Threat to the United States Homeland:

Internet Propaganda and Planners Inspiring Individual Jihad

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Author Bio and Disclosure

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This paper is his own academic work and does not reflect the opinions of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, the U.S. Army, or Department of Defense.

**The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).**
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Introduction: Future Threats to the United States

Since Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s declaration of the Islamic caliphate on July 3rd, 2014, the intelligence community estimates approximately 30,000 foreign fighters emigrated from their homeland to the Middle East to join the Islamic State.\(^1\) However, the spigot of foreign fighters flocking to the caliphate has since been largely shut down, causing the jihadi terrorist organization to alter its global messaging, specifically to new recruits within the Sunni Muslim ummah [community]. In May 2016, the Islamic State spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani continued fanning the flames of their radical ideology by calling on Muslims worldwide to wage jihad against “crusaders and infidels” on their home turf.\(^2\) His was not a message new to radical Islamic terrorist organizations, specifically with previous editions of both the Islamic State’s DABIQ magazine and Al-Qaeda’s Inspire magazine, but a message that resonates with jihadi online propaganda and encapsulates a threat the United States presently faces and will continue to see in the future.

Adnani’s refreshed message stated, “If the tawaghit [tyrants] have shut the door of hijrah [immigration] in your faces, then open the door of jihad in theirs. Make your deed a source of their regret. Truly, the smallest act you do in their lands is more beloved to us than the biggest act done here.”\(^3\) In the wake of significant losses in the Islamic State’s geographical territory, Adnani’s audio recording called for Muslims seeking to join the Islamic State to make their obligatory duty of jihad in their own backyard. Messages like Adnani’s point to a present and


\(^3\) Ibid., 12.
future threat to the United States, as exemplified by the terror attacks committed in the name of the Islamic State and adherents of Al-Qaeda in places such as San Bernardino, Orlando, Garland, Chattanooga, Minneapolis, New Jersey, Ohio State, and New York City. **While not the only threat to the U.S. homeland, terrorism in the form of homegrown violent extremism conducted by perpetrators called “lone wolves” or “wolf packs” inspired by online jihadi propaganda and facilitated by online planners continues to be a lethal, emerging threat.**

**Defining Terrorism and Classifying Perpetrators**

Despite the best efforts of some counterterrorism experts, the international community has failed to adopt a coherent and universally recognized definition for the word “terrorism,” in fact, there are at least 109 different definitions globally. Sadly, many states and organizations worldwide often adopt a definition that fits an agenda or attempts to legitimize the falsified statement that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter.”

While some may try to explain away the means towards an end or illogically justify the killing of innocents to achieve an end state, there is no such thing as “good terrorism” or “bad terrorism,” there is just terrorism, which should all be condemned.

With respect to the western understanding of terrorism, Dr. Boaz Ganor from the International Institute for Counter-terrorism defines terrorism as “a form of violent struggle in which violence is deliberately used against civilians in order to achieve political goals.”

To his credit, he leaves excuses and a definition of the perpetrator out of the equation. His simple, yet

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accurate definition focuses on the act committed and the desired goal of altering political affairs. His explanation will serve as the definition of “terrorism” for the duration of the paper.

By this definition, those who conduct attacks targeting civilians within the asymmetric battlefield, violate moral rules under international humanitarian law and should not only become an enemy of their opponent, but “an enemy of the entire world.” The Islamic State clearly fits this mold, as Adnani’s message called for Muslims worldwide to “make examples of the crusaders, day and night, scaring them and terrorizing them, until every neighbor fears his neighbor . . . Know that inside the lands of the belligerent crusaders, there is no sanctity of blood and no existence of those called ‘innocents.’” Adnani made it clear the Islamic State’s targeting of civilians living in America and the western world were not only permissible but desired.

Regarding the types of terrorism, it is useful to examine the makeup of the perpetrators who commit acts of terrorism. The three types include personal initiative attacks (known within Islamic doctrine as “individual jihad”), independent/local initiative attacks, and organized attacks. The personal initiative attack, often referred to as “lone wolf attacks” or inspired attacks, are carried out without guidance from a formal organization, nor are the individuals conducting the attack obliged to follow the guidance of any group. Despite many of the “lone wolves” being already “known wolves” to authorities, their planning and execution often occurs only in the mind of the individual conducting the act of terrorism, making it very difficult to intervene, even with the robust security apparatus of the U.S.

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9 Dr. Boaz Ganor, Lecture on “CT & Security Dilemmas.”
The second classification is the independent/local initiative attack. These tactics generally model those of the personal initiative attack, but involves a small, self-radicalized group of lone wolves forming a “wolf pack.” This frequently includes a tight knit social network comprised of brothers, cousins, couples, or friends who believe they share a similar grievance, ideology, and have no official ties or receive operational assistance from an organization.\textsuperscript{10}

Finally, the third classification is the organized attack launched by terrorists formally involved and affiliated with a terrorist organization assisting with the planning, preparation, resourcing, and execution of the attack. They are typically comprised of two types of cells, the “sleeper cell” which can be deployed and later “woken up” to carry out attacks such as in Paris and Brussels, and the “infiltrated cell” such as the 9/11 attackers.\textsuperscript{11} The organized attack are often the most lethal, yield the most attention, but also are more vulnerable to external observation and interdiction because of the amount of time, resources, and participation required to be successful. While the payoff of a successful organized attack is higher for the terrorist it is also more likely to be tied to an organization, making it easier for governments, through security and intelligence assets, to determine the source and respond against the responsible attackers and their terrorist organization.\textsuperscript{12} Regardless of the classification of the attack, the result is the same: innocent victims are wounded or killed on behalf of a totalitarian and supremacist ideology in the belief it will curry favor for the martyrs (\textit{shahids}) in the afterlife and achieve their political goals.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10} Dr. Boaz Ganor, Lecture on “CT & Security Dilemmas.”
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} The portions of this section defining terrorism and the classifications of terrorism, are in large part replicated from a previous paper I wrote for my Princeton WWS policy workshop on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict titled “Spoiler Alert: How Terrorism Could Prevent or De-Rail Future Peace Talks,” 20 October 2016.
\textsuperscript{13} COL Joe Martin, email interview with the author, 13 January 2017.
The security apparatus of the United States and the geographical separation from the Middle East creates a buffer, especially since the attacks on September 11th, 2001. This makes it more difficult to plan and execute an organized attack on U.S. soil. Foreign terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State, also known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), have infiltrated America by other means. They often achieved this through the Internet but have also expressed interest in gaining access to the U.S. homeland through immigration and visa programs.\textsuperscript{14} So far, they have focused their external attack efforts on the first two types of attacks, the personal initiative attacks and the independent/local initiative attacks. These are the main non-state terror threats facing America today, the focus of the remainder of the paper.

Due to the penetration of the global Salafist jihadi ideology via the Internet and its ability to contribute to the radicalization process of Muslim Americans with personal and political grievances against the U.S. and western world, “lone wolves” and “wolf packs” will remain an enduring threat to our homeland for the foreseeable future, especially when “virtual entrepreneurs” from the Islamic State and other terrorist organizations provide assistance.\textsuperscript{15} The U.S. national security community must understand the threat and its radicalization pathway, identify trends, implement measures to interdict whenever possible, and empower local communities and law enforcement to be educated and involved in the prevention of homegrown violent extremism (HVE) by both jihadi terrorists and other threats facing the American population who may adopt their emerging tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs).


Homegrown Violent Extremism in the U.S.

Homegrown violent extremism (HVE) in the U.S. is not a new phenomenon, horrific attacks such as the Oklahoma City bombing and organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan prove violent extremism manifested itself in many forms over the course of American history. Since 1979, there has been a worldwide “religious wave” of plots and attacks of “Holy Terror” linked specifically to radical Islamism against the United States and its interests. The United States has not traversed this wave unscathed, starting first with the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979, bombings abroad in Lebanon, Africa, and Saudi Arabia, the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and of course, the attacks on September 11th, 2001. While most of the earlier attacks were rather infrequent and perpetrated by foreign nationals and foreign terror organizations, the frequency of jihadist attacks tied to Americans have grown, specifically in the past few years since the Islamic State announced the establishment of the caliphate in Iraq and Syria.

Recent data published in the March 2017 Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel highlights, “Out of a total of 38 Islamic State-inspired domestic plots and attacks in the United States between March 1, 2014, and March 1, 2017, at least eight (21 percent) have involved some form of digital communication with virtual entrepreneurs.” While this violence, according to the article, peaked in 2015, there were also “at least six other terrorism-related cases, including assisting with logistics related to traveling to join the Islamic State,” which involved online planners and facilitators. The report also highlighted, over the past three years,

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18 Ibid.
these support cases bring the “total number of U.S. terrorism cases linked to Islamic State virtual entrepreneurs to 14, involving 19 U.S.-based individuals.”\(^{19}\) Though the number of cases is not steep, the percentage is expected to rise for cases in the U.S. linked to virtual entrepreneurs. The same article revealed a recent study from Europe published in a 2016 volume of *Perspectives on Terrorism* found “38 Islamic State-linked plots and attacks in Europe between 2014 and October 2016, 19 (50%) were found to have involved ‘online instruction from members of IS’s networks.’”\(^{20}\) The domestic security apparatus should anticipate this trend to continue migrating to the U.S. in future HVE attacks.

To begin discussing HVE and its variants, the term must be defined. As a former FBI SWAT member, director at the National Homeland Security Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events (CREATE), and professor of Homeland Security at USC’s Price School of Public Policy, Dr. Erroll Southers examines HVE, including its trends and effects on societies. In his book, *Homegrown Violent Extremism*, he defines HVE as “a terrorist act within the context of ideologically motivated violence or plots, perpetrated within the United States or abroad by American citizens, residents, or visitors, who have embraced their legitimizing ideology largely within the United States.”\(^{21}\) He also recognizes HVE as not just a predominant threat to the U.S. homeland, but also as a “diverse and growing” trend.\(^{22}\)

To breakdown the definition of HVE further, “violent extremism” must be articulated. The execution of violent extremism occurs when “individuals or groups openly express their

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\(^{20}\) Ibid., 7.


\(^{22}\) Ibid., x.
ideological beliefs through violence or a call for violence.”23 Assuming the violence targets civilians and contributes to a political goal, violent extremism is clearly terrorism as previously defined. Characteristics tied to violent extremism include those manifested through the following aspects of the perpetrators’ ideology: *intolerance and superiority* that the “world is theirs,” *otherism* where labels and “microaggressions” degrade victims, *absolutism* which paints their worldview as noble and worthy, *generalizations which lack foundation* in fact leading to false conclusions, and *doomsday scenarios and conspiracy theories.*24

Rather than possessing one or a few of these characteristics, the argument can be made that the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, and other jihadist organizations possess every one of these characteristics. This versatility in their appeal allows Islamic State to cast a wider net targeting individuals with differing grievances which can be satisfied by any of these characteristics, driving them down the path of radicalization and terrorism. It is important to note when communicating with the West, Al-Qaeda’s “theme is always the same: al-Qaeda is merely retaliating for all the injustice in the West, and the United States in particular, has brought upon Muslims.”25 This propagandistic message stands in stark contrast with their messages to the Muslim *ummah* which are religious exegesis in nature “which gives Muslims reasons why they should hate and fight the West that differ from those given in their political speeches.”26

26 Ibid., 2.
Dr. Southers recently described homegrown violent extremism as the “new face of terrorism” in the U.S. This begs the question: what defines a “homegrown” terrorist? From a U.S. perspective, homegrown terrorists are those who “target individuals who are member or representatives of [the U.S.] . . . where the attacker embraced their legitimizing ideology, as well as the intended political objectives” in America. This includes foreign nationals who may have been born elsewhere that eventually immigrate to the U.S. and then embrace an extreme ideology and resort to violence, making the radicalization process entirely American. This last group is an emerging demographic becoming increasingly hostile in Europe, and has begun to emerge in the U.S. since 2001, specifically those classified in the American media as “lone wolves” plotting or launching Al-Qaeda or ISIL-inspired attacks on U.S. soil.

Dr. Southers’ research does not focus solely on violent extremism perpetrated by those who adopt the Salafist jihadi ideology. However, he highlights the emergence of groups after 2001 in America other than those connected to Al-Qaeda and Islamic State, specifically “Jam’iyyat Ul-Islam Is-Saheeh, the terror cell formed in a California State prison and Jamaat ul-Fuqra, a paramilitary organization of African-Americans based in Pakistan and the United States.” A publication by the Anti-Defamation League highlighting violent extremism linked to radical Islamist groups reported 2015 saw so much of a spike that “for the first time, nearly as

28 Southers, Homegrown Violent Extremism, 6.
29 Ibid., 6-7.
30 Ibid., 34.
many Americans were killed by domestic Islamic extremists as by white supremacists. And in 2015, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Director, James Comey testified that they had active investigations in all 50 States. That year, jihadist terrorism killed the highest number of Americans (19) in a single year since the attacks on 9/11. The most disturbing fact is the deaths were not perpetrated by infiltrators of foreign terrorist organizations, but rather HVE committed by American citizens and residents radicalized within the U.S.

While only one attack on U.S. soil in 2016 caused civilian loss of life, it shattered the previous year’s death toll when Omar Mateen, an Afghan American from Port St. Lucie, Florida committed the largest mass shooting in modern American history when he killed 49 victims in an Orlando LGBT night club on the night of 12 June, wounding 53 others. In addition to the 49 deaths committed by Mateen, as of 29 November 2016, there were 43 U.S. residents authorities had linked to “activity motivated by Islamic extremist ideology – 21 of whom are accused of plotting domestic attacks.” Of those 21 attack plots, 6 resulted in actual attacks. These attacks included the shooting of a uniformed Philadelphia police officer in January, the Orlando night club shooting in June, a double stabbing attack in Virginia in August, the stabbing of 10 people in a Minnesota mall in September, the bombings and attempted bombing in New York and New

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Jersey in September, and the vehicle ramming and stabbing attack on the Ohio State campus in November.\(^{34}\)

Just as in the previous year, the vast majority of 2016’s plots and attacks were linked to “individuals who committed violent acts motivated by Islamic extremist ideology [who] did so in support of ISIS.”\(^{35}\) All of these acts of terrorism could be considered to be individual jihad, an expanding trend and arguably the most dangerous threat currently facing the United States.\(^{36}\) But because the U.S. remains focused on the misnomers of homegrown “lone wolves,” some national security policy makers and law enforcement officials continue wondering how “unremarkable” people in the United States become radicalized and turn to violent extremism.\(^{37}\)

**Pathway Towards Radicalization**

Once one understands the terms and definitions describing current threats facing Americans within their own borders, it is essential to understand the pathway taken towards radicalization and violent extremism. Radicalization refers to “the process through which individuals identify, embrace, and engage in furthering extremist ideologies and goals.”\(^{38}\) The radicalization process possesses three necessary ingredients: an alienated individual, a legitimizing ideology, and an enabling community.\(^{39}\)

\(^{34}\) Ibid.

\(^{35}\) “U.S. Residents Linked to Activity Motivated by Islamic Extremist Ideology in 2016.” *Anti-Defamation League.*


\(^{38}\) Southers, *Homegrown Violent Extremism,* 54.

In 2007, a New York Police Department (NYPD) intelligence report written by two senior analysts and endorsed by Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly focused on the radicalization pathway to understand the “threat from Islamic-based terrorism to New York City.” The report deduced the “terrorist attacks or thwarted plots against cities in [the West] since 2001 fit a different paradigm . . . these plots have been conceptualized and planned by ‘unremarkable’ local residents/citizens who sought to attack their country of residence, utilizing al-Qaeda as their inspiration and ideological reference point.” These TTPs do not fit the mold of traditional terrorism.

Their report recognizes the essential shift in counterterrorism strategy from targeting the terrorists in the location where the attack planning occurs and instead focuses on a “much earlier point—a point where we believe the potential terrorist or group of terrorists begin and progress through a process of radicalization.” In military terms, this is often called attacking the threat network “upstream” or trying to interdict the terrorists “left of the boom” where the counterterrorists are much more proactive and offensive rather than reacting to enemy actions. Of course, this does not occur without facing the “democratic dilemma” of reaching “maximum effectiveness in the fight against terrorism (including punitive measures, deterrence, offensive action, defensive action, and intelligence-gathering), while maintaining the nation’s liberal-democratic character and without compromising fundamental democratic values—human rights and civil liberties, [as well as] respect for the rights of minorities.”

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41 Bhatt and Silber, “Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat,” 5.
43 Bhatt and Silber, 5.
44 Dr. Boaz Ganor, The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle, 147.
of protecting the same population residing in a liberal society which also values their individual rights and freedoms which frequently come in conflict with facilitating mission accomplishment, and where the enemy attempts to reside.

A proven compliment to this dilemma is cooperation and empowerment of the community where these radicals tend to originate. Many foiled plots are due to self-policing communities where those closest to the potential terrorist are the ones who have the most influence and access to the decision-making process of the individual seeking to conduct an attack. When communities and law enforcement partner in these efforts, it gives the security apparatus more access into an otherwise closed community. Empowerment of locals to intervene breeds trust amongst the police and neighborhood. This cooperation can prove vital to the state’s ability to interdict an individual moving through the radicalization process.

The NYPD lays out a four-stage process where a radicalized individual moves from pre-radicalization to self-identification to indoctrination and finally to jihadization.45 Although there is no cookie-cutter radicalization process, there is frequently a “grooming process,”46 which includes obvious signposts.47 The first necessary ingredient of the radicalization process is an alienated individual. Central to the individual component is “a sense of alienation from the existing state of affairs, accompanied by a sense of altruism, as well as a desire and belief that the status quo can be changed.”48 This process often starts with a grievance, which can take many forms, such as “conflicted identities, injustice, oppression, or socioeconomic exclusion.”49

45 Ganor, The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle, 6.
47 Southers, Homegrown Violent Extremism, xiii.
48 Ibid., 57.
49 Ibid., xiii.
The perceived grievance opens them up to ideologies legitimizing their internalized beliefs. This is closely tied to the NYPD’s radicalization process, where individuals transition from the first stage of Pre-radicalization, or life as it was before they were “exposed to and adopted jihadi-Salafi Islam as their own ideology,” which occurs during the second stage called Self-Identification.\(^{50}\)

The second essential ingredient for radicalization is a legitimizing ideology. In addition to the individual’s grievance, often a crisis or significant event yields a tipping point. This is referred to as the “cognitive opening,” where an event or experience may make someone more susceptible to accepting an extremist ideology because their “previously-held beliefs are shaken, making an individual receptive to alternative beliefs.”\(^{51}\) For homegrown terrorism in the U.S., the NYPD report singles out the “jihadi-Salafi ideology [as] the driver that motivates young men and women, born or living in the West, to carry out ‘autonomous jihad’ via acts of terrorism against their host countries. It guides movements, identifies the issues, drives recruitment and is the basis for action.”\(^{52}\) The jihadi ideology connects the extremists to a greater network within the radical Islamic community, in person and online. In fact, in Jarret Brachman’s book, \textit{Global Jihadism}, he goes as far as to say, the ideologues and their messages are “the backbone of the global Jihadist movement. Without them, none of the violence or rhetoric could endure or make sense.”\(^{53}\) This aspect is described as part of the third stage of NYPD’s radicalization process, Indoctrination, which is often tied to a “spiritual sanctioner.”\(^{54}\)

\(^{50}\) Bhatt and Silber, 6.


\(^{52}\) Bhatt and Silber, 6.


\(^{54}\) Bhatt and Silber, 7.
These online leaders, radical religious figures, and organizations interpret and process their message into glossy, high-definition online products providing technologically savvy followers on the Internet the required legitimizing ideology to conduct their terrorist activities. The manner in which the information is presented speaks directly to the younger generation by selling it in the same format through which these individuals commonly communicate on the Internet. The organizations incorporate the same format of storytelling familiar to young men and women online, speaking in 140 characters on Twitter, incorporating their message into video games, and chop up short sermons onto YouTube clips.\textsuperscript{55} They effectively create an online sense of “community” in which there is a confluence of different vantage points coagulating into a single message and desired end state: committing violence for the sake of the cause.

The third and final ingredient necessary to the completion of the radicalization process is an enabling community. This community fosters a “supportive environment [which] can facilitate overt or passive recruitment of the affected individuals by using the influence of the group members or their leadership.”\textsuperscript{56} Overt communities enable the individual by providing knowledge, resources, or connects them with other like-minded individuals within their local network to assist them in planning or conducting terrorist attacks. Passive communities may not provide direct support, but may condone their conduct by refusing to cooperate with local law enforcement by reporting those moving down the pathway of radicalization or providing them with sanctuaries. This allows them to expand and coordinate, essentially serving as an endorsement of their intentions.\textsuperscript{57} Once all three necessary ingredients of the radicalization

\textsuperscript{55} Professor Jacob Shapiro, interview with the author, 27 January 2017.
\textsuperscript{56} Southers, \textit{Homegrown Violent Extremism}, 59.
\textsuperscript{57} Southers, \textit{Homegrown Violent Extremism}, 60.
process materialize, the homegrown extremists enter the fourth stage, defined as Jihadization, where the “members of the cluster accept their individual duty to participate in jihad and self-designate themselves as holy warriors or mujahedeen. Ultimately, the group will begin operational planning for the jihad or a terrorist attack.”

The greatest danger associated with the final stage of Jihadization is, unlike the other stages, it can rapidly progress towards the “acts in furtherance,” sometimes taking only months or even weeks.

Current and future trends show the Internet continues to be a significant factor in the radicalization process, specifically for alienated individuals in Europe and the U.S. seeking a legitimizing ideology. It also serves as a catalyst to fast track the Jihadization stage leading up to the individual or collective acts of terror. The emergence of the Internet, specifically the advancement of social media in the past decade, “provided a new foundation for the enabling community—online, open source extremism . . . [which] facilitates the sharing of ideas and tactics, it develops and enhances social networks, it conscripts new recruits, and it may inspire illegal and violent action.”

Chat rooms, blogs, social media groups, and Twitter followers can create an online crowd forming a virtual “collective mind” or “imagined community” which is “now available around the clock to inspire and cajole in real time,” regardless of where the alienated individual resides. This helps explain the continued growth of personal initiative attacks in the western world tied to the global jihad ideology where individual jihadists are

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58 Bhatt and Silber, 7.
59 Bhatt and Silber, 7.
conducting attacks in the form of mass shootings, stabbings, vehicle rammings, and even bombings and beheadings connected to online propaganda and “how-to” manuals.

Their attacks are often accompanied by the individual posting messages, jihadi “selfies,” or creating videos pledging bayat [pledge of allegiance] to organizations such as the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda or praising leaders including Usama bin Laden or Anwar al-Awlaki. These declarations sometimes appear only a matter of days, hours, or even minutes prior to the terrorist attacks. They frequently match the writings of radical Islamic scholars such as Sayyid Qutb, Abdullah Azzam, Abu Musab al-Suri, Anwar al-Awlaki or al-Adnani; names not typically associated within the western world or found on the shelves of a local American library. Yet, while these individuals appear to be operating alone or with minimal assistance, there may be more to the surface deep appearance of their violent extremism and individual jihad.

“Lone Wolf” Terrorism as Individual Jihadism

Terrorism in the form of personal initiated attacks in the United States are often branded as “lone wolves.” Like HVE, the concept of “lone wolves” is not new to America. However, it managed to grab headlines, specifically in the past eight years from 2009 to the present. This is largely a function of terrorist attacks committed in the U.S. by homegrown extremists adhering to the Salafist jihadi ideology. They proliferate their attacks through the Internet, specifically due to the expansion of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, in addition to traditional American media outlets. While not an exclusive term reserved for homegrown jihadi terrorism, this combination of wide coverage and identification of Islamic extremism in the U.S. has elevated the visibility of the term “lone wolf.” As misleading as it may be, it has become both a contemporary term and an emerging trend facing American citizens and homeland security and law enforcement country-wide.
Lone wolf terrorism is not just synonymous with Islamic extremism, rather it incorporates any individual participating in personal initiative attacks, and in recent years, is often homegrown, including, but not limited to, white supremacists, jihadis, anti-abortionists, and anarchists. Terrorist expert Jeffrey Simon defines lone wolf terrorism as:

“The use or threat of violence or nonviolent sabotage . . . by an individual acting alone or with minimal support from one or two other people . . . to further a political, social, religious, financial, or other related goal, or, when not having such an objective, nevertheless has the same effect, or potential effect, upon government, society, business, or the military in terms of creating fear and/or disrupting daily life and/or causing government, society, business, or the military react with heightened security and/or other responses.”

In Peter Bergen’s book, United States of Jihad, the dataset accounts for 330 Americans involved in jihadi terrorist activity either charged or convicted since 9/11. New America maintains the database which served as the baseline for Bergen’s book. At the end of 2016, the tally closed at 397 total jihadi terror activities. From 2001 to 2008, there were 110 convictions or charges, compared to 287 jihadi terror related events from 2009 to 2016. Broken down by year, jihadi terrorism has gone from 2 recorded events in 2001 after 9/11 to a peak of 79 in 2015. New America’s website highlighted “in the past two years, the rise of ISIS has brought an unprecedented surge in terrorism,” mostly in the form of “individual jihad.”

There are many examples of personal initiative attacks and plots tied to jihadi propaganda and the incitement of violent extremism, especially through the Internet. To prove the phenomenon may be more connected than isolated loners and is not exclusively tied to the Islamic State, one must look no further than the American-born Islamic cleric Anwar al-Awlaki.

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64 Ibid.
Of the 330 Americans charged or convicted of jihadi terrorist activity since 9/11 documented in *United States of Jihad*, “more than 80 were found to have Awlaki’s writings or sermons in their possession or cited him as an influence, and a further 7 had corresponded with him or traveled to Yemen to meet him.”\(^{65}\) This means over 26% of these homegrown violent extremists, many of which “lone wolves,” were at least inspired or influenced by another American-born citizen condoning these actions, largely online through YouTube sermons and audio recordings shared on jihadi websites.

In fact, since 2009, there have been no less than 11 actual attacks conducted in the U.S. which are attributed to Anwar al-Awlaki’s influence. There have been at least 102 deaths caused by jihadi terrorists since 9/11.\(^{66}\) The attacks attributed to having been influenced by Anwar al-Awlaki includes at least 86 of those 102 deaths, as well as approximately 400 injured. Some of the most high-profile cases include Major Nidal Hassan, an Army psychologist and adherent of Imam Anwar al-Awlaki, who killed 13 military members and civilians on Fort Hood, Texas and wounded 30 others on November 5\(^{th}\), 2009. Other notables include the “underwear bomber,” who failed to bring down an airliner with 290 passengers in 2009 and the “Times Square bomber” who failed to detonate a vehicular improvised explosive device in 2010. The Tsarnaev brothers who bombed the Boston marathon in 2013, the San Bernardino couple who killed 14 at a holiday party in 2015, the Orlando night club shooter who killed 49 people in June 2016, and the Afghan-American who tried bombing three separate locations in both New York and New Jersey in 2016 were also tied to Awlaki.


A presidentially ordered U.S. drone strike killed Anwar al-Awlaki in Yemen in 2011 while serving as the leader of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). However, he continues to drive followers to “self-radicalization” online through his previous editions of *Inspire* magazine, the AQAP online publication which highlighted his teachings as well as providing practical tips on how to conduct jihad through personal initiative attacks. His persona online often gives off the impression he has not been dead for over five years and continues to proliferate his teachings as the “Bin Laden of the Internet.”\(^{67}\) Not only does Awlaki serve as an online “spiritual sanctioner” legitimizing the ideology, his AQAP-founded publication, *Inspire*, provides ample information to carry out an attack, serving also as an online “enabling community.” *Inspire* continues to foreshadow jihadi plots and attacks in the U.S., including Yahya Ibrahim’s article in the second edition in 2010 which featured a picture of a Ford F-250. Playing off of Ford’s message calling the truck the “ultimate driving machine,” Ibrahim called the large vehicle “The Ultimate Mowing Machine . . . to mow down the enemies of Allah.”\(^{68}\) He advised “maximum carnage” could be achieved by bringing additional tools so when the vehicle stalls or is brought to a halt, the attacker can “finish off [the] work.”\(^{69}\)

Coming just 5 months after the Tunisian terrorist killed 84 people in Nice, France with a lorry truck, an American copycat struck in the heart of the American homeland. The most recent U.S. follower, Abdul Razak Ali Artan, an 18-year-old Ohio resident was a Somali-born immigrant. After spending the greater part of the past decade as a refugee in Pakistan, he


\(^{69}\) Ibid.
received a green card and arrived in the U.S. in 2014. As an Ohio State student, he rammed fellow students with his vehicle, then exited the car and was fatally shot by a campus policeman while attempting to stab civilians with a knife. Just 3 minutes before wounding 11 civilians, he posted on his Facebook page the warning, “If you want us Muslims to stop carrying out lone wolf attacks, then make peace . . . We will not let you sleep unless you give peace to the Muslims.”

His post was more than a statement, it was a declaration of individual jihad. In the same post, he praised Anwar al-Awlaki as a “hero.” The network Awlaki created, in life and in death, brings into question whether lone wolves and wolf packs really are acting on their own and are, in fact, “self-radicalized” rather than part of a greater strategy internalized by a larger community.

**Ideological Connective Tissue: System Not Organization**

In 2004, Abu Musab al-Suri, largely known as the “architect of the global jihad,” drafted his 1,600-page manifesto, *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, which was published online in early 2005. He outlined his frustration with the devastating effects the 9/11 attacks had on the current state of the movement and lamented on how the American intervention in Afghanistan caused the legitimate Islamic caliphate established by the Taliban to collapse and Al-Qaeda’s organization to scatter. For the couple years after 2001, Al-Qaeda spent most of their time on the run, trying to avoid detection, living like fugitives while trying to reconstruct their

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72 Ibid.
organization.\textsuperscript{73} Al-Suri’s deduced that if Al-Qaeda was to continue to exist in what he called a “Post-September 2001 World,” against a new order largely led by the United States, they needed to change their strategy and move away from being a hierarchical organization focused on highly orchestrated attacks.\textsuperscript{74} He, along with other jihadi strategists, understood the importance of Al-Qaeda’s ability to coalesce a movement under the banner of the global jihadi-Salafist ideology rather than as a functional organization.

In his writing, he chided any opponents desiring to rebuild in the “old model” by arguing it was unfeasible to confront the might of America head-on at “the onset of the worldwide war to fight terrorism with all its security, military, ideological, political and economic means . . . if we insist on using these methods under the current circumstances, it is . . . like committing suicide and insisting on failure.”\textsuperscript{75} He later lists multiple examples of their failures trying to confront the “New World Order” on a symmetric battlefield, stating, “If we did not take a warning from these, we can blame nobody but ourselves when 80\% of our forces were eliminated in the repercussions of September 11\textsuperscript{th} during two years only! In order for us to realize that our ‘Tora Bora-mentality’ has to end.”\textsuperscript{76} As a senior strategist for the global jihadi-Salafist movement, he not only pointed out the issues moving forward, he proposed real solutions for how the organization needed to restructure and how he envisioned waging future global jihad.


\textsuperscript{75} Lia, \textit{Architect of Global Jihad}, 355.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 359.
Seeing the environment was no longer viable for a regional, secret, and hierarchical jihadi organization to exist, his call for a global Islamic resistance included a heavy emphasis on “the school of individual jihad (al-jihad al-fardi) and small cell terrorism.” After highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the different “schools” of jihad, he arrived at the conclusion that “the basic axis of the Resistance’s military activity against America and her allies now, must lie within the framework of ‘light guerrilla warfare,’ ‘civilian terror,’ and secret methods, especially on the level of individual operations and small Resistance Units completely and totally separated from each other.” Al-Suri managed to capture all these tactics and concepts in a singular slogan, which would help morph Al-Qaeda and its affiliates from a hierarchical organization into a social movement and decentralized yet global “leaderless jihad.”

The most important aspect of Abu Musab al-Suri’s visionary writings was his slogan of “nizam la tanzim,” which in English means “system, not organization.” Beginning in 1991 with his first publication, “A Global Islamic Resistance,” he advocated for “a global terrorist campaign against the West that would rely on diffuse, decentralized, and non-hierarchical networks.” He later elaborated his vision for the global jihad, stating “Al-Qaeda is not an organization, it is not a group, nor do we want it to be . . . It is a call, a reference, a methodology.” His strategy would prove to be prophetic and be adopted by jihadi terrorist organizations worldwide, including the Islamic State and its predecessor, Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

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77 Ibid., 351.
78 Lia, Architect of Global Jihad, 373.
81 Ibid., 6.
(AQI). Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and AQI embraced al-Suri’s model and concepts, and turned the battlefield from a complicated to complex environment. The first few years of their existence in Iraq gave even the most elite U.S. military unit fits while attempting to connect dots and infiltrate their networks.83

Al-Suri believed turning to his decentralized model and its affiliated tactics would create chaos and overwhelm the western world’s security apparatus, causing the international body of Islam to coalesce around their ideology and the goal of creating a global Islamic caliphate, living under Islamic jurisprudence and the eventual submission of their opponents. He saw prior success in other theaters where jihadis employed these tactics. Seeking to sew doubt in western civilization’s security and de-legitimize their efforts, he saw “these spontaneous operations performed by individuals and cells here and there over the whole world, without connection between them, have put the local and international intelligence apparatus in a state of confusion.”84 Arguably, this is exactly what the Islamic State contributed to present day Europe, where Brexit was democratically approved, the Schengen Agreement has been the topic of controversy, and spectacular attacks in cities such as London, Paris, Brussels, and Berlin have many Europeans on edge, specifically when mixed with the current refugee crisis emanating from Syria and Iraq.

When considering the bigger picture of a strategy of global jihad rather than individual terror organizations, one must remember the Islamic State is the offspring of AQI, influenced by Al-Qaeda, and the Muslim Brotherhood before them. The former leader of AQI, Abu Musab al-

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Zarqawi, a controversial figure who, in the eyes of Bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, took violence and terrorist tactics to the extreme. But their disagreements over tactics did not interfere with their overall strategy of attacking the “far enemy” of the United States through a strategy of exhaustion. Al-Suri concurred, pointing to the successes of Mao, Che, Giap, and Castro, writing the “jihad of individual or cell terrorism, using the methods of urban or rural guerilla warfare, is fundamental for exhausting the enemy and causing him to collapse and withdraw.”\textsuperscript{85} He was not the only one who understood 9/11 to be a singular event in a war that would span decades.

Khalid Sheikh Muhammad (KSM) confirmed the shift in Al-Qaeda’s strategy during his interrogations. He believed “the long war for Islamic domination wasn’t going to be won in the streets with bombs and bullets and bloodshed . . . it would be won in the minds of the American people.”\textsuperscript{86} He believed the U.S. would eventually lose through a strategy of attrition, and wanted to see terrorist attacks continue, believing his jihadi brothers “would relentlessly continue their attacks and the American people would eventually become so tired, so frightened, and so weary of war that they would just want it to end.”\textsuperscript{87} It was at that point, he believed “America [would] expose her neck to us for slaughter.”\textsuperscript{88} KSM believed violent jihad to be a complimentary effort that would help them achieve their greater goal of spreading the Islamic caliphate worldwide, complimented by other non-violent efforts including immigration, “lawfare,” and other perceived weaknesses of western civilization including multiculturalism. He also believed western media

\textsuperscript{85} Lia, \textit{Architect of Global Jihad}, 371.


\textsuperscript{87} Mitchell and Harlow, \textit{Enhanced Interrogation}, 189.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.
would be a key conduit to spread their message. During the same period of Khalid Sheikh Muhammad’s capture when many jihadi leaders were reflecting, al-Suri was not the only jihadi strategist compiling ideas and writing while hiding in Iran after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.

Likewise, another Al-Qaeda leader, Sayf al-Adl, penned a document later called the “master plan” for Al-Qaeda, which sought to communicate a strategic vision for their organization and movement, which resulted in “a vision to establish the caliphate in Syria and, effectively, control the world by 2020.” The “master plan” included a seven-step model to achieve ultimate success. Of specific interest to this paper is the transition from stages five and six, where the global jihad moves from the “Stage of Declaring the State (2013-2016)” to the “Stage of Absolute Confrontation (2016-2018).” The purpose of the sixth stage was to “conclude with a shift toward international terrorism, in which infidels ‘would learn the meaning of real terrorism . . . that would terrify the enemy and make them think a thousand times before attacking Muslims.’” Whether their benchmarks have been met or not, the present situation, in Europe and the Middle East, reflects the next step after ISIL’s declaration of the Islamic caliphate, and according to al-Adl’s prescribed timeline, they are arguably right on schedule.

Returning to al-Adnani’s May 2016 audio address, there are obvious ties to the Islamic State’s recent shift in strategic messaging and al-Suri’s recommendations codified in his 2004 publication directing a greater emphasis on decentralization, individual jihad, and small cells of operatives. Simultaneously, Al-Qaeda disseminated their “master plan.” If the global jihad

\[89\] Ibid., 188-189.
\[91\] Ibid., 214-215.
\[92\] Ibid., 217.
ideology served as the link between organized terror groups and “non-aligned jihadists,” Abu Musab al-Suri believed his future strategy would serve as the connective tissue with the entire international Islamic ummah.\textsuperscript{93} He stressed the importance of ensuring the buy-in of individual jihad for each Muslim by citing Islamic text: “Verily, this brotherhood of yours is a single brotherhood.”\textsuperscript{94} No conduit would help him propagate his message and desired reality more than “electronic jihad” through the Internet.\textsuperscript{95}

**The Internet: Conductor of Terror & Hub of Radicalization**

Unlike Europe, the geographic distance and oceanic barrier makes it more difficult to physically infiltrate operatives like the cell which carried out the 9/11 attacks in the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, a tactic our security apparatus is much more prepared to interdict now.\textsuperscript{96} However, for the strategy and tactics outlined by al-Suri and Al-Qaeda’s “stage of absolute confrontation,” the Internet shatters the logic of America’s “Maginot Line Syndrome.”\textsuperscript{97}

The United States used to be insulated because the Atlantic Ocean stands between its homeland and foreign terrorists intent on committing atrocities on U.S. soil; but the electronic wall came down on 9/11 and continues to erode with the evolution of 21\textsuperscript{st} century technology. If the global jihadist ideology and strategy serve as the glue binding the decentralized network together, then the Internet is the conductor which channels the message and directs the employment of their


\textsuperscript{94} Lia, Architect of Global Jihad, 368.

\textsuperscript{95} Dr. Eitan Azani, Lecture on “Cyberspace in the Modern Terrorism Strategy,” Herzliyya, Israel, July 18, 2016.

\textsuperscript{96} Peter Bergen, United States of Jihad, 259.

\textsuperscript{97} Bhatt and Silber, 13.
tactics. No terror network better understands the capabilities of the Internet or has done more to maximize its utility than the Islamic State.

The Internet is now a terrorist’s “virtual incubator.”98 Under the social movement theory, the Internet serves as the “mechanism” which can “translate feelings and resources into action for the sake of common goals . . . [and] works simultaneously both for the attainment of resources and for the definition of a conceptual framework and the formation of a strategic action.”99 The NYPD report concludes, “radicalization in the West is, first and foremost, driven by Jihadi-Salafi Ideology . . . ideology is the bedrock and catalyst for radicalization.”100 The Internet creates an online community which “helps bestow upon those who want to feel part of a larger Muslim ummah a sense of solidarity and identity, empowerment and pride, and a virtual utopia.”101 It follows the same concepts adopted by anarchists decades ago through pamphlets and post offices, but lacks the same physical footprint. This poses much more of a challenge for law enforcement under limitations prescribed in domestic law.102 Unfortunately, it is radical Islamists who have best figured out how to harness the power of the Internet and use it as a funnel for the jihadi radicalization pathway.

The role of the Internet in the radicalization and recruitment process cannot be discounted or underestimated. Dr. Southers believes the Internet’s “capability for propelling extremists through the radicalization process is the single most important and dangerous innovation to the

98 Ibid., 20.
100 Bhatt and Silber, 16.
102 Professor Jacob Shapiro, interview with the author, 27 January 2017.
terrorist threat since the 9/11 attacks.”\textsuperscript{103} The Internet has become a “virtual ‘echo chamber’—acting as a radicalization accelerant for the pathway’s final stage of Jihadization,\textsuperscript{104} often concluding with acts of terrorism. While the U.S. security apparatus enacted measures to address the online capabilities of organizations such as the Islamic State, the threat in the past has been grossly underestimated and often dismissed.\textsuperscript{105} This left U.S. policy, specifically in the cyber domain, years behind the enemy’s capabilities. Had policymakers been more proactive, authorities could have been granted to law enforcement and military to take a more offensive approach to disrupting it and practitioners’ capabilities in being more proactive in countering the online threat. More must be done to defeat the online threat if the U.S. expects to stem the HVE threat emanating from this ideology, and anticipate future threats, specifically in the virtual world.

\textbf{Emerging Trend - Future Threat: ISIL “Virtual Planners” & Online Facilitators}

Investigators, analysts, and the media must understand while the connection between ideology and terrorist acts are not obvious, that does not mean it is lacking. In an age where many are decrying the effects of “fake news” on the U.S. society, none are more responsible for helping create the false narrative of “lone wolves” than the media. In many cases, the moniker “lone wolf” is not only misleading, in many recent terror attacks it is absolute fallacy.

\textsuperscript{103} Southers, \textit{Homegrown Violent Extremism}, xiv.
\textsuperscript{104} Bhatt and Silber, 37.
Open source reporting recently has highlighted the use of “ISIL Virtual Planners” as facilitators helping those carrying out individual jihad worldwide.\textsuperscript{106} The article published after the Berlin Christmas market terror attack, where Anis Amri used a hijacked truck to plow through a public square killing 12 civilians. In addition to making his own video pledging allegiance to Islamic State, the German authorities later disclosed Amri was in direct contact with ISIL attack planners at least once via the mobile messaging app, Telegram.\textsuperscript{107} This case serves as a prescient example of the current and future jihadi threat facing the western world and debunks the individual threat of the mythical “lone wolf.” ISIL’s virtual planners are highly organized, operate with technology that is frequently encrypted and tough to detect, and because they operate online, can be geographically dispersed and decentralized. This makes them an enduring threat as the Islamic State’s geographic caliphate continues to shrink in Iraq and Syria.

Their organization includes specific planners focused on regional areas contacting individual attackers and providing them with resources, advice, and expertise true lone actors do not possess. These “regional coordinators” and their model, largely conceived by strategists such as Abu Musab al-Suri, help “transform lone attackers who rely heavily on the Internet from the bungling wannabes of a decade ago into something more dangerous . . . [and] allows Islamic State to maximize the impact and propaganda value of attacks waged in its name, making sure they are seamlessly incorporated into the group’s overarching strategy.”\textsuperscript{108} These facilitators are


\textsuperscript{108} Gartenstein-Ross and Blackman, “ISIL’s Virtual Planners: A Critical Terrorist Innovation,” \textit{War on the Rocks}. 

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critical to the lethality of recent attacks and can help explain why the Islamic State is so quick to claim responsibility, put out videos of their *bayat* to the cause, and publishing propaganda spanning the gamut of the digital world from tweets to by-name praises in their online magazines published in dozens of languages.

Their adaptable coordination is seamless and their manipulation of the Internet as the virtual incubator transforms them into a lethal adversary which understands more than most, “the only constant change was change and ‘control’ was a chimera.”109 Their chameleon-like shapeshifting helps them maintain relevance and avoid detection as they covertly plan and facilitate future attacks. What should no longer be a secret is the U.S. government initially underestimated the Islamic State’s understanding of the power of the Internet to inspire and recruit.110 The Islamic State proved the Internet serves as the “connective tissue” for the global jihadi-Salafist ideology, the systematic strategy conceived by al-Suri, and attacks that are more than just personal initiative attacks or “lone wolves.” Like a thumb drive plugged into a computer, individual attackers can download the required information they need to properly function as a coded program with only the minimum amount of required information possible. This poses many challenges for both law enforcement domestically and the military and intelligence community abroad. The Islamic State caused many U.S. bureaucracies to step up their counterterrorism efforts in recent years, even after a decade and a half of conflict.

Further evidence on ISIL’s external operations focused on the West emerged in the fall of 2016, when the media covered information disclosed about a cell called “The Legion.” It


consisted of approximately a dozen or so operatives running a secretive campaign to recruit and radicalize online which greatly contributed to the surge in arrests, charges, and terror attacks associated with “ISIL-inspired,” young Americans.\textsuperscript{111} Going a step further, “The Legion” was not only tied to online recruiting and messaging, but also directly involved in planning assassination attempts. These plots included journalists outspoken against the Islamic State including a plan to behead Pamela Geller. The group focused on inspiring attacks against military personnel by acquiring personal information through hacking efforts and publically posting personal information online, including home addresses. After initially only being a law enforcement matter, the FBI pushed for further military involvement to take kinetic action overseas against those inciting the terror on the homeland and driving the radicalization process which spiked the number of jihadi-related terror incidents in the U.S. to 79 in 2015 and 43 through November of 2016.\textsuperscript{112}

Because of “The Legion” and other affiliates of ISIL’s external operations focus, the military launched a campaign to specifically target social media experts tied to radicalization, recruitment, and external planning overseas, which in August 2016, Defense Secretary Ash Carter stated had become “our highest priority.”\textsuperscript{113} The State Department has also stepped up its effort to become involved by assisting the U.S. Treasury in identifying and designating individual terrorists, giving the military further leeway in who and how to target.\textsuperscript{114} While the


\textsuperscript{112} Goldman and Schmitt, “One by One, ISIS Social Media Experts Are Killed as Result of F.B.I. Program.”


\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
coordination among U.S. departments and the recent deaths of the Islamic State externally focused leaders such as al-Adnani are moving the fight in a positive direction, some media outlets over emphasized the decline in the threat by declaring the Islamic State’s external operations cell as “decimated” and the efforts of the coalition forces’ efforts have resulted in “the killing or capturing of nearly every senior commander of the Islamic State’s online force.”

In the short term that may be not far from the truth, in the long term this strategy has been proven effective. As long as the Islamic State and other jihadi terror organizations possess access to an electronic device with an Internet connection and the ability to communicate through encrypted mediums, the threat will continue and they will seek to inspire and direct radicalization, albeit on different forums and applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal.

The TTPs may evolve, but the ideology and strategy remain in place. Whether a future attacker carries an Islamic State or Al-Qaeda membership card or not, or branded as “ISIS or ISIS-ish,” it is “an immaterial distinction for the caliph, [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi]. So long as he believes they answered his call for reprisals against the countries fighting to destroy the kingdom, his is only too happy to applaud his rabid fans from afar regardless of their motives.”

Immaterial of their branding, be it “lone wolf,” or “ISIS-inspired,” previous effectiveness, extreme ideology, and strategic architecture ensure the threat will continue to proliferate, as New York City recently experienced with the death of eight victims at the hands of an Uzbek immigrant behind the wheel of a rented Home Depot truck on 31 October 2017.

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Not a Monopoly

To be sure, while HVE stemming from jihadi ideological motivations pose a chief threat to the U.S., they are not the only threat. Racial, religious, and issue-oriented HVE spans the spectrum of terror threats facing America. Sadly, the vitriol of the 2016 election cycle will likely continue to stir strong emotions and extreme ideologies may become emboldened on both ends of the political spectrum. Whether it is white nationalists supporting what they see as a positive transition or those affiliated with movements such as Black Lives Matter seeking to oppose the new presidential administration, unfortunately extremists will always reside on both sides of the bell curve of society, as captured and broadcasted recently on evolving technology like Facebook Live. This trend is likely to continue as the country remains deeply divided, specifically on issues of religion, race, and other divisive issues such as political bipolarity.

While no singular strain holds a monopoly on the terror market in the U.S., jihadi-Salafist terror may be likened to an oligopoly. Based on their recent upswing in lethal plots and the ubiquitous open investigations in all 50 states, they warrant much of the attention from the U.S. security apparatus. While this holds true, U.S. national security and law enforcement professionals must be wary of the dangers of allocating too much focus to a singular threat, nor should they assume in the future their overt appearance will fit the traditional description of a jihadi terrorist wearing traditional Middle Eastern clothing and sporting a “one-fist length beard.” Additionally, just because current TTPs exist within a particular threat does not mean it will not be adopted by other groups, regardless of their affiliation to the group or ideology. The most prescient example of TTPs being adopted by other groups and individuals is the vehicle ramming committed on 12 August 2017 in Charlottesville, VA by a white nationalist, which
killed a 32 year old woman and wounded several others. Counterterrorists must remain as agile and adaptive as the enemy.

Tell Me the Good News

The silver lining regarding the current threat is the overall U.S. counterterrorism strategy, starting after 9/11 with the Bush administration and carried through the Obama administration, is working. Commenting on the jihadists’ shift in strategy, both at home and abroad, retired Ambassador-at-Large for Counter Terrorism and former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict Michael Sheehan believes it’s “not a brilliant pivot on their side, it’s the only thing that’s left because the rest of their strategy is in tatters.” Abu Musab al-Suri admitted the shift in strategy in diversifying and decentralizing is “the necessity of planting the idea of globalizing jihad in all fields. The enemy has forced us to do so.” Al-Suri understood they were not strong enough to confront the U.S. military directly and recognized “times have changed, and we must design a method of confrontation, which is in accordance with the standards of the present time.” Whether al-Qaeda or the Islamic State ever prepared to enter their sixth step in the jihadi’s “master plan,” the western security apparatus forced them to make the transition because massing in a singular caliphate proved to be no longer a sustainable reality for them. On the surface, their propaganda points to the transition and praises it as progress towards the end goal. But while the threat has grown in quantity, their

119 Ambassador (Ret.) Michael Sheehan, telephone interview with the author, 06 January 2017.
120 Lia, Architect of Global Jihad, 367.
121 Ibid., 359.
overall infrastructure and organization hardly looks like a global movement in the second to last step of their strategy, just short of final victory; nor is the Western world on the verge of collapse. Thankfully, as previously highlighted, this has also affected the quality of their attacks.

Ambassador (Ret.) Sheehan argues after 9/11, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, increased cooperation across government agencies, enhanced information sharing within the intelligence community, and our counterterrorism efforts, including kinetic strikes overseas, have prevented another 9/11, which he argues “is the only metric that matters.”122 While any attack is horrific, the FBI and the rest of the domestic law enforcement professionals have done an effective job of preventing “another 9/11,” and mostly kept the threat at bay, despite a swell of cases which have caused Director Comey to re-allocate resources and switch more personnel from focusing on criminal matters to surveilling terrorists instead.123

Peter Bergen concluded his book, United States of Jihad, with a calming voice, pointing out, “In the fifteen years after 9/11, jihadists have killed 94 people inside the United States. Each of those deaths is a tragedy. . . However, the attacks are not national catastrophes of the type the United States experienced on 9/11. Instead the death toll has been quite like other forms of political—and even non-political—violence Americans face today.”124 He argues the threat is not existential. Whether individuals believe that to be true likely depends on how one defines “existential,” and in what time frame. It would be hard to make the argument the global jihadists are succeeding at wiping the western world’s entire existence off the map. However, if one defines “existential” as a matter of altering the way in which people live their lives, then

122 AMB Sheehan, telephone interview with author, 06 January 2017.
123 Goldman and Schmitt, “One by One, ISIS Social Media Experts Are Killed as Result of F.B.I. Program.”
spending billions of dollars on body scanners, stores and companies forced to invest more in force protection, not to mention to incremental implementation of *sharia* [Islamic jurisprudence] speech codes under the auspices of “political correctness.” This is in addition to the cost to create and sustain the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which has seen their budget expand from an approved $19.5 billion in 2002 to a budget request of $40.6 billion for fiscal year 2017 that very may well qualify.\textsuperscript{125}

All that being said, Ambassador Sheehan is right to conclude the global jihadists resorted to less organized attacks, where smaller homegrown attacks are “blips” highlighting “the failure of AQ and ISIL” and the need to exercise their current tactics as a “strategy of weakness and default.”\textsuperscript{126} He further stated, “They’ve misjudged us and failed miserably in their primary strategy, and the reason for their failures is largely because of our CT strategy and the pressure we’ve applied.”\textsuperscript{127} He pointed out, “In the CT business, you have to measure actual events and successes, not just failures and plots.”\textsuperscript{128} If that is the metric being used, the U.S. government has been successful in protecting the homeland. However, the fight will continue and the threat will remain. Ambassador Sheehan also warned, “If we ever take the pressure off them, they will come back and kill us with even more lethality.”\textsuperscript{129} Clearly identifying this threat and eliminating it should continue to be a top priority for the sake of U.S. national security.


\textsuperscript{126} AMB Sheehan, telephone interview with author, 06 January 2017.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{129} AMB Sheehan, telephone interview with author, 06 January 2017.
Conclusion

To be sure, HVE perpetrated by jihadi “lone wolves” or “wolf packs” is not the only threat to the U.S. homeland, but it is one that will continue to make headlines for the foreseeable future due to media sensationalism, the global jihadis’ acumen in the use of online propaganda and recruiting, and the proliferation of the global jihadi-Salafist ideology on the Internet despite the Islamic State’s shrinking stranglehold on its geographical caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Like many of Anwar al-Awlaki’s sermons, al-Adnani’s message now speaks to us from the grave. He declares an ominous and foreboding message by stating, “Hold on, America; the war is not over and you have yet to win. By Allah’s permission, you will be defeated, so wait. Wait, for our swords have not been sheathed, our arms have not become weary, and our resolve has not weakened . . . We take firm steps forward, and by Obama’s failed plan, you but stumble.”130 The war against this threat and ideology is far from over, and new leadership must prepare the nation for the long road ahead.

The manifestation of these HVE emanate from individuals who refuse to assimilate in accordance with Islamist doctrine, an extremist ideology calling for the death of innocent civilians through ubiquitous online radicalization and incitement, and any form of enabling community tolerating the manifestation of a dangerous “counter-culture” to reside within our borders, both real and virtual. Unfortunately, most of these aspects reside anywhere a laptop and Wi-Fi can be accessed, making the jobs of national security and law enforcement professionals, especially in a free and open society, more difficult than ever before. The takeaway policymakers must realize is that there is no status quo in this global fight against the jihadi-

Salafist ideology. To keep America safe, the national security apparatus must continue to adapt and innovate, and acknowledge the capable and determined adversary it faces. Perhaps if the threat of “lone wolves” and “wolf packs” were treated more like solitary bees, the mentality and approach of policymakers, security professionals, and the media may change. Unlike the self-preservation of a “lone wolf,” a bee “is a member of a community that instinctively works to grow and defend that community. Each bee will sacrifice its life in defense of the hive and die for the colony without which it cannot survive.”\(^\text{131}\) Abdullah Azzam once wrote, “Jihad is a collective act of worship.”\(^\text{132}\) His words should provide policymakers and counterterrorism professionals key insight into how these terrorists view their ideology, strategy, and the interconnectedness of their individual acts of jihad. It is a system, not an organization; nor is it truly an individual effort.


\(^{132}\) Ibid.
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