Al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula-Inspired, Homegrown Terrorism in the United States

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Abstract: This article examines Islamist-inspired terrorism on United States soil including, United States-based terrorists of all nationalities and immigration status, who are inspired by Islamist precepts as articulated by AQ, AQAP, or their leaders, but are unaffiliated with those groups. Twenty cases are examined due to their illustrative nature of the threat that exists and foreshadows future risks. All the plotters in the AQ and AQAP case studies were men; but other than that trait, they differed greatly in criminal experience, experience with Islam, birth place, educational level, intellect, and a full range of marital and parental status. Therefore, frequent, sustained, and impactful counter-narratives to these extremist precepts are an important component in weakening the effects of these ideologies.

Keywords: al-Qaeda, AQAP, Home-Grown Terrorists

Introduction

This article analyzes a facet of the phenomenon of al-Qaeda (AQ) and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)-inspired terrorism on United States soil. For our purposes, this segment of religious extremist terrorism on United States soil includes United States-based terrorists of all nationalities and immigration status, who are inspired by misinterpreted religious precepts as articulated by AQ, AQAP, or their leaders, but are unaffiliated with those groups. More specifically, this article discusses twenty case studies of individuals who were not members of AQ or AQAP but inspired by them, their ideologies, or leaders.
While numerous other case studies could have been included in this analysis, these twenty were used due to their illustrative nature of the threat that exists and foreshadows future risks. Some case studies are discussed in more detail than others due to the particularly insightful aspects of the cases. Also, greater exposition on some cases stems from the fact that certain plots are less known, more dangerous, and multifaceted than others.

An objective reading of indictments, convictions, and related al-Qaeda-inspired investigations on United States soil demonstrates that this is a significant problem.\(^1\)

From September 11 (9/11) through September 2009, the United States government initiated 87 terrorist prosecutions involving al-Qaeda activities, 428 prosecutions involving unaffiliated terrorists (828 in all).\(^2\) According to other reports, since 9/11 there have been over 180 individuals indicted or convicted for al-Qaeda-related ideology.\(^3\) Since 2009, there has been a significant increased frequency in religious extremist terrorism on United States soil than in previous years.\(^4\) The twenty cases

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discussed in this article are further evidence that unaffiliated terrorism inspired by AQ and AQAP is a major threat to the United States.⁵

**Twenty Case Studies: Unaffiliated Terrorists Inspired By aq or Aqap Leadership/Ideology**

The twenty case studies of unaffiliated individuals who were inspired by AQ, AQAP its leadership, or ideology include:

- Hesham Mohamed Hadayet, LAX attack (2002)
- Derrick Shareef, Illinois mall plot (2007)
- Mohamed Taheri Azar, University of North Carolina attack (2008)
- Miami Seven, Miami/Chicago plots (2009)
- Ahmed cousins, overseas plots (2009)
- Naveed Haq, Seattle Jewish Federation, Washington, attack (2009)
- Boyd Group, North Carolina, domestic and overseas plots (2009)
- Tarek Mehanna and Ahmed Abousmara, United States plots (2009)
- Chicken Farm Plot, JFK airport plot (2010)
- Carlos Bledsoe, Army recruiting station/Little Rock, Arkansas, plots (2010)
- Hosam Smadi, Dallas plot (2010)
- Colleen LaRose, European plots, (2010)
- Jamie Paulin-Ramirez, European plots (2010)
- Paul and Nadia Rockwood, assassination plots in the United States (2010)
- Farooq Ahmed, Wash, DC metro plot (2010)
- Newburgh Four, New York plots (2010)
- Adnan Mirza, Houston, Texas, plots (2010)

The dates listed denote when the individuals were indicted, pled guilty, or sentenced to prison.

Hadayet: In July 2002, Hesham Mohamed Hadayet, an Egyptian citizen but permanent United States resident for 10 years, shot and killed two and wounded four others at the El Al Israeli airline counter at Los Angeles International Airport. He was killed by an airline security officer. The FBI ultimately designates the incident as terrorism.\(^6\)

Shareef: In December 2006, Derrick Shareef planned to set off several grenades in garbage cans at a shopping mall in Rockford, Illinois. He was arrested on December 6, 2006, by agents of the FBI-led Chicago Joint Terrorism Task Force when he met with an undercover agent at a store parking lot in Rockford to trade a set of stereo speakers for four hand grenades and a handgun. In December 2007, Shareef pleaded guilty to one count of attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction. He was sentenced to 35 years in prison.\(^7\)

Assembly of Authentic Islam: In 2004, Kevin James, a black convert to Islam, started a jihadist group in Folsom prison, California, called the Assembly of Authentic Islam (or AJI). While serving there, he recruited Levar Washington in prison, then released (who recruits Greg Patterson and Hammad Samana) to rob about a dozen gas stations to finance operations to attack United States military installations, Israeli and Jewish targets in Southern California. In 2007, James pled guilty to levying war on the United States, and was later sentenced to 16 years in prison. In 2008, Washington was sentenced to 22 years in prison. Patterson was sentenced to 151 months in prison. Samana was deemed unfit to stand trial.\(^8\)

Azar: In March 2006, Mohamed Taheri Azar, an Iranian-born United States citizen, attempted to run over University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill students with a rented SUV at a lunchtime crowd at an outside hangout. In August 2008, he pled guilty to 9 counts of attempted murder. He was sentenced to 26 to 33 years. He claimed the attack was to avenge the killing of Muslims by the United States government.\(^9\)

Miami Seven: In June 2006, seven Miami-based men-Narseal Batiste, Patrick Abraham, Stanley Grant Phanor, Naudimar Herrera, Burson Augustin, and Rothschild Augustine—were indicted in relation to terrorism plots. The indictment charged four counts: (1) conspiracy to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization, namely al-Qaeda; (2) conspiracy to provide material support and resources to terrorists; (3) conspiracy to maliciously damage and destroy by means of

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an explosive; and (4) conspiring to levy war against the government of the United States. In 2009, they were found guilty on various counts; the ringleader, on all four. They were sentenced from between 6 to 13.5 years.10

Chicken Farm: In a 2007 plot, code named “Chicken Farm”, the conspirators had planned to bomb a series of jet fuel supply tanks and pipelines feeding to JFK Airport in Queens, New York City. Besides ringleader Russell Defreitas (a naturalized United States citizen from Guyana), the conspirators included Abdul Kadir and Abdel Nur of Guyana and Kareem Ibrahim of Trinidad and Tobago. Following mistrials in 2008, Defreitas and Kadir were found guilty in July 2010 of conspiracy to commit terrorist acts. Nur pled guilty the previous month of providing material support to terrorism. Ibrahim faces retrial.11

Ft. Dix: In May 2007, six radical males, including three brothers (all in the United States illegally), were charged with plotting to kill as many United States soldiers as possible in an armed assault at the Ft. Dix army base in New Jersey. They hoped to use assault rifles and RPGs in the attacks. One conspirator also carried out surveillance on a number of other military targets, including the United States Army base at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey and Dover Air Force base in Dover, Delaware. In December 2008, Eljvir Duka, 25, was convicted along with two of his brothers, 28-year-old Shain and 30-year-old Dritan, and two other men, Mohamad Shnewer, 23, and Serdar Tatar, 25, on charges of conspiracy to kill military personnel. All except Tatar were also convicted on weapons charges. All five men were acquitted of attempted murder. All were sentenced to life in prison except for Tatar, who received 33 years. The countries of origin of the group include: Jordan, Turkey, Kosovo/Yugoslavia, and Albania.12

Ahmed Cousins: In January 2009, Zubair Ahmed, 29, and Khaleel Ahmed, 28, both United States citizens and residents of Chicago, Illinois, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists in connection with their efforts to travel abroad in order to murder or maim United States military forces in Iraq or Afghanistan. In May 2004, they traveled to Egypt with the intent of engaging in acts that would result in the murder or maiming of United States military forces in Iraq or Afghanistan. After their return from Egypt, in July 2004, they discussed, sought and received instruction on firearms from another individual in Cleveland (Marwan el Hindi, a former Chicago resident). The defendants also sought and discussed training in counter-surveillance techniques and sniper rifles with this individual.13


**Haq:** In December 2009, Naveed Haq was found guilty of one count of murder, five counts of attempted murder, one count of unlawful imprisonment, and one count of malicious harassment (hate crime) in relation to a July 2006 shooting spree at the Seattle Jewish Federation Building. Haq’s attack against that target was due, in part, to his animus towards Israel and Jews and United States foreign policy.14

**Bledsoe:** In June 2009, Abdul Hakim Mujahid Muhammed opens fire at a military recruitment center in Little Rock, Arkansas, killing one and injuring another. Formerly Carlos Bledsoe, the Muslim convert, said his “jihadi attack” was justified because of United States military actions abroad. Bledsoe spent 16 months in Yemen from the fall of 2007 until he was deported from Yemen to the United States for immigration violations. Bledsoe claims to have met Anwar al Awlaki and was inspired by him. In January 2010, he pled guilty to one count of capital murder and attempted murder as well as 10 counts of unlawful discharge of a firearm.15

**Boyd Group:** In July 2009, law enforcement arrested seven individuals from a jihadist group led by Daniel Boyd of Willow Spring, North Carolina. The group (including two of Boyd’s sons) planned terrorist attacks against overseas targets such as Kosovo, Jordan, and the Gaza Strip. They planned to kill United States Marines at the military base in Quantico, Virginia. The charges included: providing material support to terrorist organizations and conspiracy to commit murder, kidnap, and maim and injure people abroad. Between 1989 and 1992 Boyd received terrorist training in Afghanistan and Pakistan. From November 2006 until their arrest, the group had discussed attacks in the United States and abroad. Two additional persons were indicted in relation to the plots. All nine are United States citizens, including two naturalized citizens from Kosovo.16

**Finton:** In September 2009, Michael Finton, a convert to Islam, was charged with attempted murder of federal employees and attempted use of a weapon of mass destruction (explosive) in a plot to blow up the Findley federal building and courthouse in Springfield, Illinois. A trial was expected in 2010. Finton collaborated with an individual he thought was an al Qaeda operative. In fact, the man was an undercover FBI agent.17 In December 2010, the United States district court for the Southern District of Illinois deemed him competent to stand trial.18

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Mehanna and Abousamara: In October 2009, Dr. Tarek Mehanna, a dual United States and Egyptian citizen, from the Boston, Massachusetts area, was charged with plotting with others to kill two prominent United States politicians and shoot people at American shopping malls. Mehanna and two other men, including a boyhood friend, Ahmed Abousamara, who fled to Syria, also discussed overseas plots. Mehanna traveled to Yemen to try to get terror training, but was unsuccessful. Abousamara travels twice to Pakistan, trying to get terror training (could not find the place once, rejected by LeT because of his lack of experience the second time). Mehanna and Abousamara met Daniel Maldonado, a convert to Islam who traveled to Somalia to get terror training with al Shabab. In April 2007, Maldonado pled guilty to receiving training from al Shabab in Somalia.19

Smadi: In September 2009, Hosam Smadi, a 19-year-old Jordanian citizen in the United States illegally having overstayed his visa, attempted to detonate a SUV packed with what he thought were explosives outside an office building in Dallas, Texas. Smadi, who interacted with the FBI on an online jihadi website, believed he was collaborating with an al-Qaeda sleeper cell in the United States. In May 2010, Smadi pled guilty to attempted use of a weapon of mass destruction and given a 24-year prison sentence.20

LaRose: In March 2010, Colleen LaRose (Fatima LaRose, dubbed “Jihad Jane” by the press), a United States citizen, was indicted on: conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists, conspiracy to kill in a foreign country, false statement to government official, and attempted identity theft. LaRose recruited men and women to “wage violent jihad in South Asia and Europe,” including plans to kill Swedish cartoonist Lars Vigs who drew an insulting cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed.21

Paulin-Ramirez: In April 2010, Jamie Paulin-Ramirez, a United States citizen, (dubbed “Jihad Jamie” by the press) pled not guilty to provide material support to terrorists in relation to kill Swedish cartoonist Lars Vigs who drew an insulting cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed. Colleen LaRose (“Jihad Jane”) recruited Paulin-Ramirez online, and then invited her to attend at “training camp” in Europe.22

Rockwoods: In April 2010, Alaska-based Paul Rockwood, Jr., a United States citizen, and his wife, Nadia, a naturalized United States citizen from the United Kingdom, pled guilty to lying to federal agents in relation to a terrorism investigation. Rockwood converted to Islam in late 2001 or early 2002 while living in Virginia and followed the teachings of Anwar al Awlaki. Rockwood moved to Alaska in 2006. While there, he visited websites to research explosive components; construction of remote triggering

devices, such as cell phones; and construction of bombs to be delivered by common mail carriers. In late 2009, he began discussing using mail bombs and possibly killing targets by gunshot to the head.\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{Ahmed:} In October 2010, Farooque Ahmed, a naturalized United States citizen born in Pakistan, was charged with attempting to provide material support to a designated terrorist organization, collecting information to assist in planning a terrorist attack on a transit facility, and attempting to provide material support to help carry out multiple bombings to cause mass casualties at Washington, D.C.-area Metrorail stations. Ahmed was accused of conducting surveillance, videotaping, photographing, and drawing diagrams of the Arlington Cemetery, Courthouse, Crystal City and Pentagon City Metrorail stations. He also offered suggestions about where to place explosives to kill people in simultaneous attacks. These incidents were planned to take place at some time in 2011. He was convicted and sentenced to 23 years in prison.\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{Newburgh Four:} In October 2010, the Newburgh Four-James Cromitie, Onta Williams, Laguerre Payen, David Willliams IV-converts to Islam, were found guilty on charges of planting what they believed were bombs outside synagogues in the Bronx and plotting to fire missiles at military planes. The four interceded with an informer whom they believed was with a Pakistani terror group. The four alleged that they were entrapped.\textsuperscript{25}

\textit{Mirza:} In October 2010, Adnan Mirza, a Pakistani national on a student visa in United States, was convicted of unlawfully possessing firearms and conspiring to provide material support and funds to the Taliban. Houston, Texas-based Mirza was sentenced to 15 years in prison. Mirza and others intended to send funds to the Taliban and had engaged in weekend camping/training and practice sessions with firearms to prepare for jihad on six different occasions in May 2006 in Houston.\textsuperscript{26}

Findings from analysis of the twenty case studies of unaffiliated individuals who were inspired by AQ, AQI, AQIM, or AQAP, its leadership, or ideology include: seventeen plots intended attacks to take place in the United States; sixteen plots involved some United States citizens; ten plots included converts to Islam; nine plots had a foreign affinity based on nationality; eight plots involved government targets, including military; seven plots involved individuals who traveled abroad for indoctrination, training,


or participation in plots, five plots had participants with a criminal record; four plots resulted in an attack; three plots resulted in deaths or arrest of a plotter abroad; and two plots involved women participants or aviation targets.

**Conclusion**

Nearly all the plotters in the AQ and AQAP case studies were men. There were many converts to Islam as well as foreign-born individuals. Others had criminal records, varying educational levels (e.g., limited education to doctorate-level) and intellect, and a full range of marital and parental status. Some plotters had military training and diverse socio-economic backgrounds and personality traits. These terrorist operatives had disparate capabilities, sophistication levels, plans, and dedication to jihad.27

The majority of participants were stymied before launching an attack in the United States. Occasionally, an original terrorist target was modified, including to a different country. Some perpetrators attempted to obtain terror training abroad, but were rebuffed.

Those who succeeded in killing people on United States soil-Hadayat, Haq, and Bledsoe-all worked alone and used a handgun to attack their respective targets: an airport, a non-profit, and a military recruiting center. Dr. Nidal Hassan, who was in direct contact with Anwar al Awlaki, killed the most individuals-13-during his attack at Fort Hood in 2009, is excluded from these case studies as it is arguable that he was not an unaffiliated terrorist.28

These case studies indicate that there are many routes to radicalization, recruitment, and operational activities. Some were principally radicalized and trained online or in an, otherwise, amateurish manner. These case studies included largely self-taught activities or with instruction by other novices.29

Self-selected individuals often have inadequate training, funds, skill sets, and support networks necessary to undertake a successful large-scale attack. This, partly, explains the limited scale of lone wolf attacks. At the same time, the requisite skill required to run over individuals or shoot them is fairly minimal. In other words, it is not that complicated to “be a terrorist,” especially if you are not intending to kill scores or are unconcerned about being caught after the incident.

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Terror groups abdicate gate-keeping capabilities when individuals self-select into becoming a terrorist operative. Groups lose control over planning while concurrently benefiting from expansion of terror “entrepreneurial” activities and no need to allocate operational resources to these freelancers.\textsuperscript{30} Concurrently, these free agents greatly broaden the number of prospective terrorists that can target the United States and its interests.

The plots show appreciable indications of individuals thinking globally—being part of transnational jihad movement—while acting locally and/or internationally.\textsuperscript{31} Foreign-affinity terrorism, arising, in part, due to one’s nationality or family descent, is a growing factor in religious extremist terrorism.\textsuperscript{32} In the past few years, such terrorism has occurred with great frequency. Foreign affinity terrorism further globalizes local, regional, and international conflicts.\textsuperscript{33}

United States government informants and undercover law enforcement were instrumental in undermining several plots. Also, the United States court system has been effective in prosecuting individuals involved in terrorism.\textsuperscript{34}

These self-selected, unaffiliated terrorists engender greater diversification for AQ and AQAP relative to perpetrators, modus operandi, targets, means of radicalization and recruitment than on 9/11. More decentralization, small cells, and lone wolves are exemplified in the current phase of al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism than on 9/11. Unaffiliated, religious extremist operations based in the United States are increasingly frequent, particularly since 2009.\textsuperscript{35}

Terror threats are evolving towards less sophisticated plots undertaken by unaffiliated extremists acting alone or by small groups. Such plots are more probable to be successful than multifaceted plans. The more complex the plot and the greater number of members in the cabal—Ft. Dix (six), Miami Seven, and Chicken Farm (four)—the less likely the plot would succeed. In many respects, it is very difficult for law enforcement and the intelligence community to stymie plots of unaffiliated perpetrators as they often unknown and work independently.


\textsuperscript{33} Dean Alexander, “Offline and Online Radicalization and Recruitment of Extremists and Terrorists”.

\textsuperscript{34} “Terrorist Trial Report Card: September 11, 2001-September 11, 2009.”

These unaffiliated AQ and AQAP-inspired terrorists who operated in the United States can be contrasted with United States and non-United States-based individuals those who were AQ or AQAP members and planned attacks in the United States or abroad, including:

- Richard Reid, attempted to bomb a plane from Europe, 2002 (AQ);\(^{36}\)
- Lackawanna Six, attended training camp in Afghanistan, 2003 (AQ);\(^{37}\)
- Zacarias Moussaoui, planned plane attack, 2005 (AQ);\(^{38}\)
- Adam Yahye Gadahn, spokesman, 2006 (AQ);\(^{39}\)
- Jose Padilla, trained in Afghanistan, initially dirty bomb plot in Chicago, 2007 (AQ);\(^{40}\)
- Ali al Marri, plots against critical infrastructure, 2009 (AQ);\(^{41}\)
- Bryant Neal Vinas, Long Island Railroad plot, 2009 (AQ);\(^{42}\)
- Dr. Nidal Hasan, Ft. Hood attack, 2009 (linked to AQAP propagandist Awlaki);\(^{43}\)
- Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, attempted bombing of plane from Europe, 2010 (AQAP);\(^{44}\)


\(^{43}\) Associated Press, “Army Colonel Recommends Trial in Fort Hood Rampage”.

• Najibullah Zazi, Zarein Ahmedzay, Adis Medunjanin, suicide bombing in NYC subway, 2010 (AQ);\(^{45}\)
• Adnan Shukrijumah, senior AQ operative who was based in the United States, 2010 (AQ); and\(^{46}\)
• Anwar al Awlaki, senior operative for AQAP, dual United States-Yemini citizen, 2010 (AQ).\(^{47}\)

The AQ/AQAP-linked individuals had much greater levels of training, resources, and ideological instruction than the twenty case studies mentioned earlier. Additionally, the plots these AQ or AQAP members planned were much more sophisticated with a higher prospective body count than the unaffiliated operatives.

Similarly, the twenty case studies of unaffiliated, AQ and AQAP-inspired terrorists who operated in the United States can be distinguished by United States-linked individuals who joined non-AQ or non-AQAP terrorist groups [e.g., Jaish-e-Muhammed (JeM), al Shabab, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT), and Pakistani Taliban] and planned terror attacks in the United States and/or abroad:

• Hamid and Umer Hayat, prospective United States plot (2006) (JeM);\(^{48}\)
• Omar Hammmami, overseas plots (2009) (al Shabab);\(^{49}\)
• Syed Haris Ahmed and Ehsanul Islam Sadequee, United States plots (2009) (LeT and JeM).\(^{50}\)

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\(^{49}\) Elliott, “The Jihadist Next Door”; United States Department of Justice, “Statistics on Unsealed International Terrorism and Terrorism-Related Convictions”.

• David Coleman Headley and Tahawwur Rana, overseas plots (2010), 51
• Faisal Shahzad, Times Square attack (2010) (Pakistani Taliban), 52
• Northern Virginia Five, overseas plots (2010) (LeT and JeM). 53

The majority of these non-AQ and non-AQAP terrorists were involved with large-scale plots that were either planned or implemented (e.g., Headley doing surveillance in November 2008 Mumbai attacks and Shazad’s Times Square attack). Also, in the cases of Hamid Hayat, Headley, Hammami, and Shahzad, they received formal training from various non-AQ and non-AQAP terrorist groups.

In sum, the materials shared herein provide additional perspectives regarding the existence and nature of unaffiliated, AQ and AQAP-inspired terrorism on United States soil and its ramifications. Going forward, terrorist capacities at framing ideological arguments and radicalization modes will also effect if we have a conveyor belt of unaffiliated, AQ and AQAP-inspired-among other terrorist groups-terrorism on United States soil and elsewhere. Therefore, frequent, sustained, and impactful counter- narratives to these extremist precepts are an important component in weakening the effects of these ideologies.

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