behavioral changes that predispose them to violence. Even if the behaviors and beliefs sometimes associated with radicalization are detected, it is unclear that they will culminate in individuals undertaking terrorist activity, and if so, in what incidence individuals will engage in violent acts. Other evidence that radicalization is increasing, such as a surge in arrests, is also a poor indicator of a growing inclination toward violence. The surge could be the result of a clustering of arrests of those long engaged in militancy or the apprehension of large groups, such as the members of the Daniel Boyd network or the al-Shabaab recruits. Improvements in detection or other actions by law enforcement could also be contributing to an increase in the number of individuals charged with terrorist offenses independent of any larger trends in the population.

Second, there is a dearth of evidence suggesting that American Muslims, even if they were to aspire in greater numbers to plot deadly attacks, would be more capable of doing so without being prematurely apprehended than their counterparts in the past. The evidence cited above suggests that a significant grassroots investigative and monitoring architecture is in place in the United States, such that those who do aspire to plot will continue to be hard pressed to do so undetected. There is no basis for anticipating that the security environment has become more permissive for terrorists. If anything, the commitment to a steady growth of resources, an emphasis on federal, state, and local cooperative initiatives in counterterrorism, ongoing signs of societal vigilance, and continued resistance to militancy in Muslim communities suggest that terrorist plots, as in the past, have a high probability of being detected and foiled before they culminate in the deaths of Americans.

Finally, even if attacks are not foiled, there is little basis for anticipating that those that are executed will be less prone to failure than in the past. Muslim homegrown terrorists in 2009 or 2010 do not appear to have been better equipped to overcome the challenges of bomb making, or preparing attacks, than in prior years. Indeed, mistakes in operational security and tradecraft are common even among skilled terrorists and, in the case of the mostly inexperienced and unprofessional cohort of American terrorists, may be endemic.¹¹⁰ The evidence from several 2010 cases, including those of Finton, Smadi, Farooque, Martinez, and Mohamud, suggests that militants make even the most basic mistakes in terrorist tradecraft, including soliciting help from friends for their plots, advertising their intentions on the internet, and trusting

110. Kenney, "Beyond the Internet"; Kenney, "'Dumb' Yet Deadly"; Byman and Fair, "The Case for Calling Them Nitwits"; and Noah, "The Terrorists-Are-Dumb Theory."

informants and undercover agents often with few questions asked.¹¹¹ Even the most capable homegrown terrorists—such as those few who managed to navigate security obstacles to obtain overseas training and guidance—ran into difficulty in preparing for their attacks. For example, both Zazi and Shahzad had to contend with serious technical problems and committed errors in operational security.

HOW SERIOUS IS THE THREAT?

If there are no solid reasons for anticipating that the threat of deadly attacks in the United States is growing, how should Americans evaluate the seriousness of the threat of Muslim homegrown terrorism? A first step is to review the record of homegrown terrorism in the years since September 11. From September 2001 through December 2010, approximately 175 Muslim citizens or residents of the United States were charged with terrorist-related offenses, including fundraising on behalf of an overseas terrorist organization such as al-Qaida or al-Shabaab, seeking to join one, or plotting an attack in the United States.¹¹² The surge in arrests noted at the start of this article included 43 people in 2009 and 32 in 2010.¹¹³ Among these were 31 individuals seeking to join or aid al-Shabaab as well as 9 individuals involved in sting operations.¹¹⁴

Within the smaller sample of operational plots aimed at homeland targets within the United States (the focus of this article), there were 18 such plots from 2001 to 2010. Of those, 12 involved the extensive participation of informants and undercover agents from the plots' early or formative phase. Two—the Little Rock and Fort Hood shootings—resulted in deaths.¹¹⁵ The perpetrators of those attacks had singled out soldiers, as have about one-third of all terrorist-related activities and attacks in the United States and overseas.¹¹⁶ Only one plot reached the execution stage—Shahzad's Times Square bombing

111. *United States v. Finton*; *United States v. Mohamud*; and *United States v. Martinez*, Complaint, 10-4761 (D.C. Maryland, December 8, 2010).

112. Accounts vary somewhat. See "Post-9/11 Jihadist Terrorism Cases Involving U.S. Citizens and Residents," p. 1; and Kurzman, "Muslim American Terrorism since 9/11."

113. See "Post-9/11 Jihadist Terrorism Cases Involving U.S. Citizens and Residents," pp. 16–18; Schanzer, Kurzman, and Moosa, "Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans," p. 53; and Jenkins, *Would-be Warriors*, pp. 1–2, 14–17.

114. "Post-9/11 Jihadist Terrorism Cases Involving U.S. Citizens and Residents," pp. 28–29.

115. If the two questionable incidents are counted, the total number of shootings increases to four. See the earlier discussions of Hadayet, Haq, and Taheri-Azar; Johnson and Ho, "Retrial Promised in Haq Case Mistrial"; Lyman and Madigan, "Officials Puzzled about Motive of Airport Gunman Who Killed 2"; and Rocha, "Outburst Reveals 'Other' Taheri-Azar."

116. Beutel, "Data on Post-9/11 Terrorism in the United States," p. 9. See also Romesh Ratnesar, "The Myth of Homegrown Islamic Terrorism," *Time.com*, January 24, 2011; and Scott Stewart, "The Seattle Plot: Jihadists Shifting Away from Civilian Targets," *Stratfor Security Weekly*, June 30, 2011.

attempt—without the perpetrator being known to law enforcement before the attack. No explosive device has been successfully detonated by a Muslim American in a terrorist attack in the United States.

Thus the record suggests, on both analytical and empirical grounds (to the extent one can extrapolate from such a small number of successful attacks), that the plots most likely to succeed are those that involve accessible weapons (e.g., firearms) and small numbers of individuals and that require minimal skill and pre-operational steps. Because individual plotters do not risk exposure through contacts with others and may use weapons that require minimal skills, they likely have the greatest chance of avoiding detection and being successful.¹¹⁷

The difficulties associated with plotting attacks in the United States help to explain why "lone wolf" attackers are sometimes identified as the mainline domestic threat.¹¹⁸ How serious a threat do such disconnected, unsophisticated attacks pose to Americans? They can certainly prove lethal. Take, for example, Maj. Nidal Hasan's shooting spree at Fort Hood, Texas, which killed 13 soldiers and wounded many more. Alternatively, consider the outcome if Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad had chosen an easier method of attack and a more dependable weapon—firing his newly purchased Kel-Tec semi-automatic rifle into the square on a Saturday night, rather than attempting a technically ambitious car bombing. He could have killed a large number of people with a higher probability of success.¹¹⁹ As demonstrated by the 421 workplace shootings that, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, occurred in 2008, simple attacks can be deadly.¹²⁰

Whether attacks of this kind present a serious terrorist threat, however, is a somewhat different question.¹²¹ Conceptually, terrorism is commonly understood as being about more than killing; its impact depends on whether attacks generate deeply rooted psychological reverberations in society. As one ob-

117. See Napolitano, Mueller, and Leiter, "Nine Years after 9/11," p. 4; and Stewart and Burton, "Counterterrorism."

118. Shiner, "Lieberman Fears 'Lone Wolf' Retaliation"; Sageman, "The Next Generation of Terror"; and Raffaello Pantucci, "A Typology of Lone Wolves: Preliminary Analysis of Lone Islamist Terrorists" (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, King's College London, March 2011).

119. Michael Wilson and William K. Rashbaum, "Suspect's Gun Proved Easy to Obtain," *New York Times*, May 5, 2010.

120. See U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Workplace Shootings," Fact Sheet, July 2010, <http://www.bls.gov/iif/oshwc/foi/osar0014.htm>.

121. For a critique of the risk posed by solo militants (especially shooters), see Chris Jaspardo, "Lone Wolf: The Threat from Independent Jihadists," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (January 2011), pp. 14–19.

server captures it, "Terrorism is about terrorizing. It's about creating fear; it is not just about attacking."¹²² Moreover, as terrorists themselves appear to understand implicitly, the operational complexity of their attacks can affect how much they terrorize: generating a psychological impact requires undertaking attacks that demonstrate ruthlessness, premeditation, and technical capability.¹²³ For example, there is likely a reason why Shahzad chose to use a bomb instead of his rifle, or why al-Qaida did not use its U.S.-based operatives to shoot up suburban malls in the days following the September 11 attacks and why, since then, it may be willing to advocate doing so only as a last resort.¹²⁴ The very fact that aspiring militants are regularly attracted to using explosives,¹²⁵ despite the risks of detection and failure they invite, underscores a desire to generate the maximum psychological effect possible.¹²⁶

A final way of evaluating the seriousness of the homegrown Islamist threat is to compare it with other terrorist threats that Americans have faced in the past and others they face in the present—threats the population has heretofore managed rather capably. Seen in light of the threats posed by other segments of the population, the one posed by Muslim Americans appears neither especially novel, nor severe. Take, for example, the United States' recent history with terrorism. As Brian Jenkins observes, in the 1970s the country experienced a rash of bombings by Puerto Rican nationalist groups and the militant left, such as the Weather Underground, which combined were responsible for more than 100 bombings.¹²⁷ Contemporaneous reports underscore the magnitude of the threat at the time. Between January 1969 and October 1970, 370 bombings occurred in New York City alone, an average of more than one

122. Richard Barrett, "Al-Qaida and Taliban Status Check: A Resurgent Threat?" remarks made at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., September 29, 2009.

123. For evidence from psychological studies that the characteristics of an event matter when assessing reactions to terror attacks, see Ginny Sprang, "The Psychological Impact of Isolated Acts of Terrorism," in Andrew Silke, ed., *Terrorists, Victims, and Society: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and Its Consequences* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2003), chap. 7.

124. See comments by Adam Gadhan, "A Call to Arms," March 7, 2010, <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/nefagadahn0210.pdf>; and "Independent Jihad," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (October 2010), pp. 18–22. Bergen and Hoffman claim that Midwestern malls are not ideal targets, because they would make little impression on an audience of foreign Muslims. See Bergen and Hoffman, "Assessing the Terrorist Threat," p. 29.

125. Explosives are a common weapon of choice. Brian A. Jackson and David R. Frelinger, "Rifling through the Terrorists' Arsenal: Exploring Groups' Weapon Choices and Technology Strategies," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 31, No. 7 (July 2008), pp. 583–604, at p. 586.

126. Shootings are not inherently lacking in terrorizing qualities, as evident in the 2002 D.C. sniper or the 2008 Mumbai attacks. But to generate terror, they may require specialized skills (John Allen Muhammad, one of the perpetrators of the D.C. attacks, was certified an expert marksman by the army) or be used in plots that involve planning and pre-operational steps that increase the odds of detection, as in the 2008 Mumbai commando raids.

127. Jenkins, *Would-be Warriors*, p. 22.

every other day.¹²⁸ In just over two weeks in March 1970, 14 bombs exploded in New York City, and there were nearly 2,300 bomb scares—numbers that defy imagination today.¹²⁹ Overall, according to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, from 1970 to 2007 the United States experienced nearly 1,300 terror attacks—an average of more than 36 per year—with about 10 percent yielding at least one fatality.¹³⁰

The United States’ recent experience with terrorist violence from offshoots of antigovernment and Christian Patriot movements as well as white supremacist groups provides further evidence of Americans’ resilience in the face of terrorism, and therefore their capacity to weather terrorist attacks of the kind most likely to originate with Muslim homegrown terrorists.¹³¹ In some ways similar in form to the terrorist violence that has been perpetrated by Muslims, right-wing terrorism is often inspired by an overarching ideology or worldview and occurs in operationally disconnected attacks usually outside the boundaries of formal organizations or hierarchies.¹³² According to the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Intelligence Project, there were nearly sixty right-wing terrorist plots largely of this nature from 1995 to 2005.¹³³ Another study found that from September 2001 through September 2010, there were eighty domestic plots involving primarily right-wing terrorists.¹³⁴

Moreover, a subset of these cases appears to be especially frightening. When white supremacist William Klar was apprehended in 2003 as the result of a postal mistake and the actions of an alert citizen, he had allegedly amassed a large amount of sodium cyanide for use in a terror attack.¹³⁵ In 2009 a wealthy white supremacist acquired materials that he hoped to use in a radio-

128. Wade Greene, “The Militants Who Play with Dynamite,” *New York Times*, October 25, 1970.

129. “14 Bombs and 2,264 Scares Talled Here,” *New York Times*, March 29, 1970. The devices were either explosives or incendiary packs of some kind.

130. “Background Report: On the Fifteenth Anniversary of the Oklahoma City Bombing” (College Park: National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism [START], University of Maryland, April 16, 2010). START also reports that from 1970 to 2007 there were 284 terrorist attacks in New York City. “Background Report: Terrorist Attacks in New York City” (College Park: START, University of Maryland, May 2010).

131. The other active terrorist segment in the United States, which involves animal rights and ecoterrorists, targets property, so it may not be a useful comparison.

132. Timothy G. Baysinger, “Right-Wing Group Characteristics and Ideology,” *Homeland Security Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (July 2006), pp. 1–19.

133. Andrew Blejwas, Anthony Griggs, and Mark Potok, “Almost 60 Terrorist Plots Uncovered in the U.S.: Terror from the Right,” *Intelligence Report*, No. 118 (Summer 2005), <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2005/summer/terror-from-the-right-0>.

134. Beutel, “Data on Post-9/11 Terrorism in the United States.” See also Strom et al., “Building on Clues,” p. 7.

135. Michael Reynolds, “Homegrown Terror,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 60, No. 6 (November/December 2004), pp. 48–57.

logical weapon.¹³⁶ In 2010, members of a local Michigan militia helped to expose a plot by the Hutaree militia, which allegedly sought to kill a policeman and then bomb attendees at his funeral—an assault, as Al-Jazeera’s correspondents did not fail to observe, that is as serious in its particulars as those of other recent “jihadi” plots.¹³⁷

Interestingly, Americans do not seem especially terrorized by the right-wing threat. Even the 1995 Oklahoma city bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building—the most lethal attack on U.S. soil bar September 11—seemed to horrify more than terrify people, even though among the 168 dead were 19 children less than six years old. As one study of public opinion in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing concluded, the bomber’s actions “altered neither the public’s assessment of personal risk nor its reported behavior.”¹³⁸ Despite a jump in the month following the April 1995 attack in the number of respondents who said they were very concerned about terrorist violence in the United States, by June 1995 that figure had fallen below its July 1993 level. The title of the public opinion study captured the prevailing sentiment: “The Terror That Failed.”¹³⁹

In short, Americans have long experience in dealing with the kind of terrorist challenges that Muslim homegrown terrorism is most likely to present.¹⁴⁰

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that the threat posed by Muslim homegrown terrorism is not particularly serious, and it does not appear to be growing, especially in its most lethal incarnation—deadly attacks within the United States. Indeed, many analysts and public officials risk overstating the threat posed by Muslim American terrorism. Mischaracterizing that threat, in turn, is potentially costly and counterproductive for the security of the United States and the welfare of its citizens, for several reasons.

136. Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Domestic Terrorism: Tips Lead to Sting, Prison for Plotter,” press release, November 29, 2006; and Walter Griffin, “‘Dirty Bomb’ Parts Found in Slain Man’s Home,” *Bangor Daily News*, February 10, 2009.

137. See “The U.S. Homegrown Terror” *Aljazeera.net*, May 9, 2010; and Dina Temple-Raston, “How the FBI Got Inside the Hutaree Militia,” *All Things Considered*, April 12, 2010.

138. Carol W. Lewis, “The Terror That Failed: Public Opinion in the Aftermath of the Bombing of Oklahoma City,” *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (May–June 2000), p. 204.

139. Lewis, “The Terror That Failed.” September 11, in contrast, produced significant trauma. Erica Goode, “A Nation Challenged: Mental Health; Thousands in Manhattan Needed Therapy after Attack, Study Finds,” *New York Times*, March 28, 2002. See also Leonie Huddy, Nadia Khatib, and Theresa Capelos, “The Polls—Trends: Reactions to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, 2001,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (Autumn 2002), pp. 418–450.

140. See, for example, Clyde Haberman, “Outside Court, a Failure to Be Fearful,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2010.

First, misjudging the homegrown threat could lead the country to overinvest or poorly spend on counterterrorism initiatives. Since the September 11 attacks, the government's investments in resources oriented toward grassroots homeland security have risen steadily. Although these are modest in comparison with other federal expenditures, they nevertheless detract from other priorities. Consider, for example, how the reallocation of resources toward terrorism within the FBI has undermined its capacity to pursue white-collar crimes. After 2001, the FBI reduced the number of agents for its criminal program by 30 percent (from 6,179 in 2001 to 4,353 in 2008), while the number of agents specifically allocated for white-collar crime fell by 36 percent, from 1,722 to 1,097. Consequently, the number of cases brought forward related to financial institution fraud plummeted by 48 percent (dropping from 2,435 to 1,257), and during the height of the 2008 financial crisis, the FBI was left struggling to find resources to investigate major financial and other mortgage and securities crimes.¹⁴¹ In short, the "terrorism trade-off" can be significant, especially if serious questions remain about whether that investment is warranted.¹⁴²

Second, overstating or poorly characterizing the challenges posed by Muslim American terrorism risks undermining societal resilience in the face of terrorism.¹⁴³ Take, for example, Director Leiter's characterization of the homegrown threat: while noting that recent attacks are "operationally unrelated," he nonetheless described them as being "indicative of a collective subculture and a common cause that rallies independent extremists to want to attack the homeland."¹⁴⁴ Alternatively, consider FBI Director Mueller's warning that

141. Figures and details are examined in Eric Lichblau, David Johnston, and Ron Nixon, "F.B.I. Struggles to Handle Financial Fraud Cases," *New York Times*, October 18, 2008. See also Paul Shukovsky, Tracy Johnson, and Daniel Lathrop, "Focus on National Security after 9/11 Means That the FBI Has Turned Its Back on Thousands of White-Collar Crimes: The Terrorism Trade-Off," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 11, 2007.

142. Paul Kiel, "The End of FBI's Terror Trade-Off?" *ProPublica*, October 20, 2008. These trade-offs might be justified if growing investments are in fact essential to the United States' ability to prevent homegrown terrorism. One question, however, is whether similar levels of security could be attained with fewer resources. At a minimum, the sense of urgency associated with the threat may impede critical analysis of budgets and programs. For an illustration of the resources devoted to investigating homegrown terror cases, see Savage and Shane, "U.S. Arrests Saudi Student in Bomb Plot."

143. On societal resilience, "the capacity to withstand, respond to, adapt to, and recover from disasters," see Stephen Flynn, "Recalibrating Homeland Security," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 3 (May/June 2011), p. 136. On the risks of overstating terrorist threats, see John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006); and Benjamin H. Friedman, Jim Harper, and Christopher A. Preble, eds., *Terrorizing Ourselves: Why U.S. Counterterrorism Policy Is Failing and How to Fix It* (Washington, D.C.: CATO Institute, 2010).

144. Napolitano, Mueller, and Leiter, "Nine Years after 9/11," p. 6

homegrown terrorists “inspired by a violent jihadist message . . . may be as dangerous as groups like Al Qaida, if not more so.”¹⁴⁵ This language reinforces the sense of homegrown terrorism constituting not only a major threat, but a monolithic campaign against Americans.

If a shooting at Fort Hood is scary, however, more terrifying is seeing it as part of a larger conspiracy against Americans and their livelihoods. Comments that magnify the threat undermine society’s capacity to withstand what in fact are mostly self-initiated, disconnected attacks whose only real association to a centralized conspiracy is within the minds of the terrorists.

Public officials and expert commentators might consider reframing the Muslim American homegrown threat by doing more, for example, to present it as one among many domestic threats of terrorist activity posed by ideologically motivated segments of society—threats, for the most part, that Americans do not appear especially afraid of and have managed rather capably.¹⁴⁶ Officials might also emphasize what Leiter duly observed is the “operational unrelatedness” of recent plots and the diversity of terrorist offenses grouped under the rubric of homegrown terrorism. Instructive is former National Intelligence Director Dennis Blair’s characterization in February 2011 of violence from “homegrown jihadists” as “sporadic,” in which a “handful of individuals and small, discrete cells will seek to mount attacks each year, with only a small portion of that activity materializing into violence against the homeland.”¹⁴⁷ Such framing efforts could help to render threats of militancy originating from Muslim Americans more familiar and less formidable—akin to other terrorist threats from domestic militants the country faces.

There are, however, serious obstacles to such a balanced discussion of terrorism in American politics. One indication of the problem is the political backlash that ensued after the Department of Homeland Security issued a report in 2009 warning that the threat from violent right-wing extremist activity was growing.¹⁴⁸ Secretary Napolitano came under fire for one section of the report that warned that returning veterans could become drawn to extremist groups.

145. Robert S. Mueller III, remarks prepared for delivery at the City Club of Cleveland, Cleveland, Ohio, June 23, 2006. Also cited in Schanzer, Kurzman, and Moosa, “Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim Americans,” p. 8.

146. On framing, see Donald P. Haider-Markel, Mark R. Joslyn, and Mohammed Tarek al-Baghal, “Can We Frame the Terrorist Threat? Issue Frames, the Perception of Threat, and Opinions on Counter-terrorism Policies,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (December 2006), pp. 545–559; and Priscilla Lewis, “The Impact of Fear on Public Thinking about Counterterrorism Policy: Implications for Communicators,” in Friedman, Harper, and Preble, *Terrorizing Ourselves*, chap. 11.

147. Quoted in Gordon Lubold, “Homegrown Terrorism a Growing Concern for U.S. Intelligence,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 4, 2011.

148. See DHS, “Rightwing Extremism.”

She subsequently issued an apology letter to the American Legion, posted on the department's website a formal statement clarifying the report's intent, and eventually disowned the report, calling it "not a well-produced product."¹⁴⁹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Department of Homeland Security has been notably reticent to label right-wing attacks "terrorism," even when they qualify by many people's standards.¹⁵⁰

These political obstacles aside, more should be done to promote a balanced discussion of terrorist threats in the United States. Otherwise, Americans are presented with a distorted picture in which terrorist attacks appear to be originating primarily with Muslims, rather than with extremists of all varieties. In an era when the mistrust of Muslim communities is a serious social and political issue, this unbalanced presentation is corrosive to American society.¹⁵¹

Finally, mischaracterizing and inflating the Muslim homegrown American threat could prove self-defeating to the country's efforts to defend against it. Especially worrisome is the potential that, in an atmosphere in which the threat of homegrown terrorism appears serious and worsening, law enforcement will employ counterproductive methods that threaten the trust between its officials and Muslim communities—trust that underpins the demonstrated capacity and willingness of American Muslim communities to self-police and root out militants in their midst.¹⁵² For example, although the cultivation of informants and infiltration of undercover agents into Muslim communities can be helpful to investigators, there are inevitable risks associated with these

149. Spencer Ackerman, "Recent Murders Don't Sway Napolitano on DHS Report," *Washington Independent*, June 25, 2009; "Statement by U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano on the Threat of Right-Wing Extremism," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, April 15, 2009, http://www.dhs.gov/ynews/releases/pr_1239817562001.shtm; "Napolitano Apologizes to Veterans," *American Legion*, April 16, 2010, <http://www.legion.org/print/security/816/napolitano-apologizes-veterans>; and Aaron Mehta, "The Missed Warning Signs," *Newsweek*, January 11, 2011.

150. See Napolitano's comments in Ackerman, "Recent Murders Don't Sway Napolitano on DHS Report."

151. In 2005 Pew found that 25 percent of Americans who had participated in one of its surveys held an unfavorable view of Muslim Americans, while 36 percent believed that Islam encourages violence. Pew Research Center, "Views of Muslim-Americans Hold Steady after London Bombings" (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, July 26, 2005). For details on 156 anti-Muslim incidents from September 2001 to March 2011, see "Anti-Muslim Incidents since Sept. 11, 2001," Southern Poverty Law Center, March 29, 2011, <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/news/splc-testifies-about-increase-in-anti-muslim-bias/anti-muslim-incidents-since-9-11>.

152. On how Muslim cooperation is influenced by normative perceptions of fairness in police procedures, see Tom Tyler, Stephen Schulhofer, and Aziz Haq, "Legitimacy and Deterrence Effects in Counter-Terrorism Policing: A Study of Muslim Americans," Working Paper, No. 182 (New York: New York University Public Law and Legal Theory, 2010). See also Andrea Elliott, "Undercover Work Deepens Police-Muslim Tensions," *New York Times*, May 27, 2006; "CAIR Questions FBI Tactics in NY Synagogue 'Plot,'" PR Newswire, May 26, 2009; and Carrie Johnson and Robin Shulman, "FBI, Police Strive to Get Help, Engender Trust from Muslims," *Washington Post*, October 5, 2009.

methods, and using them requires care and awareness of how they may affect the communities in which they are employed. In many places, federal law enforcement and local police departments have sought to build strong relationships through outreach to Muslim communities. Such efforts help to lay the groundwork for good relations and ease tensions associated with law enforcement's monitoring efforts.¹⁵³ But FBI sting operations, such as those employed in the case of the Portland bombing suspect, Mohamed Osman Mohamud, can seriously test those relationships.¹⁵⁴ Evidence of mismanagement and insensitivity are similarly troubling.¹⁵⁵ More broadly, the perception that authorities "routinely run armies of informers" through American Muslim communities contributes to the sense, as the president of the Islamic Society of North America describes it, that "law enforcement is viewing our communities not as partners but as objects of suspicion."¹⁵⁶ Equally insidious is how these tactics, by generating suspicion and eroding norms of communal openness, undermine the community's capacity to self-police, thereby making it harder for members to detect militants in their midst.¹⁵⁷

In summary, there is a strong basis for questioning the tenability of the thesis that Muslim homegrown terrorism is a rising threat—an observation that raises a final question I consider in closing: Why has the threat of terrorism by Muslim Americans prompted such alarm? Although there is only space to speculate about answers, readers might consider several possibilities, including social-psychological dynamics and the conferring of collective responsibility by Americans on all Muslims for the horrendous acts of the September 11 terrorists, how the political dynamics noted above contribute to an unbalanced presentation of domestic terrorist threats in the country, the well-intentioned

153. On outreach initiatives, see Bjelopera and Randol, "American Jihadist Terrorism," pp. 118–120.

154. See William Yardley and Jesse McKinley, "Terror Cases Strain Ties with Some Who Can Help," *New York Times*, November 30, 2010.

155. One especially poorly handled use of an informer, Craig Monteilh, has elicited a lawsuit, backed by the American Civil Liberties Union, which argues that the First Amendment rights of members of the California mosque he infiltrated were violated. See Salvador Hernandez, "Groups Sue FBI over Muslim Surveillance," *Orange County Register*, February 23, 2011. Monteilh filed his own lawsuit against the bureau. Scott Glover, "Suit by Alleged Informant Says FBI Endangered His Life," *Los Angeles Times*, January 23, 2010. When the pregnant wife of an accused militant named Daniel Boyd was told falsely by an informant wearing a bloodied shirt that Boyd and her three sons had been injured in a car crash, only to be detained after she went to the hospital, it prompted a similar outcry. "CAIR Questions Legality of FBI's 'Cruel Trick' on Suspect's Family," PR Newswire, July 29, 2009. For another example, see "CAIR-LA Calls FBI Questioning of Muslim Men 'Outrageous,'" PR Newswire, June 21, 2010.

156. For this comment, see Tom Engelhardt, "How Not to Deal with Muslims in America," *Pacific Free Press*, May 24, 2010; and Vitello and Semple, "Muslims Say F.B.I. Tactics Sow Anger and Fear."

157. See Leila Fadel, "Muslims in U.S. Feeling Targeted," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, October 19, 2009; and Neil MacFarquhar, "Echoes of Terror Case Haunt California Pakistanis," *New York Times*, April 27, 2007.

desire by public officials and politicians to prepare people for local attacks even at the risk of overstating their probability, and perhaps more cynically, those individuals' bureaucratic and political incentives to magnify the threat. Regardless of the source of alarmism, all Americans benefit from questioning assumptions about the Muslim homegrown threat.