INTERNET TERROR RECRUITMENT AND TRADECRAFT: HOW CAN WE ADDRESS AN EVOLVING TOOL WHILE PROTECTING FREE SPEECH?

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Twice in the past six months, the United States was just minutes away from another tragedy of unmitigated horror. Once again, terrorists had breached our security and nearly succeeded in killing and harming Americans in the skies above our country or on its streets. In both instances, had it not been for the malfunctioning of the terrorists' explosive devices and the quick and effective intervention of our fellow citizens, America would have fallen victim to the worst terrorist attacks since September 11, 2001.

These two incidents are part of an emergent pattern of terrorist threats in the U.S. During 2009, a record ten jihadi or jihadi-inspired plots or incidents and one tragically successful attack, at Fort Hood, Texas that claimed the lives of thirteen persons, occurred.[1] Furthermore, at least two dozen persons were indicted in the U.S. on terrorism charges last year[2]—another record. Thus far in 2010 there have been four incidents. It is therefore difficult to be complacent when an average of one plot is now being uncovered per month over the past year or more—and perhaps even more are being hatched that we don't yet know about.

While it is easy and perhaps also comforting to dismiss as "amateurish" these plots, incidents, and failed or foiled attacks, we do so at our peril. In point of fact, what appears as "amateurishness"—such as the most recent abortive car bomb plot in New York City's Times Square and the attempt last Christmas Day to effect the in-flight bombing of a North West Airlines passenger jet—may be

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[♦] My affiliation with Georgetown University is for identification purposes only. This testimony presents the views of the witness only and does not nor is it meant to reflect those of Georgetown University.

[1] See Brian Michael Jenkins, *Would-Be Warriors: Incidents of Jihadist Terrorist Radicalization in the United States Since September 11, 2001* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2010), pp. 13-17.

[2] One source puts this figure at 41 persons. See Steve Kroft, "Homegrown Terror," *60 Minutes*, CBS News, 9 May 2010 accessed at: http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=6470178n&tag=contentMain;cbsCarousel.

more a reflection of the attack having been rushed. Terrorists, we often forget, play the odds and pin their faiths and hopes on eventually simply getting lucky. Over a quarter of a century ago, the Irish Republican Army famously taunted then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher after a bomb failed to kill her at the 1984 Conservative Party conference in Brighton, England: "Today we were unlucky, but remember we only have to be lucky once. You will have to be lucky always."[3] Our terrorist enemies today doubtless embrace the same logic.

Indeed, at a time, for example, when the capability of the Tehrik-i-Taliban or Pakistani Taliban, (TTP)—whom both the U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder and senior Obama Administration counterterrorism adviser John Brennan have gone on record as stating was behind the Times Square plot, having provided money and direction to the hapless bomber, Faisal Shahzad[4]—and al Qaeda in Pakistan are being relentlessly degraded by the U.S. drone attacks, both groups as well as allied and associated organizations may feel pressed to implement an operation either sooner or more precipitously than they might otherwise prefer. Fears that a would-be attacker might be identified and interdicted by authorities may thus account for what appears to be a more compressed operational tempo or faster "soup to nuts" process by which a recruit is deployed operationally.

The complaint sworn against Shahzad in federal court, for instance, reveals a very fast four-month process from planning to training to Times Square.[5] He reportedly only received three to five days of bomb-making training. The TPP, al Qaeda and other terrorist groups may thus be prepared to accept this trade-off between shorter training periods leading to accelerated operations in order to dispatch "clean skin" recruits before they can be identified and detected. Indeed, this likely represents a reasonable trade-off and excellent return on a very modest investment. The terrorists groups have expended little effort and energy training alleged "walk-ins" like Shahzad who present terrorist organizations with a low-cost opportunity to strike in the U.S.

This is part and parcel of an al Qaeda strategy that it also has pushed on other groups. It is a strategy that is deliberately designed to overwhelm, distract, and exhaust the terrorists' adversaries. There are two components to this strategy: one economic and the other operational. In terms of the economic dimension, al Qaeda has never claimed it could or would defeat U.S. militarily. Instead, it seeks to wear us down economically through increasing expenditures on domestic security and overseas military commitments. Given the current global economic downtown, this message arguably now has greater resonance with al Qaeda's followers and supporters and indeed perhaps even with new recruits. The operational dimension seeks to flood already stressed intelligence

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[3] Quoted in Peter Taylor, *Brits* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), p. 256.

[4] Anne E. Kornblut and Karin Brulliard, "U.S. blames Pakistani Taliban for Times Square bomb plot," *Washington Post*, 10 May 2010.

[5] United States Of America v. Faisal Shahzad, Defendant, Case 1:10-mj-00928-UA Filed 4 May 2010.

and law enforcement with "noise": low-level threats from "lone wolves" and other jihadi "hangers on"—e.g., the "low hanging fruit" are designed to consume the attention of law enforcement and intelligence in hopes that this distraction will permit more serious terrorist operations to go unnoticed and thereby sneak in "beneath the radar" and in fact succeed.[6]

The sheer diversity of the perpetrators and nature of their U.S. plots is also remarkable. These have included highly trained al Qaeda operatives like Najibullah Zazi, the Afghan-born U.S. resident who sought to replicate the 7 July 2005 suicide attacks on London transport in Manhattan; motivated, but less competent, recruits like Shahzad and the five youths from a Washington, D.C. suburb who last December sought training in Pakistan to fight in Afghanistan but, had they been successful in establishing contact with a Pakistan-based terrorist group, could just as well have been deployed back to U.S.; dedicated sleeper agents like the U.S. citizen David Headley whose reconnaissance efforts on behalf of Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), a longstanding al Qaeda ally, were pivotal to the November 2008 Mumbai, India attack's success; bona fide "lone wolves" like Major Nidal Hasan, the Fort Hood shooter, and other individuals with murkier terrorist connections like Abdulhakim Muhammad (nee Carlos Bledsoe), an African-American convert to Islam who returned from Yemen last year and killed a U.S. military recruiter and wounded another in Little Rock, Arkansas and has now claimed in court to have done so on behalf of AQAP—the same group responsible for Christmas Day plot; and, finally, the incompetent, wannabe terrorists who are easily entrapped and apprehended such as the four parolees and converts to Islam who attempted to bomb 2 Bronx synagogues and an upstate air national guard base, the Jordanian national who overstayed his US tourist visa and plotted to bomb a downtown Dallas office tower last September, and another convert who wanted to blow up a Springfield, IL federal building that same month, among others.

Well over a year ago we became aware of radicalization and recruitment occurring in the U.S. when Somali-Americans started disappearing from the Minneapolis-St Paul, Minnesota area and turning up in Somalia with an al Qaeda affiliate called al Shabab ("the youth"). Administration officials and others believed it was an isolated, one-off phenomenon. But it was not restricted to a small number of individuals in one place as the grand juries that have been sitting in Minneapolis-St Paul and San Diego, California attest along with the ongoing FBI investigations in Boston and two locations in Ohio, among other places. The number of Somali-Americans who left the U.S. to train in Somalia was also far higher than initially believed (numbering upwards of some thirty persons) and furthermore once they were in Somalia they were in fact being trained by a senior and long-established al Qaeda commander.

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[6] See Bruce Hoffman "American Jihad," *The National Interest*, no. 107, May/June 2010, pp. 17-27; and, idem, "Al-Qaeda's New Grand Strategy," *Washington Post (Sunday Outlook* section), 10 January 2010.

In sum, the case of the Somali-Americans thus turned out to be a Pandora's box. And by not taking the threat of radicalization and recruitment actually occurring in the U.S. more seriously and sooner we failed to comprehend that this was not an isolated phenomenon, specific to Minnesota and this particular immigrant community, but that it indicated the possibility that an albeit embryonic terrorist radicalization and recruitment infrastructure had been established in the U.S. Shahzad is thus the latest person to jump out of this particular Pandora's box.

As disparate and diverse as the above list of individuals may appear, the one thing that the majority of them had in common was the role that the Internet played in their respective plots and often their radicalization. For example:

- Zazi conducted several Internet searches to identify and obtain commercially available materials for the bombs he intended to use in attacks on the New York City subway;[7]
- Hasan exchanged at least eighteen e-mails between December 2008 and June 2009 with Anwar al Awlaki, an operational officer with al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP);[8]
- Colleen LaRose used the online monikers "Fatima La Rose" and "JihadJane" allegedly to recruit others in the United States and abroad, supposedly to carry out a terrorist attack in Sweden.[9] She boasted in e-mails how, given her appearance—e.g., a petite, blue-eyed, blonde—she could "blend in with many people." She also sought to recruit other Western women who looked like her.[10] David Kris, an assistant attorney general in the Department of Justice's National Security Division, was quoted in the *Washington Post* as stating that the fact that a suburban American woman stands accused of conspiring to support terrorists and traveling overseas to implement an attack "underscores the evolving nature of the threat we face";[11]
- Hosam Smadi, the young Jordanian national implicated in the Dallas, Texas bomb plot, according to his indictment, allegedly belonged to "an online group of extremists . . . who espoused violence." It further

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[7] United States District Court Eastern District of New York against Najibullah Zazi, Defendant, Memorandum Of Law In Support Of The Government's Motion For A Permanent Order Of Detention, 09-CR-663 (RJD), 24 September 2009, pp. 5, 7 & 11-12.

[8] Brian Ross and Rhonda Schwartz, "Major Hasan's E-Mail: 'I Can't Wait to Join You' in Afterlife," ABC News, 19 November 2009 accessed at http://abcnews.go.com/print?id=9130339.

[9] See United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, United States Of America v. Colleen R. LaRose, 10-Cr-123, 4 March 2010, pp. 3-8.

[10] Quoted in Ibid., p. 3.

[11] Quoted in Carrie Johnson, "JihadJane, an American woman, faces terrorism charges," *Washington Post*, 10 March 2010.

stated that Smadi "stood out based on his vehement intention to actually conduct terrorist attacks in the United States";[12]

- Michael Finton, a U.S. citizen, implicated in a plot to bomb a federal building in Springfield Illinois, claimed both to have been influenced by an al Qaeda video and to have obtained "all that he could . . . . use the Internet to look up all he needed to know to conduct such an attack . . ."[13]

- David Headley, the U.S. citizen who allegedly carried out reconnaissance and surveillance operations on behalf of both Pakistani jihadi terrorist organizations and al Qaeda was actively involved in on-line user groups and chat room forums[14] as was one of his alleged co-conspirators, Tahawur Rana.[15]

- Tarek Mehanna, a U.S. citizen charged with conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists allegedly made extensive use of the Internet, amassing, according to the criminal complaint filed against him in federal court, "Video files, audio files, images, stored messages, word processed documents and cached web pages";[16]

- Bryant Neal Vinas, a U.S. citizen from Long Island, New York who traveled to Pakistan to enlist in al Qaeda and, in addition to providing information to facilitate an al Qaeda plot to blow up a Long Island Rail Road train inside New York's Pennsylvania Station, participated in an attack on U.S. military forces in Afghanistan, is believed to have been radicalized as a result of "visiting jihadist Web sites";[17]

- Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab, the AQAP operative who attempted to bomb a North West airlines flight on Christmas Day, 2009 was in regular contact with the aforementioned Anwar al Awlaki;[18] and,

- Faisal Shahzad has been widely reported to have viewed radical jihadi material on the Internet and apparently has admitted to having been inspired by al Awlaki as well.[19]

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[12] Quoted in United States District Court for the Northern District of Texas, United States Of America v. Hosam Maher Husein Smadi, 3:09-MJ-286, 24 September 2009, p. 1. See also, Ibid., pp. 2 & 5; and, "Jordanian accused in Dallas bomb plot goes to court," *CNN.com*, 25 September 2009 accessed at: http://cnn.site.printthis.clickability.com/pt/cpt?action=cpt&title-Jordan.

[13] Quoted in United States District Court for the Central District of Illinois, United States Of America v. Michael C. Finton, 09-3048-M, 24 September 2009, pp. 11 & 15. See also, Ibid., p. 17

[14] See United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, United States Of America v. Ilyas Kashmiri, et al., 09 CR 830 October 2009, pp. 13 & 20.

[15] Idem., United States Of America v. Tahawur Rana, 18 October 2009, pp. 4, 8, 14, 24, & 42.

[16] United States District Court of Massachusetts, United States Of America v. Tarek Mehanna, 09-10017-GAO CR 830, November 2009, pp. 2-3, 10-11, 14-30, 39-40, 43-49, & 56-73.

[17] Quoted in William K. Rashbaum and Souad Mekennet, "L.I. Man Helped Qaeda, Then Informed," *New York Times*, 23 July 2009.

[18] Mark Hosenball, et al., "The Radicalization of Umar Farouk Abdulmuttalab," *Newsweek*, 2 January 2010.

TERRORISM AS COMMUNICATION AND THE INTERNET AS A CRITICAL MEANS OF RADICALIZATION AND RECRUITMENT

Terrorism has long been understood to be a violent means of communication. The terrorist act itself is of course designed to attract attention and then, through the publicity that it generates, to communicate a message. Indeed, nearly a quarter of a century ago, Alex Schmid and Janny de Graaf observed that, "Without communication there can be no terrorism."[20] But communication is essential for a terrorist movement not just for the obvious purposes of summoning publicity and attention, but also to ensure its longevity and very survival. Indeed, without effective communications, a terrorist movement would be unable to recruit new members into its ranks, motivate and inspire existing members to carry on with the struggle despite formidable odds as well as expand the pool of active supporters and passive sympathizers from which the movement draws its sustenance.

Given this constellation of requisite sustainable resources—motivated minions, energized recruits, along with generous sympathizers and supporters—it is not surprising that the weapons of terrorism are no longer simply the guns and bombs that they always have been, but now include the mini-cam and videotape, editing suite and attendant production facilities; professionally produced and mass-marketed CD-Roms and DVDs; and, most critically, the lap-top and desk-top computers, CD burners and e-mail accounts, and Internet and worldwide web. Indeed, largely because of the Internet—and the almost unlimited array of communications opportunities that it offers—the art of terrorist communication has now evolved to a point where terrorists can effortlessly and effectively control the communication of their ideology of hate, intolerance and violence: determining the content, context and medium over which their message is projected; and towards precisely the audience (or multiple audiences) they seek to reach.[21]

The implications of this development have been enormous. The Internet, once seen as an engine of education and enlightenment, has instead become an immensely useful vehicle for terrorists with which to peddle their baseless propaganda and manifold conspiracy theories, lies and clarion call to violence.[22]

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[19] See Scott Shane and Souad Mekhennet, "Imam's Path From Condemning Terror to Preaching Jihad," *New York Times*, 8 May 2010.

[20] Alex Schmid and Janny de Graaf, *Violence As Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1982), p. 9.

[21] See, for example, the 2004 video clip, "Dirty Kuffar," aimed at British youth at http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=9083681522527526242#docid=-4283987610134255997; and, an al Shabaab video clip aimed at Americans and Westerners in general from 2009 "English Nasheed Rap by Shabab Al-Mujahideen (Blow by Blow)" at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODGRd_DKchw.

[22] See, for instance, the "Iraq" tab at www.kavkazcenter.com and the "Iraqi Resistance Report" tab at www.jihadunspun.com as well as such sites as

These sites alarmingly present an increasingly compelling and indeed accepted alternative point of view to the terrorists' variegated audiences.[23] This was of course precisely al Qaeda's purpose in creating its first website, www.alneda.com, and maintaining a variety of successor sites ever since: to provide an alternative source for news and information that the movement itself could exert total control over.

Because of its geographical reach, ubiquity, modest costs, and ability to communicate in real-time, the Internet has thus become the terrorists' favored means of propaganda dissemination and incitement to violence. As Professor Gabriel Weimann of Haifa University notes in his seminal study *Terror on the Internet*, when he began studying this phenomenon nearly a decade ago, there were only about 12 terrorist group web sites. By the time he completed his research in 2005 the number had grown to over 4,300—"a proliferation rate of about 4,500 percent per year."[24] And, by the time the book was published the following year, the number had jumped to over 5,000 web sites.[25] Today, experts estimate that there are well over 7,000 such sites.

Thus, virtually every terrorist group in the world today has its own Internet website and, in many instances, maintain multiple sites in different languages with different messages tailored to specific audiences. The ability to communicate in real time via the Internet, using a variety of compelling electronic media—including dramatic video footage, digital photographs, and audio clips accompanied by visually arresting along with savvy and visually appealing web design—has enabled terrorists to reach a potentially vast audience faster, more pervasively and more effectively than ever before. The changing face of terrorism in the 21st Century is perhaps best exemplified by the items recovered by Saudi security forces in a raid during on an al Qaeda safe house in Riyadh in late spring 2004. In addition to the traditional terrorist arsenal of AK-47 assault rifles, explosives, rocket-propelled grenades, hand grenades, and thousands of rounds of ammunition that the authorities the police expected find, they also discovered an array of electronic consumer goods including: video cameras, laptop computers, CD burners, and the requisite high-speed Internet connection. According to "60 Minutes" investigative journalist Henry Schuster, the videos

> had been part of an al Qaeda media blitz on the Web that also
> included two online magazines full of editorials and news digests,

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www.islammemo.cc/taqrer/one_news.asp?Idnew=292; www.la7odood.com; www.balagh.com/thaqafa/0604ggpz.htm; and www.albasrah.net: all accessed on 6 July 2005.
   [23] See, also, Dina Temple-Raston, "Al-Qaida media Blitz Has Some On Alert," *Morning Edition, National Public Radio*, 8 April 2009 accessed at: http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=102735818.
   [24] Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, the New* Challenges (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006), p. 105.
   [25] Remarks by Professor Gabriel Weimann, book launch event held at the U.S. Institute of Peace, Washington, D.C. on 17 April 2006.

along with advice on how to handle a kidnapping or field-strip an AK-47 assault rifle. The videos mixed old appearances by bin Laden with slick graphics and suicide bombers' on-camera last wills and testaments. They premiered on the Internet, one after the other, and were aimed at recruiting Saudi youth.[26]

As Tina Brown, the doyenne of post-modern media, has pointed out: the "conjunction of 21st-century Internet speed and 12th-century fanaticism has turned our world into a tinderbox."[27]

CONCLUSION

The recent Times Square plot involving a naturalized American citizen of Pakistani descent is a wake-up call. The wishful thinking that the American "melting pot" theory provided a "fire wall" against the radicalization and recruitment of American citizens—whether naturalized or born here—along with U.S. residents (green card holders), arguably lulled us into a sense of complacency that home-grown terrorism couldn't happen here. The British similarly believed before the 7 July 2005 London suicide attacks that there was perhaps a problem with the Muslim communities in Europe but certainly not with British Muslims in the U.K. who were better integrated, better education, and wealthier than their counterparts on the continent.

By stubbornly wrapping ourselves in this false security blanket we lost five years to learn from the British experience. Indeed, the U.S. missed a rare chance three years ago to get in front of this issue and potentially fully understand how Americans are radicalized and recruited to terrorism. In 2007, the Chairwoman of this same sub-committee introduced House Resolution 1955, the "Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism Prevention Act of 2007," which would have established a national commission to study domestic terrorism. Although the bill passed the House of Representatives, it never came to a vote in the Senate. Given that the terrorist threat has changed so appreciably since the 9/11 Commission concluded its work six years ago, we require the same fresh look and new approaches that would have been this commission's remit. Moreover, these days it seems bipartisan commissions are the only way our government can accomplish anything terrorism related. In this case, such a body would have provided a baseline assessment of terrorist radicalization and recruitment processes, and made policy recommendations about how to counter them by drawing on a comprehensive survey of the experiences and best practices of other countries—and by better understanding how terrorist groups might target and attract Americans and U.S. residents into their ranks.

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[26] Henry Shuster, "Studios of Terror: Al Qaeda's Media Strategy," *CNN International.Com, Tracking Terror*, 16 February 2005, accessed at http://207.25.71.245/2005/WORLD/meast/02/15/schuster.column/index.html.

[27] Tina Brown, "Death by Error," *Washington Post*, 19 May 2005.

Instead, ten years into the war on terrorism, the big questions that the commission proposed in H.R. 1955 may have shed critical light on lamentably remain unanswered. What do we do when the terrorists are like us? When they conform to the archetypal American immigrant success story? When they are American citizens or American residents? When they are not perhaps from the Middle East or South Asia and in fact have familiar-sounding names? Or, when they are "petite, blue-eyed, blonde" suburban housewives who, as the infamous JihadJane boasted, "can easily blend in"?

Who in fact is responsible in the U.S. government to identify radicalization when it is occurring and then interdict attempts at recruitment? Is this best done by federal law enforcement (e.g., the FBI) or state and local jurisdictions working closely with federal authorities? Is it a core mission for a modernized, post-9/11 FBI? Or for the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)? Can it be done by the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), even though it has only a coordinating function and relies on other agencies for intelligence collection, analysis and operations? What is the role of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) in home-grown terrorism and recruitment and radicalization? Will coming to grips with these challenges be the remit of the next FBI Director given the incumbent's impending retirement?

And, finally and most critically, have terrorists discovered our Achilles Heel in that we currently have no strategy to counter this type of threat or to interdict radicalization and prevent terrorist recruitment?