BORDERLESS WORLD, BOUNDLESS THREAT: ONLINE JIHADISTS AND MODERN TERRORISM

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Master of Arts
in Security Studies

By

Spencer O. Hayne, B.A.

Washington, DC
November 19, 2010

BORDERLESS WORLD, BOUNDLESS THREAT: ONLINE JIHADISTS AND MODERN TERRORISM

Spencer O. Hayne, B.A.

Thesis Advisor: Justine A. Rosenthal, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

The online jihadist community represents a new phenomenon in the global spread of Islamic radicalism. Many terrorism experts largely ignore the fact that the Internet is more than just a tool for established terrorist organizations—it can be a platform for the evolution of the jihadist social movement itself. While the majority of this movement's members are casual supporters of a global Islamist jihad against the West, a number of the community's members have already proven willing to take their virtual beliefs into the real world through terrorist acts. Many of these terrorists have attracted significant media attention—Jihad Jane, the Christmas Day Bomber, the Fort Hood Shooter, the attack on CIA agents in Afghanistan, the Times Square Bomber, and a number of other "homegrown" terrorists. The individuals perpetrating these terrorist acts are as diverse as they are dangerous, presenting a significant challenge to counterterrorism officials and policymakers. This study profiles 20 recent cases of online jihadists who have made the transition to real-world terrorism along a number of characteristics: age, ethnicity, immigration status, education, religious upbringing, socio-economic class, openness about beliefs, suicidal tendencies, rhetoric focus, location, target, terrorist action, offline and online activity, and social isolation or the presence of an identity crisis. The analysis shows that today, it is much less important how al-Qaida or any other jihadist group expresses its ideology, because any individual may self-radicalize and interpret the jihadist social movement in their own way and carry out terrorist attacks based on this understanding. When the jihadist social movement becomes borderless, the threat presented by the terrorists it inspires is no longer limited by the artificial boundaries of the real world. Counterterrorism officials must recognize this and adopt a long-term strategy for combating this movement.

CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

1. Executive Summary

> "The conjunction of 21st-century Internet speed and 12th-century fanaticism has turned our world into a tinderbox."
>
> —Tina Brown, "Death by Error," *The Washington Post*

Over the past few years, the online community of Muslims supporting an al-Qaida style global jihad against the West has grown dramatically. While it is impossible to say just how many people participate in the various websites, forums, and chat rooms that make up this community, a number of its members have already attempted terrorist attacks. Many of these have been relatively high-profile terrorism cases—Jihad Jane, the Fort Hood Shooter, the Christmas Day Bomber, and the attack on CIA agents in Afghanistan, to name a few. These terrorists developed and expressed their radical beliefs online and then attempted to turn their views into violent action. From an American housewife to a U.S. Army major to a Jordanian doctor, many of these people seem to break the mold of what we think of as a "typical" jihadist.

Current thinking on combating terrorism largely revolves around stopping organized, active terrorist groups. The Internet has radically changed this situation—not only are organized terrorist groups able to use the Internet as a powerful tool, but sympathetic individuals around the world are able to connect with one another to express their support for a terrorist movement's ideology or to gain the resources they need to act on their own. The growing online movement in support of an al-Qaida-style global jihad presents a significant challenge to counterterrorism officials, who are only now beginning to recognize the changing nature of the threat presented by the global jihadist movement.

In addition, many terrorism experts emphasize the importance of real-world connections in the radicalization and organization of modern terrorists. Yet meeting in mosques, student

groups, or family gatherings is no longer the only way in which terrorists are radicalized and organized. The global jihadist movement has shifted from a real-world, hierarchical organization to a virtual, borderless social movement capable of producing terrorists anywhere in the world. Many terrorism experts largely ignore the fact that the Internet is more than just a tool for established terrorist organizations—it can be a platform for the evolution of the jihadist movement itself. However, little work has been done to determine how the terrorists that engage in this online movement fit into the larger picture of modern terrorism.

This study examines 20 recent cases of online jihadists who have made the transition to real-world terrorism. By comparing these cases to each other and to the existing profile of modern terrorists, the analysis will determine if these cases represent an entirely new phenomenon or simply more of the same. The study finds that none of the cases fits perfectly into a mold; each case has some features that make it unique. While comparisons can be made along individual characteristics, there is no "typical" terrorist coming from the online jihadist community. But the growth of this community means that the overall terrorist threat will become more diverse in the next few years, which creates a tremendous challenge for counterterrorism.

The threat from the online jihadist community is truly global. Today, it is much less important how al-Qaida or any other jihadist group expresses its ideology than in the past, because any individual can interpret the jihadist social movement in their own way and carry out terrorist attacks based on this understanding. When the jihadist social movement becomes borderless, the threat presented by the terrorists it inspires is no longer limited by the artificial boundaries of the real world. With terrorists coming from all over the world and willing to attack targets anywhere else in the world, these online jihadists have proven that the jihadist movement is now a truly boundless threat.

2. Methodology

The central question of this analysis is: "How do violent online jihadists compare to what is already known about violent offline jihadists?" This paper will approach the question by comparing a number of recent cases of online jihadists-turned-terrorists to the established profile of a modern jihadist terrorist. This will involve several steps. First, this paper will review current research on violent radicals and terrorist use of the Internet. Based on this research, a basic profile of a modern violent offline jihadist will be established, according to multiple terrorism experts. The phenomenon of violent online jihadists will then be analyzed by looking at a small dataset of cases and determining commonalities between them. This analysis will then be compared to current thinking on violent jihadists in order to draw lessons for counterterrorism policy.

Each case will be analyzed based on several factors often used in current study of violent offline radicals. These factors are: Age, Ethnicity, Immigration Status, Education, Religious Upbringing, Socio-economic Class, Openness about Beliefs, Suicidal Tendencies, Rhetoric Focus, Location, Target, Terrorist Action, Offline Activity, Online Activity, and Social Isolation or the Presence of an Identity Crisis. Several of these factors are relatively qualitative and may require some subjective assessment. Each of these factors is explained in depth below, alongside the data. This research will be compared to existing analyses to determine how online jihadists fit into current theories of violent Muslim extremists.

2.1. Dataset

As this is a relatively new phenomenon, there are a limited number of cases to be analyzed. For this study, 20 cases of online jihadists turning to terrorism have been selected for comparison. These cases were chosen based on several simple criteria. First, the individual

must have a) engaged or attempted to engage in a terrorist act or b) engaged or attempted to engage in an activity in preparation for future terrorist activity.[1] Second, this act must be the first time the actor has engaged in such an activity. Third, prior to this act, the individual must have engaged in online discourse in support of extremist thought or ideas. Cases where the actor self-radicalized or self-motivated to action will be considered along with cases where the actor was actively recruited to the task.[2]

The chronology of events leading each actor to his or her act of terrorism will be briefly explained. Each case will then be rated in a comparison chart, which will then be analyzed to determine commonalities between these violent online jihadists.

2.2. Definitions

The following terms are used throughout the paper. While each term may not have a universally-accepted definition, these definitions reflect the intended meaning of each as it is used in this paper.

The West: A loose term used to refer to the parts of the modern world that have their origins in Greco-Roman culture. The term can be used to refer to specific countries, or more generally to culture, social norms, values, and political systems. The broadness of the term is one of the things that make it attractive to jihadists as an adversarial descriptor.

Islamism: The belief that Islam provides a political ideology wherein Islamic shari'a law should provide the laws of the state. In Islamist societies, political sovereignty is the purview of God rather than the people.

---

[1] This includes assistance in planning an attack as well as training for future terrorist attacks.
[2] While some radicals are recruited to the movement by others, many online jihadists actively seek out the community and join it voluntarily. While this is an important distinction that could impact an individual's commitment to the movement, both types of cases will be considered here.

Jihadism: The belief that Muslims must engage in violent conflict with non-Muslims in order to create an Islamist state. Jihadists also often believe there is an ongoing struggle between Christians and Muslims throughout the world.

Radical/Extremist: Views or beliefs that argue for a drastic political, economic, or social transformation from the status quo.

Terrorism: The use or threat of violence against noncombatants for a political cause.

2.3. Assumptions and Limitations

While the term "online jihadists" is used frequently throughout the paper and is a central theme of this project, it is important to note that there is no clear distinction between an online and an offline jihadist. Someone's beliefs do not change depending on whether they are expressing their thoughts in the real world or in cyberspace. Similarly, given the ubiquity of the Internet, most modern terrorists use it in some way in preparing for their attack. For this research project, I have tried to select only those cases in which the Internet played a central role in the radicalization and/or preparations of each terrorist. Given the difficulty of making this distinction, it is also difficult to determine definitively the scope of the threat presented by violent online jihadists. While 20 recent cases are presented here, these are only a portion of the recent terrorism cases, be they online or offline.

The rest of the online jihadist community—those supporters of jihad who have not acted violently in the real world—are not considered here. While this is the pool from which each of the terrorists comes, this analysis is only concerned with those people who have taken their beliefs into the real world. This is not to imply that those online jihadists, or "jihobbyists" as terrorism expert Jarret Brachman has labeled them, are any less worthy of consideration as a threat.

This analysis is primarily concerned with the characterization of violent online jihadists as individuals. As such, terrorist organization and function will not be examined in this analysis, nor will there be an extensive analysis of the methods used by violent online jihadists. In addition, this study is primarily concerned with the al-Qaida social movement, as opposed to the real-world al-Qaida organizations such as al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula or the al-Qaida senior leadership. Also not discussed in this analysis are the intricacies of each individual's beliefs, or distinctions within Islam such as Sunni, Shi'a, Wahhabi, Salafi, Takfiri, etc.

The cases considered in this analysis do not provide the full picture of violent online jihadists. There has been a significant effort to select cases for which there is relevant and detailed data, but it should be clear that these cases are only a subset of violent online jihadists (which are themselves only a subset of all violent jihadists). Several well-known online jihadist cases— namely Adam Gadahn, Anwar al-Awlaki, Younis Tsouli, Aabid Khan, Omar Hammami, Samir Khan, and Malika el-Aroud—have not been considered for two reasons: many have not been actively engaged in carrying out violent action, despite many of them being convicted of terrorism-related charges for their online activities; and others have only become active online *after* they engaged in terrorist action or joined a real-world terrorist group. While comparisons can be made between the selected cases, unconsidered and future cases may change or even contradict some of the findings of this analysis.

Finally, it is important to note that many of the cases considered are still pending legal action. Because of the recentness of the cases, many of the subjects are still awaiting trial, so while they are referred to as "terrorists" in this analysis, they have not necessarily been convicted of a terrorism charge.

3. Relevant Literature

The related works to this project falls into two main categories: those works dealing with terrorist use of the Internet, and those works dealing with the radicalization of modern Islamist terrorists. The first set of works assumes that the Internet is merely a tool for established terrorist groups. The second set of works, while mentioning the Internet's growing importance in terrorist radicalization, identifies real-world connections as an essential factor in terrorist development and does not consider the growing online jihadist community.

3.1. Terrorist Use of the Internet

The literature dealing with the unique threat posed by terrorist use of the Internet and other digital media has developed slowly over the past decade as the world has grown accustomed to the ubiquity of these technologies in society. A number of terrorism experts have recognized that the Internet and other digital media represent important tools now available to terrorists around the world.

In 1999, Steven Furnell and Matthew Warren of the University of Plymouth were two of the first to note four potential uses of the Internet by terrorist groups: *propaganda and publicity*, *fundraising*, *information dissemination*, and *secure communications*.[1] These ideas were reiterated a few years later in 2002 by Fred Cohen, who presents a similar list of four terrorist uses of the Internet: *propaganda*, *finance*, *coordination and operations*, and *political action*.[2] In both works though, the focus is on network security and protection against cyber attacks, rather than on terrorists using the Internet as a tool.

---

[1] Steven M. Furnell and Mattew J. Warren, "Computer hacking and cyber terrorism: the real threats in the new millennium?" *Computers & Security*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1999).
[2] Fred Cohen, "Terrorism and Cyberspace," *Network Security*, Vol. 2002, No. 5 (May 31, 2002).

This gap was addressed the following year by Timothy Thomas, an analyst with the Foreign Military Studies Office at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, who looked with unprecedented detail at terrorists' presence on the Internet as well as how those groups could utilize it.[3] Thomas was one of the first to focus not on cyberterrorism, but on terrorist *use* of the Internet.

The next major step forward in this growing field of study was taken by Gabriel Weimann, who, in 2004, presented the preliminary findings of a six-year U.S. Institute of Peace study of terrorists' use of the Internet.[4] The study focused on tracking and analyzing the official websites of terrorist groups around the world. Weimann's report pointed out the risk of focusing too much on cyberterrorism and not enough on the dangers presented by more mundane uses of the Internet by terrorists.[5] The report presents "eight different, albeit sometimes overlapping, ways in which contemporary terrorists use the Internet. Some of these parallel the uses to which everyone puts the Internet—information gathering, for instance. Some resemble the uses made of the medium by traditional political organizations—for example, raising funds and disseminating propaganda. Others, however, are much more unusual and distinctive—for instance, hiding instructions, manuals, and directions in coded messages or encrypted files."[6] Weimann's work added a significant amount of hard data to the earlier attempts to classify terrorist use of the Internet.

In 2006, Maura Conway substantially summarized much of the above literature. Conway, a professor of law and government at Dublin City University, explained the "core terrorist uses of

---

[3] Timothy L. Thomas.,"Al Qaeda and the Internet: The Danger of 'Cyberplanning,'" *Parameters* (Spring 2003).
[4] Gabriel Weimann, "www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet," *U.S. Institute of Peace Special Report 116* (March 2004).
[5] Ibid., 1.
[6] Ibid., 5.

the Internet" established by Furnell and Warren, Cohen, Thomas, and Weimann.[8] Table 1 summarizes the key points of each.[9] In all, Conway notes 22 different categories identified by these authors. She condenses these uses into "five core terrorist uses of the Internet: *information provision*, *financing*, *networking*,

Table 1. Conway's Core Terrorist Uses of the Internet[7]				
Author(s)	Furnell & Warren	Cohen	Thomas	Weimann
Uses	Propaganda & Publicity Fundraising Information Dissemination Secure Communications	Planning Finance Coordination & Operations Political Action Propaganda	Profiling Propaganda Anonymous/Covert Communication Generating "Cyberfear" Finance Command & Control Mobilization & Recruitment Information Gathering Mitigation of Risk Theft/Manipulation of Data Offensive Use Misinformation	Psychological Warfare Publicity & Propaganda Data Mining Fundraising Recruitment & Mobilization Networking Sharing Information Planning & Coordination

recruitment, and *information gathering*."[10] According to Conway, each of the other authors' categories can fit within one of the five categories explained briefly below:

Information provision refers to terrorist groups' efforts at propaganda, publicity, and psychological warfare—essentially all efforts to win the battle of ideas in the minds of supporters, the public at large, and the enemy. This battle is nothing new and has been at the core of terrorists' efforts for decades; but the Internet has shifted the landscape, giving terrorists "direct control over the content of their message … and [the ability] to manipulate their own image and the image of their enemies."[11]

---

[7] Maura Conway, "Terrorist 'Use' of the Internet and Fighting Back," *Information & Security*, Vol. 19 (2006), 11.
[8] .Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 10.
[11] Weimann, "www.terror.net," 6.

Financing refers to "direct solicitation via terrorist websites, exploitation of e-commerce tools and entities, and exploitation of charities and fronts."[12]

Networking refers to the overall ability of terrorist groups to decentralize their structure via the Internet. This activity can also refer to the limitation of terrorist risk through the anonymity of the Internet as well as the ability of members and cells to coordinate with each other from a distance.

Recruitment refers to terrorist groups' explicit efforts to locate current or potential supporters and encourage greater participation in the cause.

Information gathering refers to the potential of terrorist groups to access the wide array of information available to any Internet user. This danger has been pointed out by numerous authorities and the media.[13] The category also refers to "data mining"—the act of gathering information about potential targets (such as government buildings or nuclear plants) through their websites—and information sharing through "how to" sites and similar advice.

3.1.2. Problems with Current Analyses

The above categories provide a fairly comprehensive look at the explicit ways terrorist groups can use the Internet. But these discussions have assumed a relatively clear-cut line between terrorists and non-terrorists when it comes to Internet users. This distinction ignores the growing movement of online supporters of extremist terrorist groups. These new online violent jihadists represent a grey area for current analyses and further research is important to better understand the future of online jihadism.

---

[12] Conway, "Terrorist 'Use' of the Internet and Fighting Back," 12-13.
[13] See, for example, George Musser, "Better Killing through Chemistry," *Scientific American* (November 5, 2001).

3.2. Terrorist Motivations

There is a vibrant and ongoing discussion of the psychological motivations of modern terrorists. While there is some disagreement on the relative importance of various factors in driving an individual to commit a terrorist act, there is wide consensus on what many of those factors likely are. In addition, analysis of past terrorism cases has allowed experts to develop a basic profile of what the modern terrorist most likely looks like (at least on paper).

3.2.1. Psychology of Terrorism

A full discussion of terrorist psychological motivations is beyond the scope of this paper, but nonetheless plays a role in discussing online jihadists. In a review of theories of the psychology of terrorism, Jeff Victoroff notes that "terrorist behavior is probably *always* determined by a combination of innate factors, biological factors, early developmental factors, cognitive factors, temperament, environmental influences, and group dynamics."[14] He does, however, point to four basic psychological traits common to terrorists: A) a general attraction to ideological issues; B) a personal stake in the movement or resonance with its message through "strongly perceived oppression, humiliation, or persecution; an extraordinary need for identity, glory, or vengeance;" C) "low cognitive flexibility, low tolerance for ambiguity, and elevated tendency toward attribution error"; and D) "a capacity to suppress both instinctive and learned moral constraints against harming innocents."[15]

Building on this analysis, Martha Crenshaw writes that "there is no one terrorist personality or simple profile, although it is the case that most but not all active terrorists are young men. … Members of underground conspiracies often knew each other before being recruited into the

---

[14] Jeff Victoroff, "The Mind of a Terrorist: A Review and Critique of Psychological Approaches," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (February 2005), 32.
[15] Ibid., 35.

organization; they were high school or college friends, siblings, or were joined by other affective bonds."[16]

For many jihadists, their attraction to the group has less to do with the ideology of the movement than with what the group provides *them*: "Individuals decide to form or join such violent groups for a variety of motives. They may act because they have experienced personal humiliation or loss. Others seek financial gain or social stature. Many identify as strongly with the group as with the political cause that it represents. … We should not assume that the content of radical beliefs, particularly within Islam, is the primary cause of the terrorism that we face today. Focusing only on doctrine may lead us to ignore important changes in the context for terrorism, such as globalization and protracted political conflicts."[17] The evolution of global jihadism on the Internet is one such important change in the context of terrorism today.

3.2.2. Profiling the Modern Terrorist

Recognizing that it is not possible to definitively profile the psychological motivations of a terrorist, some researchers have tried a more empirical, data-driven approach. Psychologist Marc Sageman has analyzed a large database of recent terrorist attacks, which has led him to describe three waves of modern jihadist terrorism.[18] The first wave involved the original leadership of al-Qaida—those who fought the Soviets and developed their bonds during the 1980s. These *mujahideen* then turned their sights on the West, developing the ideology of global jihad that drives al-Qaida and some other terrorist groups. The second wave began in the 1990s as young middle class Muslims volunteered to attack Western targets, having been inspired by the actions

---

[16] Martha Crenshaw, "Have Motivations for Terrorism Changed?" in Jeff Victoroff, ed., *Tangled Roots : Social and Psychological Factors in the Genesis of Terrorism* (IOS Press, 2006), 54.
[17] Ibid., 55.
[18] Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 49.

of those in the first wave. The third wave discussed by Sageman began after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and primarily involves second-generation Muslim immigrants in the West, many of whom have struggled to reconcile their Muslim heritage with their new Western society. Terrorist groups in this third wave are formed through bonds of family and friendship.[19] This framing of "waves" of terrorism has been echoed by a number of other terrorism experts, including some government agencies.[20]

Sageman explains that "these third-wave groups form in the same way the second-wave groups formed, so they are already friends and family. Most have known each other all their lives."[21] Thus, real-world connections have been integral to the formation of terrorist networks in each of the recent waves of jihadist terrorism. In addition, a profile of a modern jihadist commonly includes the following characteristics: young males; a limited religious understanding; limited education (high school or less); immigrant (often second-generation); existing connection (friendship or kinship) to others in the movement[22]; and voluntary membership in the movement.[23] It is important to note that these characteristics were based on a *majority* of the cases, not all of them. There are always exceptions.

In a study differentiating between violent extremist Muslims and nonviolent extremist Muslims, Jamie Bartlett identified a number of characteristics that separate terrorists from their moderate Muslim colleagues. Among these traits is a disdain for Western society and culture; a lack of religious upbringing; a shallow understanding of Islam; a refusal to engage in the

---

[19] Ibid.

[20] See, for example, *Violent Jihad in the Netherlands: Current Trends in the Islamist Terrorist Threat*, (Netherlands: Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2006), http://www.fas.org/irp/world/netherlands/violent.pdf.

[21] Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, 141.

[22] Sageman notes two primary paths through which people join these networks. The first is an existing real-world group of a "bunch of guys" that collectively decides to take up the cause. Alternatively, an individual can rekindle a childhood friendship with a person already involved with a terrorist group.

[23] Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, 48-70.

political process; and elements of an identity crisis.[24] Measurement of these traits is extremely difficult, and it is important to note that some of these attitudes are displayed by violent and nonviolent extremists alike.

3.3. Current "Typical" Violent Jihadist

The above works find some significant agreement on the characteristics of modern violent jihadist. The modern jihadist is most likely to be a second-generation male immigrant to the West in his early twenties. He is unlikely to have gone to college (often because of his young age), and may have dropped out of high school. He is not a career criminal, but may turn to crime once he has embraced jihad in order to finance his terrorist activities. His primary motivation for radicalization is the U.S. invasion of Iraq along with a strong desire to become a martyr and fight on the "front lines" in Chechnya, Afghanistan, or Iraq. Generally, an identity crisis or lack of direction in his own life causes him to turn to religion as a way to escape the hopelessness of his own life. In addition, the narrative provided by jihadism of a "war between Islam and the West" often provides a convenient explanation for his own failures.

The typical jihadist is unlikely to come from a religious family and thus finds Islam later in life. This lack of religious background makes him unable to put the extremist views he encounters into context, and thus, he is more susceptible to jihadist views. According to Sageman, the likeliness of an extremist having a religious upbringing is dependent on geography—generally, those raised in the West have secular upbringings, and those from the Middle East and Southeast Asia become devoted to Islam earlier in life.[25]

---

[24] Jamie Bartlett, Jonathan Birdwell, and Michael King, *The Edge of Violence: A Radical Approach to Extremism* (London: Demos, 2010).
[25] Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, 51.

Terrorist groups and cells are generally formed on their own initiative, rather than being recruited or organized by an outside organization such as al-Qaida. In addition, these groups consist of friends and family—most members of such cells know each other before pursuing violent jihad. Sometimes one member will go to Afghanistan for training, returning to his home country as a hero and inspiration in the eyes of friends and family, who he is then able to organize into a terrorist group. Alternatively, the cell members may slowly become radicalized as a group, pushing each others' beliefs toward violent extremism.

4. Are Online Jihadists Different?

Over the past decade, we have come to a better understanding of the threat posed by modern jihadist terrorism. The above authors have established a profile of modern terrorists that primarily includes terrorists who have not been active participants in the online jihadist community. This study profiles 20 recent online jihadists who have made the transition to real-world terrorism. These cases will then be compared to the existing profile of a modern terrorist.

4.1. Profiles of Recent Online Jihadists

Mirsad Bektašević

On October 19, 2005, Mirsad Bektašević was arrested in his aunt's apartment in Sarajevo, Bosnia, where police found over 40 pounds of explosives, detonators, wiring, and a suicide bomber's belt.[1] His computer showed evidence of communication with a number of other online jihadists, eventually leading to the arrest of several of these accomplices.[2] Police also discovered tapes and planning documents made by Bektašević and shared via the Internet with a number of like-minded jihadists as evidence of his commitment to carry out a terrorist attack.

Bektašević was born to a Muslim family near Sarajevo on July 30, 1987.[3] His father was killed in a car accident when he was a young boy, and he grew up during the breakup of the former Soviet Union, when Bosnian Muslims were an easy target for Croatian militants.[4] Eventually, his mother was forced to flee with him and his younger brother to Sweden in 1992.

---

[1] BBC News, "Trio 'Linked to Terrorist Films,'" April 25, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6592537.stm.
[2] Brian Krebs, "Terrorism's Hook into Your Inbox," *Washington Post*, July 5, 2007, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/07/05/AR2007070501153.html.
[3] Global Jihad, "Mirsad Bektasevic," August 15, 2007, http://www.globaljihad.net/view_page.asp?id=382.
[4] United Nations, "Judgment of the International Tribunal for the Prosecution of Persons Responsible for Serious Violations of International Humanitarian Law Committed in the Territory of Former Yugoslavia since 1991," March 31, 2003, http://www.icty.org/x/cases/naletilic_martinovic/tjug/en/nal-tj030331-e.pdf.

While Bektašević eventually gained Swedish citizenship, his loyalty apparently lay with his ethnic roots in Bosnia, and he returned to visit family there several times. It is unclear exactly when he radicalized, but he likely dropped out of high school before the age of 18. In September of 2005, he returned to Bosnia to meet a Danish citizen of Turkish descent who he had met on the Internet through the jihadist community.[5] The two learned from various websites and other online jihadists how to construct bombs and collected information on a variety of possible targets around Europe. These activities quickly attracted the attention of Serbian police, who arrested them less than a month after their arrival.[6]

Ehsanul Sadequee and Syed Ahmed

The arrest of Bektašević led authorities to Younes Tsouli,[7] a Moroccan-born London resident who had been actively spreading pro-jihadist materials over the Internet since 2003.[8] Tsouli was also an active member of the online jihadist community, and his communications led authorities to Ehsanul Islam Sadequee and Syed Haris Ahmed in Atlanta, GA, who had been working to establish a terrorist cell in North America.[9] In March of 2005, the two men traveled to Canada to meet with several other jihadists they had met over the Internet in hopes they would be able to hide out in Canada after they attacked the U.S.[10] The following month, Sadequee and Ahmed

---

[5] Stefan Lisinski, "Säpo utreder mehjälp till terrorbrott (SAPO Investigating Aiding of Terrorists)," *Daily News*, November 11, 2005, http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/sapo-utreder-medhjalp-till-terrorbrott-1.410170.
[6] Global Jihad, "Mirsad Bektasevic."
[7] N.B. Tsouli is not considered in this analysis because his activities, while directly supportive of terrorist activities, remained exclusively online. He himself never undertook real-world terrorist activity.
[8] Gordon Corera, "Al-Qaeda's 007," *The Sunday Times*, January 16, 2008, http://women.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/women/the_way_we_live/article3191517.ece.
[9] U.S. Department of Justice, "Terrorism Defendants Sentenced in Atlanta," December 14, 2009, http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2009/December/09-nsd-1338.html.
[10] Frontline World, "Canada: The Cell Next Door," January 30, 2007, http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/about/episodes/602_transcript.html.

made casing videos of various targets around Washington, DC and provided these videos to members of the Lashkar-e-Taiba terrorist group in Pakistan via the Internet.[11]

Sadequee, who met Ahmed at a mosque near Georgia Tech, was a second-generation Bangladeshi born in Fairfax, VA in 1986.[12] He was homeschooled until high school, when he was sent to a British school in Bangladesh, before returning to the U.S. in 2004.[13] It is unclear when he became radicalized, but he and Ahmed began plotting terrorist attacks with those they met online the following year. He returned to Bangladesh in August of 2005 to get married, where he remained active in the online jihadist community. He was arrested in April of 2006 and subsequently handed over to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).[14] He was tried and sentenced to 17 years in prison.[15]

Ahmed was born in Pakistan in 1984, and his family immigrated to Atlanta when he was 12. His father was a professor of computer science at North Georgia University.[16] He studied mechanical engineering at Georgia Tech University, but traveled to Pakistan in July 2005, initially hoping to visit a Lashkar-e-Taiba training camp. Eventually, he gave up and returned to Georgia.[17] Back in Atlanta, he continued his research and communications online and was approached by FBI agents in March of 2006 who questioned him about his activities. He voluntarily answered their questions, and "amid efforts to deny his illegal activities and mislead

---

[11] John Murgatroyd, "Ex-Georgia Tech Student Convicted on Terrorism Charge," *CNN Justice*, June 10, 2009, http://articles.cnn.com/2009-06-10/justice/georgia.terror.trial_1_solitary-confinement-jury-trial-georgia-tech-student.
[12] Anthony Lake, "Second Alleged Atlanta Terrorist Ehsanul Sadequee Begins Trial; Representing Self, August 4, 2009, http://www.federalcriminaldefenseblog.com/2009/08/articles/terrorism-1/second-alleged-atlanta-terrorist-ehsanul-islam-sadequee-begins-trial-representing-self/.
[13] Michelle Malkin, "Accused Jihadists in Georgia," April 20, 2006, http://michellemalkin.com/2006/04/20/accused-jihadists-in-georgia/.
[14] Bangladesh Observer, "US-born Bangladeshi held in Dhaka, handed over to FBI?" April 22, 2006, http://newsfrombangladesh.net/view.php?hidRecord=102304.
[15] U.S. Department of Justice, "Terrorism Defendants Sentenced in Atlanta."
[16] Frontline World, "Interview with Syed Riaz Ahmed," January 30, 2007, http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/canada602/interview_ahmed.html.
[17] Ibid.

the agents, Ahmed made increasingly incriminating statements," while warning Sadequee of the FBI's interest, telling him not to return to the U.S.[18] The FBI finally arrested Ahmed on March 23, 2006, and he was tried and sentenced to 13 years in prison.

Fahim Ahmad and Zakaria Amara

The men that Sadequee and Ahmed had visited in Canada in 2005 were part of a group of 18 individuals plotting terrorist attacks in Canada. On June 2, 2006, Canadian police rounded up all 18 of these people in connection with a terrorist plot to attack the Canadian parliament and other government buildings. These arrests were the culmination of an investigation that had begun in 2002 when authorities became alarmed at the online activities of Fahim Ahmad in Ontario.[19] Ahmad had moved with his family from Afghanistan to Canada when he was 10, eventually meeting Zakaria Amara in high school.[20] The two immediately connected. Amara had come to Canada when he was 12, after living in both Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Both youths felt out of place because of their strong Muslim faith and the relative unfamiliarity of Canadian culture.

The two began spending more time together and with other Muslim students, particularly after Amara's parents divorced, which drove him to become more religious.[21] Both men married strict Muslim women around the end of high school, though Ahmad's father so disagreed with his marriage that he kicked him out of the house. At the same time, Ahmad and Amara began a blog to profess their beliefs, and both became more involved in the online jihadist community. In

---

[18] U.S. Department of Justice, "Terrorism Defendants Sentenced in Atlanta."
[19] Frontline World, "Canada: The Cell Next Door."
[20] Isabel Teotonio, "The Battle of Toronto," *Toronto Star*, http://www3.thestar.com/static/toronto18/index.1.html.
[21] Ibid.

addition, both men's new wives were very active in that same online community, encouraging their husbands to pursue violent jihad.[22]

Throughout 2005, Ahmad was particularly busy connecting to online jihadists and even hosted several foreign contacts that he had met online while they were visiting Canada in March (among them Sadequee and Ahmed). Both he and Amara, who had dropped out of college, began building a group of like-minded supporters, and in December, the two men organized a training camp for their growing cell.[23] But Amara became frustrated with the slow pace of the group and formed a splinter cell, intent on committing a violent attack as soon as possible.[24] He used instructions he found online to build a remote detonator and began researching how to make a bomb. Meanwhile, Canadian intelligence had successfully infiltrated the group with an informant, keeping a close eye on the cell's planning, which took place throughout 2006.[25] While Ahmad organized another training camp in spring of 2006, Amara developed a plan to assault Parliament Hill in Toronto with car bombs and to behead various politicians until the government agreed to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan.[26] Ultimately, Ahmad and Amara were arrested along with 16 other accomplices. Ahmad was sentenced to 18 years and Amara to life in prison.[27]

Bryant Vinas

Bryant Neal Vinas was a fairly typical American kid—a former Boy Scout and altar boy who grew up in Long Island. However, his mother and father, who had immigrated from Argentina

---

[22] Omar El Akkad and Greg McArthur, "Hateful Chatter Behind the Veil," June 29, 2006, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/hateful-chatter-behind-the-veil/article832952/.

[23] Megan O'Toole, "Sentence Toronto 18's 'Ideological Leader' to 18 Years, Crown Says," September 27, 2010, http://news.nationalpost.com/2010/09/27/toronto-18s-asad-ansari-to-be-sentenced/.

[24] Isabel Teotonio, "The Battle of Toronto."

[25] Frontline World, "Canada: The Cell Next Door."

[26] Ibid.

[27] Megan O'Toole, "Sentence Toronto 18's 'Ideological Leader' to 18 Years."

and Peru, respectively, divorced in 2000, which deeply affected Vinas.[28] According to a friend, "his father's infidelity … had left him disillusioned with Catholicism."[29] After graduating from high school in 2002, he joined the Army, but washed out after only a few weeks. While working as a truck driver and at a car wash, he converted to Islam in 2004 and began worshipping at a mosque near his father's house.

At the same time, Vinas began visiting radical jihadist websites and communicating with extremists both online and offline.[30] This extremist community began to dominate his life and he eventually left his mosque because he found it too moderate. In the summer of 2007, he began telling friends he wanted to travel to Pakistan, claiming he wanted to study Islam and receive treatment for back pain. He succeeded in arranging a trip in September 2007, eventually joining militants in Afghanistan and training with al-Qaida operatives.[31] He took part in several operations against American troops in Afghanistan and helped plan terrorist operations that would take place in the U.S.[32] He was finally arrested when he returned to Peshawar to search for a wife in October 2008.[33]

---

[28] Michael Powell, "U.S. Recruit Reveals How Qaeda Trains Foreigners," July 23, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/24/nyregion/24terror.html.
[29] Paul Cruickshank, Nic Robertson, and Ken Shiffman, "The Radicalization of an All-American Kid," *CNN Justice*, May 13, 2010, http://articles.cnn.com/2010-05-13/justice/bryant.neal.vinas.part1_1_qaeda-american-family-young-child.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Michael Powell, "U.S. Recruit Reveals How Qaeda Trains Foreigners."
[32] Henrick Karoliszyn and John Marzulli, "Long Island-bred Terrorist's Plea Reveals LIRR Plot," *NY Daily News*, July 24, 2009, http://www.nydailynews.com/news/ny_crime/2009/07/24/2009-07-24_terrorists_plea_reveals_lirr_plot.html.
[33] Claire Suddath, "Bryant Neal Vinas: An American in Al Qaeda," *Time*, July 24, 2009, http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1912512,00.html.

Nicky Reilly

Born in London in 1987, Nicky Reilly was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome at the age of nine and has an IQ of 83.[34] With both his father and brother in prison, he had a tumultuous home-life and "neighbors painted a picture of a friendless, reclusive, vulnerable young man."[35] After splitting up with a girlfriend, he tried to commit suicide several times, becoming more reclusive and spending hours on his computer.[36]

After the September 11 attacks, Reilly began visiting jihadist websites and communicating with British Muslims, eventually converting and changing his name to Mohammed Rashid.[37] The other radicals apparently convinced him to attempt a bomb attack on a café in Exeter. Using directions he found online, he built two nail bombs and set out for the café on May 22, 2008.[38] Fortunately, while trying to arm the bombs in the bathroom of the café, one of them exploded, injuring only Reilly.

Abdel Shehadeh

It is unclear when exactly Abdel Hameed Shehadeh became radicalized, but his goal of becoming a violent jihadist seemed always out of reach. Born and raised in Staten Island, NY in 1989, Shehadeh turned his attention to the online jihadist community in 2008 after graduating from high school. He began posting on jihadist forums and in June attempted to travel to Pakistan (ostensibly to study at an Islamic university), but was turned away at the airport once he

---

[34] Adam Fresco, "Nicky Reilly, Muslim Convert, Jailed for 18 Years for Exeter Bomb Attack," *The Sunday Times*, January 31, 2009, http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/crime/article5619151.ece.
[35] Michael Seamark and Colin Fernandez, "Face of the 'Nail Bomber': Police Were Tailing Muslim Convert Before Restaurant Attack," *DailyMail*, May 23, 2008, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1021502/Face-nail-bomber-Police-tailing-Muslim-convert-restaurant-attack.html.
[36] Nick Allen and Richard Savill, "Neighbours Tell of Nicky Reilly's Troubled Past," *Telegraph*, May 23, 2008, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2017366/Exeter-explosionNeighbours-tell-of-Nicky-Reillys-troubled-past.html.
[37] Adam Fresco, "Nicky Reilly, Muslim Convert, Jailed for 18 Years for Exeter Bomb Attack."
[38] Ibid.

arrived.[39] After returning to the U.S., Shehadeh created several websites of his own to express his jihadist beliefs and to mirror the writings of Anwar al-Awlaki.[40]

Later in 2008 he went to the Times Square Army recruiting center and attempted to join, but was turned away for not revealing his trip to Pakistan. Authorities speculated that his goal was to receive military training and be deployed to Iraq where he would turn on his fellow soldiers.[41] This led the FBI to question him and begin monitoring his online activities. Two weeks later, he tried to travel to Jordan, but was again turned away by authorities.[42] A few months later, in April 2009, Shehadeh traveled to Hawaii without telling his family, where he visited the SWAT gun club to practice on a variety of weapons.[43] Then in June, he purchased a ticket to Dubai, where he hoped to travel to Somalia, but he had been placed on the no-fly list. After further investigation by the FBI, Shehadeh was finally arrested in October 2010 and transferred back to New York for trial.[44]

Michael Finton

Michael Finton was a textbook example of a troubled American youth. A foster child raised in California, he went to high school in Michigan, before being expelled for fighting with a

[39] Kareem Fahim, "Hearing Is Held for Man Accused of Jihadist Ties," *New York Times*, November 2, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/03/nyregion/03staten.html.

[40] Global Jihad, "Abdel Shehadeh Held in NY Without Bail," March 11, 2010, http://www.globaljihad.net/view_news.asp?id=1735.

[41] NY Daily News, "Abdel Hameed Shehadeh, Staten Island Jihadi Busted After All-Too-Grueling Investigation," October 27, 2010, http://www.nydailynews.com/opinions/2010/10/27/2010-10-27_ever_on_guard.html.

[42] Richard Serrano, "Alleged Would-Be Terrorist Thwarted at Every Turn," *Los Angeles Times*, October 26, 2010, http://www.latimes.com/sc-dc-1026-hawaii-terrorism-20101026,0,101011.story.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Alton Parrish, "U.S. Citizen Abdel Hameed Shehadeh Tried to Join Taliban, Arrested for False Statements Involving International Terrorism," October 27, 2010, http://beforeitsnews.org/story/237/987/U.S._Citizen_Abdel_Hameed_Shehadeh_Tried_to_Join_Taliban,_Arrested_for_False_Statements_Involving_International_Terrorism.html.

teacher.[45] He moved to Illinois and was soon arrested for robbery and aggravated battery, serving seven years of a 12 year sentence.[46] It was in prison that Finton converted to Islam, posting online under the screen name "Talib Islam" about his beliefs and his desire to move to Saudi Arabia. A few months after his release from prison, he was given $1,375 by a man in Saudi Arabia whom he had met on the Internet, whom he visited for a month in April of 2008. Over the next year, Finton worked at a restaurant in Decatur, IL, meeting several times with an FBI informant he believed to have connections to al-Qaida.[47]

In January 2009, Finton told the informant he was upset about the recent Israeli bombing of Gaza and had been searching the Internet for a way to get military training so he could "carry a gun on the front lines."[48] At this point, the informant introduced him an undercover FBI agent posing as an al-Qaida operative. Finton suggested they attack a federal building in Springfield, IL with a car bomb. The two men spent the next several months planning the attack, and the agent eventually provided Finton a fake bomb, which he tried to detonate on September 23, 2009, and was subsequently arrested.

Hosam Smadi

On September 24, 2009, Hosam Maher Husein Smadi, a 19-year-old Jordanian man, dialed a number on his cell phone that he believed would detonate a car bomb next to a 60-story glass office tower in downtown Dallas, TX. The accomplices he believed to be al-Qaida operatives were actually undercover FBI agents who had contacted him after he began posting his intent to

---

[45] Bruce Rushton, "Man Accused in Bombing Plot Known for Strong Stance on Islam," *PJStar*, September 24, 2009, http://www.pjstar.com/archive/x1800826354/Man-accused-in-bombing-plot-known-for-strong-stance-on-Islam.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Madeleine Gruen, "Attempt to Attack the Paul Findley Federal Building in Springfield, Illinois," *NEFA Foundation*, December 2009, http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/nefa_fintontargetamerica.pdf.
[48] Ibid.

commit violent jihad on online Islamist message boards.[49] Smadi had entered the U.S. in 2007 on a tourist visa, but then stayed illegally, living and working in a small town south of Dallas.[50]

Born in northern Jordan in 1990 to a middle class family, Smadi was never very religious and had many Christian friends.[51] But in 2007, after his parents divorced and his mother died of cancer soon after, he became depressed and dropped out of high school.[52] It was not long after this that Smadi traveled to the U.S., initially staying in San Jose, CA, but moving to Texas in 2008. It is unclear when exactly he began browsing jihadist websites, but he came to the attention of the FBI in January 2009, about nine months after arriving in Texas. Undercover agents subsequently contacted Smadi, posing as al-Qaida sympathizers, and Smadi began formulating a plan for a terrorist attack.[53] The agents gave him a fake bomb, which he placed and attempted to detonate, but was subsequently arrested.

Colleen LaRose

The case of "Jihad Jane" attracted worldwide media attention in March 2010. Many people were shocked to see a white American woman willing to move halfway around the world in order to help assassinate a Swedish cartoonist for drawing the Prophet Muhammad.

Colleen LaRose's life was tumultuous and meandering. She was born in Michigan and grew up in Texas, but dropped out of school before entering high school. At age 16, she briefly

---

[49] Megan Feldman, "In Federal Court Today, FBI Special Agent Lays Out Case Against Hosam Maher Smadi," *Dallas Observer*, October 5, 2009, http://blogs.dallasobserver.com/unfairpark/2009/10/in_federal_court_today_fbi_spe.php.

[50] Jason Trehan, Todd J. Gillman, and Scott Goldstein, "Dallas Bomb Plot Suspect Told Landlord He Was Moving Out," *Dallas Morning News*, September 26, 2009, http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/latestnews/stories/092409dnmetbombarrest.1b177db8b.html.

[51] Taylor Luck, "Dallas Terror Plot: Troubled Jordanian Teen or Jihadist?" *Christian Science Monitor*, September 30, 2009, http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2009/0930/p06s01-wome.html.

[52] Ibid.

[53] U.S. Department of Justice, "FBI Arrests Jordanian Citizen for Attempting to Bomb Skyskraper in Downtown Dallas," September 24, 2009, http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2009/September/09-nsd-1024.html.

married a man twice her age, and then re-married at the age of 24, divorcing again 10 years later. She lived in several towns across Texas during the 1990s, eventually moving to Philadelphia in 2004 to live with a boyfriend she had met in Texas.[54]

It was around this time that she apparently converted to Islam, empathizing with the suffering of the Palestinian people. She eventually "turned to YouTube, MySpace and electronic message boards, where she found like-minded individuals bent on supporting international terrorism."[55] Despite her apparent radicalization, friends and family were completely unaware of her transformation— even "her boyfriend of five years said LaRose had never hinted at Muslim leanings or attended religious services of any kind."[56]

But LaRose's online activities went beyond simply expressing her support for Palestinians. She had also been communicating with violent jihadists around the world.[57] Their discussion of generic threats against "Zionists and all who support them" eventually transitioned to actual planning. A Swedish cartoonist named Lars Vilks became the target of the developing cell for having drawn a picture of the Prophet Muhammad on the body of a dog. In August of 2009, LaRose stole her boyfriend's passport and left without a word to her friends and family, moving to Western Europe to plan and coordinate the assassination of Vilks. After traveling to several

---

[54] Associated Press, "Terror Suspect 'Jihad Jane' Pleads Not Guilty," March 18, 2010, http://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local-beat/Terror-Suspect-Jihad-Jane-Pleads-Not-Guilty-88416682.html.
[55] Carrie Johnson and Alice Crites, 'JihadJane' suspect dropped out before high school, married at 16," *The Washington Post*, March 11, 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/10/AR2010031003722.html.
[56] CBS News, "Boyfriend: 'Jihad Jane' Wasn't Religious," March 10, 2010, http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/03/10/national/main6286246.shtml.
[57] Anti-Defamation League, "'Jihad Jane' Indicted on Terror Charges in Pennsylvania," May 11, 2010, http://www.adl.org/main_Terrorism/jihad_jane_indictment.htm.

locations in Europe in preparation for the attack, she was arrested on returning to the United

States on October 16, 2009.[58]

Jamie Paulin-Ramirez

The other American woman implicated in the plot to assassinate Lars Vilks,[59] Jamie Paulin-

Ramirez, had a very troubled life before joining the jihadist movement. Raised in Blue Springs,

MO, her family eventually moved to Denver, CO.[60] She was married as many as four times in

the following years, and had a son from one of those marriages.[61] While working as a medical

assistant in Colorado, she announced to her family in early 2009 that she had converted to Islam.

Spending increasingly long periods on the Internet, she began posting angry messages on her

Facebook and MySpace pages and communicating with various jihadists. Her mother has

described her as "a troubled single mother who had the 'mentality of an abused woman' and who,

in trying to escape her loneliness, may have spiraled into the depths of Islamic extremism."[62]

One of the people she talked to online was LaRose, who introduced her (through the Internet)

to Ali Charaf Damache, another member of the cell planning to assassinate Vilks.[63] Paulin-

Ramirez apparently jumped at the opportunity to take her beliefs into the real world. On

September 11, 2009, she left Colorado without a word to her family and moved to Ireland, where

---

[58] U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Pennsylvania, "Indictment of Colleen R. LaRose," March 4, 2010, http://www.scribd.com/doc/28111132/U-S-v-Colleen-R-LaRose.

[59] It is important to note that this analysis does not include the other members of the cell that was organized around this plot. Specifically, Ali Charaf Damache (45) and Abdul Salam al-Jahani (32), who are the only two members still held by Irish authorities, but not on terrorism charges. The lack of information on these two, as well as the lack of definitive evidence of their intent to act precluded them from being considered here.

[60] Ivan Moreno, "Jamie Paulin-Ramirez Held in Connection with Plot to Assassinate Swedish Cartoonist," March 13, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/03/13/jamie-paulinramirez-held-_n_497882.html.

[61] Vanessa O'Connell, Stephanie Simon, and Evan Perez, "For the Love of Islam," March 12, 2010, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704131404575118103199708576.html.

[62] Ivan Moreno, "Jamie Paulin-Ramirez Held in Connection with Plot to Assassinate Swedish Cartoonist.".

[63] Paul Thompson, "'Jihad Jamie' is Second White U.S. Woman Arrested Over Plot to Kill Swedish Cartoonist," *DailyMail*, March 15, 2010, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1258048/Jihad-Jamie-second-white-woman-arrested-plot-kill-Swedish-cartoonist.html.

she married Damache. While LaRose was arrested shortly thereafter, Paulin-Ramirez and the other six members of the conspiracy continued their planning until their arrest on March 9, 2010.[64] Paulin-Ramirez was transferred back to the U.S., where she is currently awaiting trial.

Nidal Hasan

On November 5, 2009, Nidal Malik Hasan, a U.S. Army major, opened fire on soldiers at Fort Hood, Texas, killing 13 and injuring 38. This act of terrorism came as a surprise to most, but there were some warning signs prior to Hasan's rampage. Born to a middle class Palestinian immigrant family in Virginia, Hasan had served in the Army since entering college in 1988, eventually becoming a psychologist.[65] While serving at Fort Hood, he heard the horror stories of soldiers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq. These stories added to his existing misgivings over American foreign policy.[66] For years, "Major Hasan had focused intently on the conflict he believed some Muslim soldiers felt between their religion and their country's wars in Muslim lands."[67] Yet what appeared to be an important speculative pursuit was apparently indicative of Hasan's own personal struggle.

At least six months before the shooting, Hasan had come to the attention of law enforcement officials for online postings he may have made supporting suicide bombings.[68] While investigators were unable to determine for certain if the postings were made by Hasan, it now appears that the Army major had also been communicating with al-Qaida recruiter Anwar al-

---

[64] Shawn Pogatchnik, "Irish Arrest 7 Over Threat to Kill Swedish Artist," *ABC News*, March 9, 2010, http://abcnews.go.com/Entertainment/wireStory?id=10050445.

[65] Brett J. Blackledge, "Who is Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan?" *MyFoxDC*, November 5, 2009, http://www.myfoxdc.com/dpp/news/major-nidal-malik-hasan-fort-hood-shootings-110509.

[66] Scott Shane and James Dao, "Investigators Study Tangle of Clues on Fort Hood Suspect," *New York Times*, November 14, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/us/15hasan.html.

[67] Ibid..

[68] NBC News, "Troubling Portrait Emerges of Shooting Suspect," *MSNBC*, November 5, 2010, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/33695256/.

Awlaki, discussing his misgivings over his upcoming deployment to Afghanistan.[69] It was likely during this time that Hasan made the decision to wage jihad against the U.S. military by opening fire on his fellow soldiers. Hasan was shot in the struggle to stop his rampage, paralyzed, and is currently awaiting trial.

Umar Abdulmutallab

The so-called "Christmas Day Bomber," Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab was the youngest of 16 children of a successful Nigerian banker, raised in an upper class family.[70] He attended some of the best schools in the region and eventually enrolled at the renowned University College London, where he graduated in 2008 with a degree in mechanical engineering.[71] Yet throughout his education, he had become progressively more and more extreme in his Islamist religious beliefs. While the rest of his family was fairly devoutly Muslim, Abdulmutallab railed against his father for his "immoral" banking practices.[72]

Abdulmutallab had been active in online Muslim communities since at least February 2005, when he was still in high school. Posting as "Farouk1986," he used the Internet as a platform for his own discontentment, posing questions about his faith as well as difficulties he had in his personal life.[73] His beliefs became increasingly radical until, upon his graduation from college, his father sent him to Dubai to study business, hoping the cosmopolitan city would curb his

---

[69] Pamela Hess and Anne Gearan, "Levin: More E-mails from Fort Hood Suspect Possible," *ABC News*, November 21, 2009, http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory?id=9143884.
[70] Adam Nossiter, "Lonely Trek to Radicalism for Terror Suspect," *New York Times*, January 16, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/17/world/africa/17abdulmutallab.html.
[71] Richard Schapiro, "Flight 253 Terrorist Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab Led Life of Luxury in London Before Attack," *NYDailyNews*, December 27, 2009, http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/2009/12/27/2009-12-27_untitled__2london27m.html.
[72] Adam Nossiter, "Lonely Trek to Radicalism for Terror Suspect."
[73] Alden Levine and Jeanne Meserve, "Online Poster Appears to be Christmas Day Bomb Suspect," *CNN Justice*, December 29, 2009, http://www.cnn.com/2009/CRIME/12/29/terror.suspect.online/index.html.

extremist beliefs.[74] Instead, Abdulmutallab disappeared to Yemen, resurfacing again on a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit on December 25, 2009. As the plane passed over the American city, he tried to detonate explosives that had been sewn into his underwear.[75] The explosives did not detonate, and he was overpowered by other passengers, being placed under arrest once the plane landed.

Humam al-Balawi

Arguably the most successful example of an online jihadist-turned-terrorist is Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, a Jordanian doctor who was a popular jihadist blogger using the screen name Abu Dujana al-Khorasani. Al-Balawi was born in 1977 in Kuwait to a middle class Palestinian family, which moved to Jordan upon Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990.[76] He attended medical school in Turkey until 2002, where he met his wife, a translator and journalist.[77] The two returned to Jordan, where al-Balawi continued his training as a doctor and began volunteering in Palestinian refugee camps. He also began posting online in support of al-Qaida style jihad, eventually rising within the community to become one of its most respected bloggers.

After posting a particularly disturbing blog entry entitled "When Will My Words Drink from My Blood?" (wherein he explained his desire to go beyond online support to actually commit acts of terrorism) al-Balawi was arrested by the Jordanian security services.[78] Jordanian intelligence agents attempted to turn him to their side and convince him to infiltrate the al-Qaida

---

[74] BBC News, "Profile: Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab," October 14, 2010, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8431530.stm.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Jamal Halaby, "CIA Bomber Coerced to Work for Jordan Spy Agency," *KomoNews*, January 5, 2010, http://www.komonews.com/news/national/80766812.html.
[77] Newsweek, "The Bomber's Wife," January 7, 2010, http://www.newsweek.com/2010/01/07/the-bomber-s-wife.html.
[78] Flashpoint Intel, "As-Sahab Media: 'An Interview With The Shaheed Abu Dujaanah al-Khorasani," *NEFA Foundation*, February 28, 2010, http://flashpoint-intel.com/images/documents/pdf/0310/balawi0310-2.pdf.

organization in order to give them access to high-level figures and intelligence. According to al-Balawi, Jordanian intelligence financed his travel to Waziristan, though this has not been confirmed.[79] Once in Pakistan, he provided some intelligence, which made him a trusted source in the eyes of Jordanian and American intelligence.[80]

In December of 2009, al-Balawi convinced intelligence agents that he had made contact with Ayman al-Zawahiri, second in command of al-Qaida. He was invited to the CIA base at Camp Chapman in Khost, Afghanistan. Because of his status as a trusted informant, he was not searched until right before his debriefing. While surrounded by people, he detonated a suicide bomb, killing nine and injuring ten.[81]

Faisal Shahzad

Faisal Shahzad was born in 1979 in Pakistan to a senior military officer, which meant he enjoyed a relatively affluent upbringing.[82] After high school, he attended a college in Karachi before transferring to the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut, where he got both a BA and an MBA from 1999-2005.[83] While completing his MBA, Shahzad worked at two different finance companies and in 2004 entered into an arranged marriage with a Pakistani woman who had grown up in Colorado.[84] For a time it appeared the two were living the American dream as

---

[79] Ibid.
[80] Jamal Halaby, "CIA Bomber Coerced to Work for Jordan Spy Agency."
[81] Jeffrey Smith, Joby Warrick, and Ellen Nakashima, "CIA Bomber Struck Just Before Search," *Washington Post*, January 10, 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/09/AR2010010900758.html.
[82] Andrea Elliot, Sabrina Tavernise, and Anne Barnard, "For Times Sq. Suspect, Long Roots of Discontent," *New York Times*, May 15, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/16/nyregion/16suspect.html.
[83] Wall Street Journal, "Faisal Shahzad's Life in America and Path to Citizenship," May 4, 2010, http://blogs.wsj.com/dispatch/2010/05/04/faisal-shahzads-life-in-america-and-path-to-citizenship/.
[84] Michael P. Mayko, "Who Is Faisal Shahzad?" *CTPost*, May 5, 2010, http://www.ctpost.com/news/article/Who-is-Faisal-Shahzad-474436.php.

Shahzad successfully invested in real estate and bought a three-bedroom home for his new family shortly before the wedding.[85]

While Shahzad had always been critical of U.S. foreign policy, his criticism began to take on a new religious tone in 2006.[86] He gave up drinking, began rejecting aspects of his Western life, pressured his wife to begin wearing a hijab, and on visits to his family in Pakistan, he began to clash with his father. In 2008, he asked his father's permission to go fight in Afghanistan. His father refused and attempted to reign in his son's growing extremism. Back in America, Shahzad began using the Internet to contact like-minded radicals around the world, including al-Qaida recruiter Anwar al-Awlaki.[87] Shortly after gaining U.S. citizenship in April 2009, Shahzad left his job in hopes of finding more lucrative work in the Middle East.[88] On June 2, 2009, he phoned his wife from JFK Airport and told her he was leaving the U.S., and he flew to Dubai and then Pakistan. He briefly indicated he would stay with his family and work in Peshawar, but disappeared in December, apparently going to a Pakistani Taliban training camp.[89] He returned to the U.S. on February 3, 2010, and on May 1, he unsuccessfully attempted to detonate a car bomb in Times Square in New York, and was arrested while trying to flee the country.

Paul Rockwood

Paul and Nadia Rockwood, 35 and 36, respectively, appeared to be a neighborly and friendly couple living in a small town of King Salmon, Alaska. He was the local weatherman for the

---

[85] Andrea Elliot, "For Times Sq. Suspect, Long Roots of Discontent."
[86] Ibid.
[87] Damien McElroy, "Times Square Bomb Suspect Had Links to Terror Preacher," *The Telegraph*, May 7, 2010, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/7691929/Times-Square-bomb-suspect-had-links-to-terror-preacher.html.
[88] Michael P. Mayko, "Who Is Faisal Shahzad?"
[89] Liam Stack, "Pakistani Taliban Helped Faisal Shahzad, It's Not on US List of Terrorists?" *CSMonitor*, June 23, 2010, http://www.csmonitor.com/World/terrorism-security/2010/0623/Pakistani-Taliban-helped-Faisal-Shahzad-it-s-not-on-US-list-of-terrorists.

small town and she was a stay-at-home mom for their 4-year-old son.[90] Within King Salmon, Paul mostly kept to himself, but his wife was highly involved in the community. When the family decided in May 2010 to move to Nadia's native England, over 30 people saw them off at the town's small airport. However, waiting for them at the Anchorage airport were FBI agents, who questioned the couple about a hit-list found in Paul's luggage containing names of 20 individuals that he considered to have "desecrated Islam."[91]

It is unclear how the FBI found out about the list, but Paul had been active in the online jihadist community since the couple had moved to Alaska in 2006.[92] In order to curb a drinking problem, Paul "Rockwood converted to Islam in late 2001 or early 2002 while living in Virginia. After converting, and while residing in Virginia, Rockwood gravitated to the violent- Jihad-promoting ideology of cleric Anwar al-Awlaki."[93] He had also been researching and discussing over the Internet ways to kill his targets for years.[94] In their interview with the FBI in May, both Paul and Nadia lied about all this, which they ultimately pled guilty to on July 21, 2010.[95]

Mohamed Alessa and Carlos Almonte

Mohamed Mahmoud Alessa and Carlos Eduardo Almonte both grew up in New Jersey, where they led troubled lives before engaging in terrorist activities in June of 2010. Alessa was born in 1989 in Jersey City, NJ and grew up in North Bergen, NJ. After his freshman year at a private Islamic school, he transferred to North Bergen High School in December 2009, but was placed

---

[90] Kim Murphy, "Terrorism Case Baffles Remote Alaska Town," *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 2010, http://articles.latimes.com/print/2010/jul/23/nation/la-na-adv-alaska-terrorists-20100723-1.

[91] Investigative Project on Terrorism, "Alaskan-based Terrorist had 20-person Hit List," August 18, 2010, http://www.investigativeproject.org/blog/2010/08/alaskan-based-terrorist-had-20-person-hit-list.

[92] Anti-Defamation League, "Alaskan Couple Pleads Guilty to Terrorism Charges," August 24, 2010, http://www.adl.org/main_Terrorism/alaska_terror_charges.htm.

[93] U.S. District Court, District of Alaska, "Sentencing Memorandum," August 16, 2010, http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/1362.pdf.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Anti-Defamation League, "Alaskan Couple Pleads Guilty to Terrorism Charges."

on "home instruction" only two months later for "radical" and "threatening" behavior.[96] He transferred between several schools over the next few years, each time demonstrating the same violent behavior.

Almonte, born in the Dominican Republic in 1986, had even more troubles in high school in New Jersey, where he was arrested several times in 2004 for "increasingly violent behavior."[97] This was also the year he converted to Islam, meeting Alessa in 2005; the two began actively participating in the online jihadist community shortly thereafter.[98] The following year, the FBI began monitoring both men after receiving an anonymous tip about their online activities.[99] Over the next few years the two men discussed various plots and tried unsuccessfully during a 2007 trip to Jordan to get into Iraq and fight with terrorists there.[100]

While their activities continued to be monitored over the next few years—Almonte unintentionally attracted fame on the Internet when he posted a picture of himself online with a sign reading "death to all juice."[101] They did not again attempt to act on their beliefs until June 5, 2010, when the two men attempted to travel to Somalia to join the al-Shabaab terrorist group.[102]

---

[96] Tricia Tirella, "I Wanna, Like, Be the World's Known Terrorist," *Hudson Reporter*, June 13, 2010, http://hudsonreporter.com/view/full_story/7904296/article-%E2%80%98I-wanna--like--be-the-world%E2%80%99s-known-terrorist%E2%80%99-Arrest-arouses-North-Bergen-neighbors%E2%80%99-chatter-..

[97] Carolyn Salazar, Perry Chiaramonte, and Chuck Bennet, "Faces of Hate: Jersey Jihadis Junior Hellions," *New York Post*, June 9, 2010, http://www.nypost.com/p/news/local/the_faces_of_hate_FmR9QICZelkLzI5JDIh5EM.

[98] Michelle Ruiz, "Who Are the Alleged New Jersey Jihadists," *AOLNews*, June 13, 2010, http://www.aolnews.com/nation/article/who-are-mahmood-alessa-and-carlos-eduardo-almonte-the-alleged-nj-jihadists/19514322.

[99] New Jersey Star-Ledger, "FBI Followed Every Move of two N.J. Terror Suspects for Years, Culminating in Airport Arrests," June 13, 2010, http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2010/06/authorities_followed_every_mov.html.

[100] Matthew Van Dusen and Peter J. Sampson, "Parents of Accused Terrorist Blame FBI for Son's Interest in Jihad," *NorthJersey*, June 25, 2010, http://www.northjersey.com/news/97135424_Parents_blame_FBI.html.

[101] Alison Gendar and Rich Schapiro, "Jersey Jihadist Carlos Almonte is Terror at Spelling, Too; Proud of Sign 'Death to all Juice,'" *NYDailyNews*, June 11, 2010, http://www.nydailynews.com/ny_local/2010/06/11/2010-06-11_jersey_jihadist_spells_out_hate_death_to_all_juice.html.

[102] Anti-Defamation League, "New Jersey Residents Arrested for Attempting to Join Somali-Based Terrorist Group," June 7, 2010, http://www.adl.org/main_Terrorism/new_jersey_al_shabaab.htm.

Instead, authorities arrested them at New York's John F. Kennedy Airport before they could board their planes.

Zachary Chesser

Zachary Chesser captured headlines in April 2010, when he posted a threat on the radical Islamist site "Revolution Muslim" threatening the creators of the show "South Park" for an episode depicting the Prophet Mohammed in a bear suit.[103] Only two years earlier, Chesser, born and raised in Virginia, had graduated from high school, where he was a member of the school's breakdancing club.[104] Yet over the following summer, he converted to Islam and began communicating with radicals such as Anwar al-Awlaki online.[105] He briefly attended George Mason University, where he met a Muslim woman who was also active in the online jihadist community. The two were married in early 2009 and they had a son a few months later. [106]

Over the next year, Chesser became more active in the online community, and in March 2010, he attended a rally in front of the White House organized by Revolution Muslim, at which he called President Obama "an enemy of our religion and a tyrant."[107] He also began to express a desire to travel to Somalia in order to receive training from and fight with the al-Shabaab terrorist group. He attempted twice during 2010 to travel to Somalia with his wife and infant son,

---

[103] Edecio Martinez, "Zachary Chesser Threatened 'South Park' Creators Over Muhammad, Now Charged in Terror Case, *CBS News*, July 22, 2010, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-504083_162-20011302-504083.html.
[104] Tara Bahrampour, "Internet Helped Muslim Convert from Northern Virginia Embrace Extremism at Warp Speed," *Washington Post*, November 2, 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/11/01/AR2010110106394.html.
[105] Anti-Defamation League, "Abu Talhah al-Amrikee: An Extensive Online Footprint," April 20, 2010, http://www.adl.org/main_Terrorism/abu_talhah.htm.
[106] Anti-Defamation League, "Wife of Virginia Man Who Threatened South Park Pleads Guilty," October 19, 2010, http://www.adl.org/main_Terrorism/nzabanita_chesser.htm.
[107] Anti-Defamation League, "Abu Talhah al-Amrikee."

but was thwarted first by his mother-in-law and then by his name appearing on the no-fly list.[108]

His online activities and attempts to travel to Somalia allowed authorities to build a case against

him, and he was arrested on July 21, 2010.[109]

[108] Soraya Roberts, "Virginia Man Who Threatened 'South Park' Creators Charged with Trying to Join Somali Terrorist Group," *NYDailyNews*, July 22, 2010, http://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/2010/07/22/2010-07-22_virginia_man_who_threatened_south_park_creators_charged_with_trying_to_join_soma.html.
[109] Meghan Louttit and Tara Bahrampour, "Zachary Chesser Timeline," *Washington Post*, October 27, 2010, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/metro/zac-chesser/.

4.2. Analyzing the Data

Table 2 represents the examined cases of violent online jihadists broken down along 15 separate factors: **Date**, **Age**, **Ethnicity**, **Immigration Status**, **Education**, **Religious Upbringing**, **Socio-economic Class**, **Openness about Beliefs**, **Suicidal Tendencies**, **Rhetoric Focus**, **Location**, **Target**, **Terrorist Action**, **Offline Activity**, and **Online Activity**. Some of these factors may require further explanation, which can be found on the next page.

Table 2. Selected Cases of Violent Online Jihadists															
Case	**Date**	**Age**	**Eth.**	**Imgrnt**	**Ed.**	**RU**	**Class**	**Openness**	**Suicidal?**	**Rhetoric**	**Location**	**Target**	**Terrorist Action**	**Offline Activity**	**Online Activity**
Mirsad Bektašević	10/19/05	18	Bos	1st	<HS	Mus	LC	No	No	IRQ	Sweden	EUR/CIV	CL/B	Mod	Ext
Syed Haris Ahmed	3/23/06	21	Pak	1st	<BA	Mus	MC	No	No	USA	GA, US	US/CIV	REC	Mod	Ext
Ehsanul Sadequee	4/20/06	19	Bng	2nd	HS	Mus	MC	No	No	USA	GA, US	US/CIV	REC	Mod	Ext
Fahim Ahmad	6/2/06	21	Afg	1st	HS	Mus	LC	Yes	No	AFG	Ontario	CAN/CIV	CL/TR	Ext	Ext
Zakaria Amara	6/2/06	21	Jor	1st	HS	Chr	LC	Yes	No	AFG	Ontario	CAN/CIV	CL/TR/B	Ext	Min
Bryant Vinas	9/10/07	26	Cau	2nd	HS	Chr	MC	No	No	??	NY, US	AFG/FL	TR/R	Ext	Min
Nicky Reilly	3/22/08	22	Cau	No	HS	No	LC	Mod	Yes	MUS	London	UK/CIV	B	Mod	Ext
Abdel Shehadeh	6/13/08	21	Pal	No	HS	Mus	MC	Mod	No	USA	NY, US	AFG/FL	TR	Min	Ext
Michael Finton	9/23/09	29	Cau	No	<HS	Chr	LC	Yes	No	PAL	IL, US	US/CIV	B	Mod	Mod
Hosam Smadi	9/24/09	19	Jor	1st	<HS	No	MC	No	No	??	TX, US	US/CIV	B	Mod	Mod
Colleen LaRose	10/16/09	46	Cau	No	<HS	Chr	LC	No	Yes	PAL	PA, US	EUR/I	CL/A	Min	Ext
Nidal Malik Hasan	11/5/09	39	Pal	2nd	MA	Mus	MC	Mod	??	IRQ/AFG	TX, US	US/MIL	SA	Min	Min
Umar Abdulmutallab	12/25/09	23	Nig	No	BA	Mus	UC	Yes	No	USA	Nigeria	US/CIV	TR/B	Mod	Mod
Humam al-Balawi	12/30/09	32	Pal	No	MA	Mus	MC	Yes	Yes	IRQ/PAL	Jordan	AFG/FL	TR/B	Min	Ext
Jamie Paulin-Ramirez	3/9/10	31	Cau	No	HS	Chr	LC	Mod	No	USA	CO, US	EUR/I	CL/A	Min	Ext
Faisal Shahzad	5/1/10	31	Pak	1st	MA	No	UC	Yes	No	IRQ	CT, US	US/CIV	TR/B	Min	Min
Paul Rockwood	5/19/10	35	Cau	No	MA	Chr	MC	Mod	No	MUS	AK, US	US/CIV/MIL	A	Min	Mod
Mohammed Alessa	6/5/10	20	Jor	2nd	HS	Mus	MC	Yes	No	IRQ/PAL	NJ, US	SML/FL	TR	Ext	Min
Carlos Almonte	6/5/10	24	Cau	1st	HS	Chr	MC	Yes	No	IRQ/PAL	NJ, US	SML/FL	TR	Ext	Min
Zachary Chesser	7/21/10	20	Cau	No	HS	No	MC	Mod	No	MUS	VA, US	SML/FL	TR	Ext	Ext

4.2.1. Explanation of the Data

Date refers to the date the individual either a) acted, or b) was arrested.

Age refers to the age of the person at the time they moved their beliefs into the real world and committed to carrying out violent jihad.

Eth. is the person's ethnic background and is simplified to preserve space: Afg(hani); B(a)ng(ladeshi); Cau(casian); Jor(danian); Nig(erian); Pak(istani); Pal(estinian).

Imgrnt? refers to whether or not the individual was an immigrant to the country in which they lived and planned their action. **1st** = First Generation Immigrant; **2nd** = Second Generation Immigrant.

Ed. is the highest level of education completed by the individual. **<HS** = Dropped Out of High School; **HS** = Completed High School; **<BA** = Dropped Out of College; **BA** = Completed College; **MA** = Any Completed Education Beyond College (includes MBA, MD, etc.).

RU (Religious Upbringing) refers to what religion the individual was raised to believe in. **Chr** = Christian; **Mus** = Muslim; **No** = Individual had minimal religious upbringing.

Class refers to the person's relative socioeconomic class. **LC** = Lower Class; **MC** = Middle Class; **UC** = Upper Class.

Openness refers to how open the individual was about their radical beliefs with those around them, particularly non-extremists. **No** = the individual did not share their beliefs with anyone around them; **Mod** = people around the jihadist were aware they held some extreme beliefs, but unaware of the extent; **Yes** = anyone who knew the jihadist for more than a few minutes knew they held radical beliefs.

Suicidal? measures whether or not the jihadist was openly suicidal, possibly having attempted suicide before.

Rhetoric explains the focus of the individual's animosity, if it was apparent. **AFG** = Invasion of Afghanistan; **IRQ** = Invasion of Iraq; **MUS** = Anger over the Treatment of Muslims in the World; **PAL** = Israeli/Palestinian Conflict; **USA** = General Disdain for the U.S. and its policies.

Location refers to the jihadist's location at the time they committed to carrying out a terrorist act. This is not necessarily where the intended action was to take place, but rather where the individual went from being an online supporter to a real-world terrorist.

Target gives a short-hand explanation of the individual's intended target, providing both the location and the nature of the target. **AFG** = Afghanistan; **CAN** = Canada; **EUR** = Europe; **SML** = Somalia; **UK** = Britain; **US** = America. **CIV** = Civilians Targeted; **FL** = Front Lines Targeted; **I** = Individual Targeted; **MIL** = Military Targeted.

Terrorist Action provides the type of action taken (or attempted) by the jihadist.
A = Assassination; **B** = Bomb; **CL** = Organized a Terrorist Cell; **R** = Rocket Attack; **REC** = Reconnaissance; **SA** = Attack with Small Arms; **TR** = Training.

Offline Activity categorizes the extent of offline activity the person engaged in related to their jihadist activity, but prior to actually acting. **Ext** = Extensive Activity—the jihadist met with other extremists regularly and may have even organized a cell; **Mod** = Moderate Activity—the jihadist engaged with other extremists offline, but largely pursued violent jihad on their own or via the Internet; **Min** = Minimal Activity—the jihadist's extremist views remained almost entirely online before acting.

Online Activity categorizes the extent to which the individual was an active member of the online jihadist community prior to taking action. **Ext** = Extensive Activity—the jihadist was known by many in the community and spent a great deal of time on multiple jihadist sites; **Mod** = Moderate Activity—the jihadist knew a few people online and posted on some forums, but it did not consume their life; **Min** = Minimal Activity—the jihadist used the Internet for research and may have participated a little in the jihadist community, but was not very active.

4.2.2. Comparing the Cases

Given the above data, there is no definite model of an online jihadist into which all the cases fit—they are each unique. However, a few trends do emerge:

Basic Attributes

- *Age*: The average age of the terrorists in this sample was 26. However, the median age was 22.5, indicating that violent online jihadists are most likely to be in their early twenties. The six cases of jihadists over 30 should not be discounted, though, particularly since each of these cases took place in the last two years (2009-10). This could indicate a trend among online jihadist-turned-terrorist toward an older demographic. Unfortunately, given that the selected cases do not represent every possible recent case of violent online jihadist, it is impossible to make any definitive conclusion concerning such a possibility.

- *Ethnicity*: There were a surprising number of Caucasian terrorists in the cases examined. Eight of the cases involved Caucasians (including the two Latino cases); another eight involved people of Arab descent. The remaining cases involved non-Arabs from Muslim countries or countries with large Muslim populations.

- Interestingly, even though several of the cases involved Pakistan in some way, only two of the terrorists were actually of Pakistani descent. Similarly, none of the jihadists who attempted to travel to Somalia were of Somali origin. This indicates that for many online jihadists, kinship ties to perceived "front line" countries are not required for them to seek training there.

- ***Immigration Status***: Eleven of the cases involved individuals who were either first- or second-generation immigrants. While this is not conclusive in proving the relevance of immigration status to the development of each jihadist, there is an apparent correlation between immigration status and online jihadists. However, if we consider that second-generation immigrants were natives to their countries, that means that approximately two-thirds of the cases involved what could be considered "homegrown" terrorists. Interestingly, these terrorists' targets were rarely their home countries (*see below*).

- ***Religious Upbringing***: Less than half the cases (nine) involved individuals who were brought up as Muslims. Seven had Christian upbringings, and four had no specific religious upbringing. This indicates that a Muslim upbringing is not necessary for online jihadists to embrace the Islamist ideology.

- ***Education***: Fifteen of the cases involved individuals with a high school education or less. This could be an indication that a lack of education limits the prospects of potential recruits, leading them to more readily embrace the jihadist movement. For some of the jihadists, though, this is simply an indication of how early in life they joined the movement. While this study was primarily concerned with the age at which the individuals shifted from online supporters of jihad to real-world terrorists, some of the people in the sample were involved in the online jihadist community for years before they

acted. While a lack of education clearly predisposes someone to get involved in the online jihadist community, the quarter of the cases involving people with a college education or greater indicates that education does not completely inoculate an individual against extremist beliefs.

- *Socio-economic Class*: Seven of the cases involved a poor/lower class person. For these individuals, the online jihadist community likely provided an escape from an otherwise frustrating or intolerable life, as well as an excuse for the problems they had encountered. The eleven cases involving middle class individuals demonstrate that socio-economic status is not clearly correlated with attraction to the online jihadist community. For these individuals (as well as the two upper class cases), factors beyond poor economic conditions were the likely driver for their interest in jihadism.

Psychology

- *Suicidal Tendencies*: While only three of the cases involved people who had demonstrated suicidal tendencies prior to acting, most of the people also indicated that they were willing (or even eager) to be martyrs. This indicates that the desire to be a martyr is more closely related to a desire for glory or respect than any suicidal tendencies.
- *Immigration Status*: Almost all the individuals who were immigrants seemed to have trouble fitting into their adopted societies, regardless of their religious roots. In addition, nearly all of these individuals targeted their adoptive countries. Those that did not directly target their countries indicated a willingness to do so, such as Eduardo Almonte and Mohammed Alessa, who, after failing to travel to Somalia, said "We'll start killing

here, if I can't do it over there."[1] This suggests that immigrants feel less attachment to their adoptive countries, and may indicate that their problems acclimating have less to do with them being Muslim than with them being immigrants.

- ***Religious Upbringing***: A number of the cases considered here featured individuals who made a rapid transition into the jihadist movement. This may indicate that the online community is able to indoctrinate individuals quickly due to the readily-available pro-jihadist materials and large community of supporters ready to embrace and encourage a potential recruit. In addition, this further supports the idea that the sense of community provided by the movement was more important to its adherents than the details of the ideology.

Ideology and Rhetoric

- ***Religious Upbringing***: The fact that more than half of the individuals examined here converted to Islam later in life could indicate that the lack of religious upbringing and education denies people the context into which they can put jihadist ideas. The oversimplified ideology of jihadism provides people easy answers; the fact that they have no previous knowledge of Islam means they do not have to square these new ideas with existing beliefs about Islam.

- ***Rhetoric Focus***: For many of the cases, specific grievances against the West were largely irrelevant—only some of the terrorists cited specific complaints. General complaints against the U.S. and/or discrimination against Muslims worldwide accounted for half of the cases, whereas only four of the terrorists specifically cited the war in Iraq as their

---

[1] Perry Chiaramonte, C. J. Sullivan, Murray Weiss, and Chuck Bennett, "Bloodlust of NJ 'Jihadists,'" *NYPost*, June 7, 2010, http://www.nypost.com/p/news/local/bloodlust_of_tjUWgKCSnGMpRDcz9eUBXJ.

primary motivation (and of these, only two did not cite additional complaints). A number of the jihadists joined the online jihadist community *first*, and *then* began complaining about the West. This again suggests that the sense of belonging to a community was more important to the jihadists than the specific tenets of global jihadism.

- ***Religious Upbringing and Rhetoric Focus***: Those who converted to Islam or became more religious later in life were much less likely to cite the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan as their motivation, and much more likely to cite general grievances against the West and treatment of Muslims.

Real-World Connection

- ***Openness about Beliefs***: The cases were almost evenly split between complete openness, moderate openness, and apparent secrecy about beliefs. This indicates no correlation between an individual's openness with those around them and their desire to act. While an individual who is willing to discuss his or her radical beliefs with those around them is certainly cause for concern that they might take action, it is equally likely that the people around a future terrorist would have no idea of their involvement in the online jihadist community.

- ***Offline Activity***: While real-world friendships were important in some of the cases, there were also a number of terrorists who were willing to work with people they had never met in the real world. Fahim Ahmad was willing to host in his apartment and plan terrorist attacks with individuals that he had only spoken with online; Jamie Paulin-Ramirez was even willing to marry a man she had never met face to face. Thus real-world connections seem to be of minimal importance to the terrorists emerging from the

online jihadist community—they seem to trust those they meet online just as much as someone they have met face to face.

- Only two of the terrorists considered here had a criminal past (Michael Finton and Carlos Almonte). This indicates that the willingness to go outside the law to commit a terrorist act is not correlated to a prior willingness to break the law.

- *Online and Offline Activity*: There does not appear to be any correlation between an individual's level of online activity and their level of offline activity. Individuals who are highly active online are just as likely to be either highly active or relatively inactive offline.

- *Location*: All but two of the cases considered here involve individuals who became involved in the online jihadist community while living in the West. Clearly the online jihadist community is a big contributor to the growing problem of "homegrown terrorists." The increasing emphasis by many al-Qaida leaders on homegrown terrorism in the West seems to be having a significant impact through the online jihadist community.[2]

- The locations of the cases were also disturbingly varied; within the U.S., 11 different states were represented as well as three other Western nations. This does not include the areas that the terrorists may have traveled through in their preparations for their activities, which would drive the number of states and countries involved much higher. This demonstrates the truly borderless nature of the threat.

---

[2] The chief example of al-Qaida's shifting emphasis on homegrown terrorists is the release of *Inspire* magazine by al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. The magazine features articles intended to encourage jihadists living in the West and give them ideas for how to act on their own. As of November 2010, two issues of the magazine have been published. CNN Wire Staff, "Al Qaeda Launches English Language Magazine," *CNN*, July 1, 2010, http://edition.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/meast/07/01/al.qaeda.magazine/?fbid=CE2WTvs0hMG.

Target Selection and Terrorist Action

- *Target*: Six of the individuals attempted to travel to countries they considered to be the "front lines" in order to receive training and fight with other terrorists. Also, many of those who did not travel to such countries indicated a desire to do so, but were unable to for whatever reason.

- *Target and Immigration Status*: Half of the cases involved individuals wishing to commit terrorist attacks against the country in which they lived. Interestingly, only two of these cases involved second-generation immigrants targeting their adoptive countries. This may indicate that first-generation immigrants are more likely to strike where they live than second-generation immigrants, who are just as likely to travel to reach their target.

- Only three of the nine native-born (non-immigrant) individuals attempted to attack their native country (Nicky Reilly, Michael Finton, and Paul Rockwood). This likely indicates that while non-immigrants may be increasingly susceptible to the jihadist ideology via the online community, they tend to choose targets outside their own country.

- *Terrorist Action*: This sample size is not large enough to determine any sort of trends in how online jihadists pursue their objectives, and there are only a few correlations among the cases. Eight of the cases involved bombings, which has long been the preferred method of terrorist attack. In addition, half of the cases involved individuals who attempted to receive military training. This indicates a strong desire among many of the online jihadists to be seen as real warriors involved in a millenarian struggle between good and evil, rather than simple, disorganized bands of terrorists.

4.2.3. Is There a Typical Online Jihadist?

One of the only factors unifying each of these online jihadists is the fact that none of the cases fits perfectly into a mold. Each case has some features that make it unique. While comparisons can be made along individual characteristics, there is no "typical" terrorist coming from the online jihadist community.

The variety of cases emerging from this community is also what makes it such a challenge for counterterrorism. With terrorists coming from all over the world and willing to attack targets anywhere else in the world, these online jihadists have proven that the jihadist movement is a truly boundless threat. There is also no easy way to determine which online jihadists are most likely to make the transition from casual supporter of violent jihad to real-world terrorist. In addition, there is no easy way to track the potential terrorists in this community. Only some of the people in the above cases made it clear in the online community or in their real-world lives that they were intent on actually acting. Thus, without a clear picture of what makes a violent online jihadist, it is very difficult to counter this phenomenon directly.

4.2.4. The Appeal of the Online Jihadist Community

One feature that does seem to unify the above cases is each individual's lack of belonging in the world around them. Almost all of the people in this analysis had some sort of identity crisis or feeling of social isolation. For these cases, the jihadist community provides an escape from problems in their lives in three ways: for some it is the sense of belonging and kinship that they lacked in the real world; for others, the jihadist ideology provides a convenient excuse for the problems in their life (as well as the world at large); for still others, the jihadist social movement provides a path to glory, which can give them a sense of purpose that they otherwise lacked. A person could be attracted by one or all of these factors. Whether or not the person is involved in

or really cares about world politics is largely irrelevant for many of them. Each individual's

reasons for feeling social isolated or having an identity crisis are outlined in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Identity Crisis and Social Isolation	
Case	**Reason for Identity Crisis or Social Isolation**
Mirsad Bektašević	Growing up during the Bosnian war left him with a sense of injustice towards Muslims.[3] At the time of his radicalization, he was unemployed and lacked an apparent purpose in life.
Syed Haris Ahmed	His sister and father claimed he "was searching for his Muslim identity" after coming to the U.S.[4] He was troubled by the suffering of Muslims around the world and wanted to help.[5]
Ehsanul Sadequee	He was homeschooled and sent to school in Bangladesh; he had trouble reconciling his Bangladeshi roots with his life in the U.S.[6]
Fahim Ahmad	Growing up in Afghanistan exposed him to violence and *mujahideen* victories against the Soviets. He was also kicked out of his father's house for marrying a devout Muslim woman.[7]
Zakaria Amara	He came from a broken home and sought stability in Islam (against his parents' wishes). He also felt like an outcast as a Muslim immigrant in Canada.[8]
Bryant Vinas	His mother said he "seemed to be searching for something."[9] He was a loner in high school, rejected by the army, and his photo does not appear in any of his high school yearbooks.[10]
Nicky Reilly	His neighbors called him a "friendless, reclusive, vulnerable young man."[11] His mental illness made him unable to relate to society like most people.
Abdel Shehadeh	It is unclear why he was initially attracted to the online jihadist community, but his family reported that he "had seemed lost."[12]
Michael Finton	With a youth spent in foster care, he was a troubled youth—kicked out of several high schools and moved around a lot. He also tried out a number of religions before Islam.[13]
Hosam Smadi	"Following his parents' divorce and the subsequent death of his ill mother in 2005, Smadi spent years battling depression, mood swings, and low self-esteem."[14]
Colleen LaRose	She moved around frequently, attempted suicide on May 21, 2005, had drinking problems, and went through a number of relationships.[15]
Nidal Malik Hasan	He had long struggled to reconcile his disagreement with American foreign policy and his Muslim identity. He also dreaded his impending deployment to Afghanistan.
Umar Abdulmutallab	As the youngest of 16 children, he struggled to find his place and turned to the online jihadist community for answers.[16]
Humam al-Balawi	His radical views were likely fueled by the U.S. invasion of Kuwait, and he had firsthand experience with the suffering of Palestinians as a doctor.[17]
Jamie Paulin-Ramirez	She was married four different times and according to her mother, "she was always looking for something."[18]
Faisal Shahzad	He "grew up somewhat rootless" and had trouble reconciling his Pashtun heritage with his wealthy upbringing.[19]
Paul Rockwood	He originally converted to Islam to curb a drinking problem, though it is unclear what drove him to the extremist community.[20]
Mohamed Alessa	He suffered from a violent temper, had a number of scrapes with authority figures, and was kicked out of several schools.[21]
Carlos Almonte	He had been violent throughout his life and was "picked up by cops several times for increasingly violent behavior."[22]
Zachary Chesser	He was always a "loner" in high school and "had an interest in being controversial," though it is unclear what led him to his interest in Islam after high school.[23]

Table 3 demonstrates that each person's reasons for being attracted to the online jihadist community were different. While some were attracted to the movement as a community where they found a sense of belonging, others appear to have been drawn to it as an outlet for their aggression not found elsewhere. The online jihadist community does not mean the same thing to each of its members, which allows it to attract a wide variety of people.

---

[3] Stefan Lisinski, "Säpo utreder mehjälp till terrorbrott."

[4] John Murgatroyd, "Ex-Georgia Tech Student Convicted on Terrorism Charge."

[5] Frontline World, "Interview with Syed Riaz Ahmed."

[6] Associated Press, "Ga. Tech Student Indicted for Material Support of Terrorism," *AccessNorthGa*, April 20, 2006, http://www.accessnorthga.com/detail.php?n=125596&c=2.

[7] Isabel Teotonio, "The Battle of Toronto."

[8] Ibid.

[9] Paul Cruickshank, "The Radicalization of an All-American Kid,"

[10] Michael Powell, "U.S. Recruit Reveals How Qaeda Trains Foreigners."

[11] Michael Seamark and Colin Fernandez, "Face of the 'Nail Bomber.'"

[12] Kareem Fahim, "Hearing Is Held for Man Accused of Jihadist Ties."

[13] Bruce Rushton, "Man Accused in Bombing Plot Known for Strong Stance on Islam."

[14] Taylor Luck, "Dallas Terror Plot."

[15] Kitty Caparella and Gloria Campisi, "Before 'Jihad,' Colleen Had Her Demons," *Philly Inquirer*, March 11, 2010, http://www.philly.com/philly/news/pennsylvania/20100311_Before__jihad___Colleen_had_her_demons.html.

[16] Mark Hosenball, "The Radicalization of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab," *Newsweek*, January 2, 2010, http://www.newsweek.com/2010/01/01/the-radicalization-of-umar-farouk-abdulmutallab.html.

[17] Jamal Halaby, "CIA Bomber Coerced to Work for Jordan Spy Agency."

[18] Vanessa O'Connell, Stephanie Simon, and Evan Perez, "For the Love of Islam."

[19] Andrea Elliot, Sabrina Tavernise, and Anne Barnard, "For Times Sq. Suspect, Long Roots of Discontent."

[20] David Gardner, "Pregnant British Mother Guilty of U.S. Terror Charges After Drawing Up Hit List of 'Enemies of Islam,'" *Daily Mail*, July 23, 2010, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1296995/Pregnant-British-mum-guilty-U-S-terror-charges-drawing-hit-list-enemies-Islam.html.

[21] Kareem Fahim and Karen Zraick, "Neighbors Saw Changes as Suspects Grew Up," *New York Times*, June 7, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/nyregion/07suspects.html.

[22] Carolyn Salazar, "Faces of Hate."

[23] Joshua Rhett Miller, "Road to Radicalism: The Man Behind the 'South Park' Threats," *Fox News*, April 23, 2010, http://www.foxnews.com/us/2010/04/23/road-radicalism-man-south-park-threats/.

4.2.5. Comparison to Existing Analyses

There are no revolutionary differences between the above examples and current thinking about what makes a jihadist terrorist. The differences that do exist are of relatively minor significance and likely do not justify a new and unique approach to dealing with terrorists from the online jihadist community. A brief comparison below of the various factors highlights some of the similarities and differences.

Basic Attributes

- The average age of the terrorists in the sample was 26, which is only slightly higher than other modern jihadists, who are expected to be in their early twenties. There is a wide distribution of ages and 70 percent of the cases involved people under 30. The other 30 percent who were over 30 years old are an important exception, however. This indicates that for online jihadists, age may not be as important a factor as it has been for offline terrorists. While "angry youths" are still the most likely to become terrorists, there are also a significant number of older terrorists coming from the online jihadist community. These people are more likely attracted to the jihadist community because of the sense of purpose that it gives them, rather than an outlet for their youthful rebelliousness that is often attributed to younger members of the community.
- While offline terrorists are most likely to be first- or second-generation immigrants, violent online jihadists are just as likely to be native-born. This supports the idea that the online jihadist community is a significant source of homegrown terrorists.
- Violent online jihadists continue the same trend of a low level of education (high school or less) as seen among other terrorists.

Psychology

- Online jihadists are most likely to find Islam later in life, just like many offline jihadists. As stated above, this gives them little context into which they can put the ideas of the online jihadist movement and makes them more likely to embrace the ideology.

- Much like many terrorists before them, most of the cases in the sample involved individuals who sought a sense of purpose or belonging in the jihadist movement. The community's ability to reach a wider audience is likely the only difference in its attraction to these online terrorists.

Ideology and Rhetoric

- One of the chief differences between online jihadists and previous cases is that the primary motivation for terrorists is no longer primarily the war in Iraq. While the U.S. invasion in 2003 spurred a wave of terrorists, it now appears the al-Qaida social movement has placed the war in a larger context of "injustices against the Muslim world," which many terrorists have embraced as their motivation to act.

Real-World Connection

- Another key difference between online jihadists and their offline counterparts is their willingness to work and plan with people they have not met face-to-face. Kinship and real-world friendship are no longer the sole drivers of terrorist networking. Indeed, among online jihadists, such connections may be rare, as these individuals seemingly enjoy the anonymity of operating online.

Target Selection and Terrorist Action

- Online jihadists continue to pursue a variety of terrorist actions, demonstrating no significant shift from previous generations of terrorists. While recent offline terrorists have tended to act in their adoptive countries, online jihadists have proven less likely to do so. This could be a result of their more global view of the world and their movement as increasingly borderless.

There are some examples of violent online jihadists that come pretty close to the current standard established for offline terrorists. The cases of Faisal Shahzad, Nidal Malik Hasan, and the two leaders of the Toronto 18 highlighted above each illustrate this point. Shahzad's frustration with Western foreign policy and inability to reconcile his new lifestyle with his Muslim heritage led him down the path to radicalization and eventual action. Similarly, Hasan struggled for years with his role in a military that was engaged in two wars that he did not agree with and which he viewed as opposed to his own heritage. Ahmad and Amara both felt like outcasts because of their background and religion, eventually finding acceptance and a sense of belonging in a community of extremists.

Yet for each example that fits a mold, there seems to be another example that breaks it. Colleen LaRose and Jamie Paulin-Ramirez—American-born Caucasian women—represent a significant shift in what a terrorist looks like. On the other extreme, Humam al-Balawi's early path to radicalization seemed to resemble some early supporters of jihad—highly-educated, he became radicalized after seeing firsthand the suffering of the Palestinian people. But where previous terrorists might have joined a local terrorist group to launch rockets into Israel, al-Balawi instead connected with the borderless jihadist social movement through the Internet,

leading him to blame a larger threat to Muslims emanating from the West in general. At 32 years old and with a medical degree, al-Balawi did not fit the mold of what terrorism experts have defined as the modern jihadist threat.

4.3. What Does This Mean?

Violent online jihadists only partially represent the future of global jihadism. While we are likely to see an increase in the number of terrorism cases where the online jihadist community played a key role, these cases are not going to become the *only* terrorism cases. There will still be terrorists who are recruited and radicalized by their family and friends, and these bonds of kinship and real-world friendship will continue to be important to many terrorists.

But the growing online jihadist community means that the terrorist threat will become more diverse in the next few years. Terrorists might come from anywhere, and their target could be any place. Thus we are likely to see terrorists moving from the West to attack targets in Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and any other "front line" location (e.g. Ahmed, Vinas, Shehadeh, Alessa, Almonte, and Chesser); terrorists from these front line countries moving to the West to attack targets, or moving between such countries (e.g. Abdulmutallab and al-Balawi); terrorists from the West traveling to Pakistan or another country for training and returning to their country to attack targets there (e.g. Shahzad); terrorists from the West traveling to other Western countries to carry out their attacks (e.g. Bektašević, LaRose, and Paulin-Ramirez); terrorists in the West striking right where they live (e.g. Ahmad, Amara, Reilly, Finton, Smadi, Hasan, and Rockwood); or any other combination of such players moving about.

The threat from the online jihadist community is truly global. Today, it is much less important how al-Qaida or any other jihadist group expresses its ideology than in the past, because any

individual can interpret the jihadist social movement in their own way and carry out terrorist attacks based on this understanding. When the jihadist social movement becomes borderless, the threat presented by the terrorists it inspires is no longer limited by the artificial boundaries of the real world.

5. Policy Implications

In addition to recognizing the rise in terrorist use of the Internet, officials should recognize the increasingly important role the Internet plays in sustaining and strengthening the global jihadist movement. The Internet is no longer simply a tool that can be used by terrorists in planning and executing their operations. The development of the online jihadist community as the primary stage for the evolution of jihadist thought means that authorities must pay even more attention to the ongoing dialogue occurring among extremists around the world via the Internet. While it is uncertain where the next terrorist threat will come from, it is more than likely that his or her beliefs will be impacted by this community.

It is also important to note that there is no clear dividing line between *terrorist* and *non-terrorist* until the person actually acts in the real world. This is not a new concept, but one that is made all the more troubling by the increasingly active online jihadist community. Policy-makers should do their best to bear in mind the fact that global jihadism is no longer solely a real-world movement. New counterterrorism policies should include provisions for addressing the threat from this online movement.

Young Muslim males are likely still the most susceptible to the jihadist movement, but because adherents are no longer restricted to real-world connections, jihadism is able to affect more than just the physical network of people around its supporters. Thus, as the borderless jihadist movement expands, we are likely to see a diversifying picture of what makes a modern terrorist. This will make it harder for officials to define who and what it is they are looking for in profiling threats. An awareness of this fact will prevent officials from becoming over-reliant on any specific picture of jihadists and possibly ignoring the threat presented by atypical radicals.

Immediate, active efforts to prevent online jihadists from making the transition to real-world terrorism are essential to countering this growing threat. Efforts such as those undertaken by the FBI in the cases of Michael Finton and Hosam Smadi have proven effective. The online jihadist community is too vast to monitor each of its members, but officials have proven it is possible to pinpoint those who announce their intentions to carry out real-world attacks and co-opt them with undercovers or informants. In addition to preventing civilian deaths, such activities will prevent more role models like Humam al-Balawi arising from this community. The more precedent online jihadists have to follow, the more likely they may be to commit themselves to following in these others' footsteps.

5.1. No One Lives Online

One of the difficulties in developing the dataset used in this project was delineating between "online" and "offline" terrorists. While this distinction is the central premise of this analysis, it is, in many ways, a false or a grey distinction. The fact is that, regardless of how much time these jihadists spend online, becoming radicalized and plotting terrorist attacks, they do not spend their whole lives in this virtual space. Each jihadist almost invariably has real-world contact with the people around them, be they friends and family or like-minded individuals at a local mosque or student group. What makes online jihadists different than previous terrorists is the importance of the online community to these individuals. For the above sample, I have tried to choose cases where the Internet and online jihadist community played a key role in the individual's radicalization and/or planning, though it is not always possible to discern this definitively.

Regardless of the individuals' backgrounds, terrorism is still a real-world activity that requires real-world preparations, connections, and other activities. While a terrorist may be able

to get 80 percent of the information needed to conduct a terrorist operation from the Internet, that final 20 percent of real-world experience is crucial to the success of an operation. For example, a would-be terrorist can find many recipes for bomb-making online, but actually creating a bomb requires tacit knowledge that can only be acquired through real-world experience and training. The importance of this training is demonstrated through the failure of Faisal Shahzad, the Times Square Bomber, and Nicky Reilly, who attempted to create a bomb from a recipe he found online. Existing counterterrorism policies that deal with tracking potential threats in the real world should therefore be at least partially effective in addressing the threat from online jihadists.

5.1.1. What's in a Screen Name?

One of the greatest challenges encountered by law enforcement officials in trying to monitor online jihadists and prevent them from carrying out terrorist attacks is the difficulty of attributing screen names to real-world people. Authorities encounter significant issues in overcoming this obstacle, both logistically and in relation to privacy issues.

Logistically, it is difficult for authorities monitoring online chats and discussions to know who is behind any given screen name. This is the same issue encountered by every other individual in communicating over the Internet—indeed, the anonymity of the Internet is simultaneously one of its most celebrated and controversial features. Without the cooperation of Internet Service Providers, authorities are unable to determine the real-world person behind an online persona. Obtaining such cooperation often runs into the second obstacle: privacy issues.

Privacy concerns have been an issue for law enforcement for decades, and the advent of the digital age has simply created a new platform on which officials must respect individual privacy. The many issues at stake regarding privacy on the Internet are beyond the scope of this paper, but it becomes increasingly important to develop an official policy regarding online jihadists as this community grows and continues to produce real-world terrorists. The issues regarding police surveillance of the online community will not disappear any time soon.

5.1.2. Public-Private Partnerships

Private companies can be an important partner in addressing the threat from online jihadists. In addition to shutting down those sites that break laws and working with authorities to track down specific threats, companies can establish policies that prevent jihadists from using their services to promote terrorism. For instance, YouTube recently consented to American and British requests to remove many videos featuring al-Qaida spokesman Anwar al-Awlaki, saying that the company "removed videos that violated the site's guidelines prohibiting 'dangerous or illegal activities such as bomb-making, hate speech, and incitement to commit violent acts,' or came from accounts 'registered by a member of a designated foreign terrorist organization,' or used to promote such a group's interests."[1] Such voluntary public/private partnerships can be useful in allowing sites to assist in countering the jihadist discourse without providing a serious threat to free speech.

5.1.3. Understanding the Enemy

An assessment of current official understanding of online jihadists, given how recently this phenomenon has developed, is difficult. Certainly the failure of the CIA and Jordanian

---

[1] John F. Burns and Miguel Helft, "YouTube Withdraws Cleric's Videos," *New York Times*, November 3, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/04/world/04britain.html.

intelligence to recognize the danger posed by Humam Khalil al-Balawi reflects poorly on the agency's policy toward checking up on informants. But an ideal policy would ensure such agents of terror never get as far as al-Balawi did by recognizing the threat he posed before he was sent to Afghanistan. In al-Balawi's case, the fault clearly lies with Jordanian intelligence, which failed to recognize his commitment to jihad, despite seizing his laptop, which contained his online discussion of his beliefs. American counterterrorism officials should learn from this mistake and implement policies to look into the online activities of any potential threats.

In dealing with jihadists, it is also important to understand their motivations and world outlook. Al-Balawi himself points out this problem when he exclaimed after Jordanian intelligence believed him to have been turned: "They think that we worship wealth and lusts just like them. How amazing! How amazing that you propose [such things] to a man whose last article just a short while ago was called 'When Will My Words Drink From My Blood?,' a man who burns with desire for martyrdom and who motivates the Ummah to Jihad!"[2] It is very important for counterterrorism officials to understand the motivations of the jihadists and suspected terrorists they deal with. Misunderstanding these motives can have deadly results, as al-Balawi's case demonstrates.

5.2. Borders No Longer Matter (to Terrorists)

Al-Qaida-style jihadism is now a truly global movement. In a world where potential terrorists operate without regard for borders, it is essential for law enforcement officials worldwide to realize that terrorists are not playing by their rules. Many terrorist threats are no longer simply domestic threats that can be handled by a single government. Since September 11, international

---

[2] Flashpoint Intel, "As-Sahab Media."

law enforcement cooperation has been greatly expanded, and continued integration of counterterrorism efforts is essential for combating this borderless movement.

Beyond international cooperation, though, efforts to counter the jihadist ideology must go beyond the government. If the global jihadist movement does not obey traditional boundaries, then neither should the efforts to counter it. The involvement of the community is one key element to countering the impact of jihadism. Both Muslim and non-Muslim community leaders should remain engaged and vigilant for signs that an individual has come under the influence of a radical ideology. Rather than simply dismissing such a person as a misguided menace, it may be more effective to engage them directly and debate their beliefs. For many of those attracted to the online jihadist community, they simply need an outlet for their frustrations. Making such individuals further into outcasts could only serve to fuel their desire to act.

5.3. Their Greatest Strength is Also Their Greatest Weakness

The anonymity and breadth of the online jihadist community gives its members an important advantage over counterterrorism efforts. As discussed above, attaching a real-world identity to an online persona presents a significant challenge to law enforcement. In addition, many of the most important conversations for online jihadists—such as those involving real-world plans or the formation of terrorist cells—can take place in private, password-protected chat rooms and forums that officials might not have access to. Not only that, but the sheer breadth of the online jihadist community is such that monitoring even all the public conversations occurring on a day to day basis is impossible for law enforcement officials. All this combines to give violent online jihadists a significant advantage vis à vis counterterrorism efforts.

However, the same anonymity that protects the jihadist community and other potential terrorists from law enforcement also undermines their ability to trust one another. A terrorist organization operates covertly based on mutual trust between its members. This is one of the primary reasons that past terrorist cells have developed through family and friend connections in the past. A networked, borderless social movement may be good for spreading the message of global jihad, but by its very nature, it lacks the trust needed to conduct terrorist operations.

Many of the examples of online networks of would-be terrorists attempting to contact real-world terrorist organizations have met with failure simply due to a lack of trust between the people involved. While trust may exist between those who meet and organize via the Internet, online jihadists have had a hard time transferring this online trust into real-world contact with established terrorists, who may not be engaged in the online jihadist community. As modern terrorists come more frequently from the online community as opposed to real-world kinship or friendship connections, this lack of trust is likely to become a significant obstacle to their operations. Counterterrorism officials should do more to exploit this by infiltrating their own operatives into the online communities.

In several of the above cases, the tension between anonymity and trust worked against the potential terrorists. Hosam Smadi was co-opted by the FBI through his online connections. Having met his contact online, he was forced to trust the agent, which allowed the Bureau to set up a successful sting operation to catch the would-be terrorist.

In addition to the trust in individuals that online jihadists must have, they are also forced to trust in the information they get from the Internet. Instructions and assistance in planning a terrorist attack can come from either other members of the jihadist community or from resource

websites such as those providing information on bomb making. Such sites are often unreliable, and do not provide adequate training to turn an inexperienced novice into an effective bomb maker. In addition, jihadists are forced to trust any information they get from other members of the community, even if they do not know who the person is. While some of the members may be experienced terrorists, it is equally (if not more) likely that the user is merely blustering and the information received is not reliable.

Another difficulty for terrorists with extensive online activity is the trail left behind. Once captured, the jihadist's online conversations serve as fairly concrete demonstration of the individual's desire to commit violent terrorist acts. While attempts by law enforcement officials to use this information have run into obstacles with would-be terrorists claiming they never intended to act, sting operations like those undertaken against Smadi and Michael Finton serve as evidence that the individual *was* willing to carry out a terrorist attack. In addition, the terrorist's connections to other jihadists may not be based on real-world kinship or friendship, but the information on their computers could provide law enforcement a roadmap of connections to other threats. Such connections were integral in a number of the cases discussed above—for example, the arrest of Mirsad Bektašević led authorities to arrest Younes Tsouli, who had connections to the Toronto 18 terrorists as well as Ehsanul Sadequee and Syed Haris Ahmed.

5.4. Global Jihadism Has Grown Beyond Al Qaida

The online jihadist community exists largely because al-Qaida could no longer function as a hierarchical organization following the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Forced to decentralize, the group at first attempted to adapt by adopting a franchise-like model, where smaller groups around the world would gain the al-Qaida seal of approval (e.g. Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia

and the GSPC in Algeria). This effort is where al-Qaida's direct control of the movement ended though. Beginning around 2004, terrorists around the world started carrying out attacks and then announcing after the fact that they were part of al-Qaida, which the group would either acknowledge or not.

Al-Qaida has lost much of its control of the ideological direction of the movement it began. The advent of the Internet has allowed like-minded jihadist supporters around the world to discuss their beliefs and support global jihad through the dissemination of media and other resources. While leaders like Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri engage in the discussion from time to time, and can indeed provide some direction for the conversation because of the respect they receive from community members, they no longer directly control the dialogue. Instead, like many other online decentralized communities, the discussion shifts with the community, taking on a life of its own.

Ultimately, the problem for counterterrorism policy lies in this community's existence itself. Long-term attempts to address the growth of extremist thought should place these online communities at the center of their efforts. The Internet has demonstrated itself as a global marketplace of ideas, connecting people from all walks of life with those who share similar interests and beliefs. In many cases this is an exciting and hopeful phenomenon; but it has also allowed global jihadism to become a borderless social movement that survives and evolves via the Internet. Worse, individuals who may be most susceptible to such extremist thought— loners seeking a sense of belonging and purpose—may be more likely to spend long periods on the Internet, thus making them ideal targets for extremist recruiters or even self-radicalization.

One of the best ways to dissuade online radicals from turning to terrorism may be to simply engage this community in its ongoing dialog. This idea has been put forward by terrorism expert Jarret Brachman, who actively engages online jihadists via his website, jarretbrachman.net.[3] Brachman had an extensive online conversation with Zachary Chesser shortly before he was arrested, in which the two discussed the roots of Chesser's support for jihad, among other topics.[4] By engaging those radical Muslims who have not yet turned to violence, we not only learn more about their beliefs, but have the opportunity to monitor the development of the jihadist ideology. As Brachman points out, jihadists are usually the "true experts on themselves, so I let them tell me where they believe they are strongest, most vulnerable and importantly, where the fractures are within their movement that can be exacerbated through wedge issues."[5]

A strategy to diminish the threat presented by this community requires a multi-pronged approach. Long-term attempts to disrupt the spread of extremist thought—through such measures as providing counterarguments to extremist ideologies, targeting and eliminating recruiters, and public information campaigns—are essential to any hope of success.

---

[3] Jarret Brachman, "Chronus Global," http://jarretbrachman.net/ .
[4] Jarret Brachman, "My Pen Pal, the Jihadist," *Foreign Policy*, July 29, 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/07/29/my_pen_pal_the_jihadist.
[5] Jarret Brachman, "Engaging Jihadists Head On: My Response to Abu Talhah al-Amrikee," April 23, 2010, http://jarretbrachman.net/?p=658.

6. Conclusions

While the borderless nature of the online jihadist movement makes it a new platform for terrorist recruitment and organization, it is unlikely that the terrorists developing from the Internet will look radically different from those produced from offline interactions. The jihadist social movement is now able to reach a significantly larger audience, but it still appeals to many of the same types of people: younger males seeking a sense of belonging or purpose and an answer to perceived injustices in the world. However, anomalies like Colleen LaRose and Nidal Malik Hasan may become more frequent as the jihadist message is embraced by a more varied base of supporters through the Internet.

6.1. Further Research Needs

The above analysis is only a first step in improving our understanding of the workings of the jihadist social movement. As the jihadist community continues to evolve online, it is essential to understand the nature of the terrorists emerging from it.

Further research into what separates those online jihadists who pursue violent terrorist activities from the majority of their colleagues who do not is crucial. Within the online jihadist community—where most of its members express their support for violent jihad—the number of people willing to take their beliefs into the real world appears to be only a small portion of the whole. Even with extensive research, it is unlikely that a definitive explanation for why some choose to pursue real-world terrorism while others are content with their online support will be reached. However, any insights into what separates the casual supporter from the hardcore terrorist would be useful.

In many of the above cases, the family and friends of the jihadist were aware of the individual's radicalization, and even tried to talk them out of acting, but were unsuccessful. Jamie Paulin-Ramirez's family tried on several occasions to talk her out of becoming a radical Muslim, to no avail; Abdumutallab's and Shahzad's fathers also both failed to dissuade their sons. This is a fairly common occurrence with people who join such a movement. Anyone not in the movement or group is viewed as an outsider, and thus their opinions carry little weight. More research is necessary to determine effective ways for people to deal with friends and family they suspect might have joined a radical movement. In addition, resources are needed for people to learn what they can do if they know someone who has embraced radical Islamist views.

6.2. Countering the Global Jihadist Movement

The global jihadist movement will continue to grow and expand, and the threat from terrorists coming out of this community will continue for the foreseeable future. The primary novelty of the terrorists emerging from this movement is their disparity—it seems that no two cases are the same. While one could argue a similar quality to offline terrorists, violent online jihadists truly defy stereotyping. This presents a unique challenge to counterterrorism efforts, as the potential threat is only getting harder to define.

The primary terrorist threat to the West increasingly comes not from established organizations with strategic plans to use terrorism for specific political aims, but from individuals identifying with specific movements or ideologies, such as those inspired by the actions of al-Qaida. For many of these terrorists, the intricacies of Islam and even the strategic goals of the movement are largely irrelevant. Recognizing the nature of this threat is the first step in countering it.

In the long-term, effectively countering the global jihadist movement relates more to addressing the root causes of terrorism than to short-term efforts to stop individual terrorists from acting. Toward this end, this study has attempted to enhance our understanding of what drives those terrorists coming from the online jihadist community. While the picture is somewhat bleak in terms of this community's ability to spread the threat of violent jihadists around the world, counterterrorism officials are increasingly aware of how this community has shifted the theater for the struggle against extremism.

The borderless nature of the jihadist movement means that counterterrorism efforts must transcend the traditional boundaries—not only does this mean international cooperation is essential to addressing the long-term threat, but it also means that counterterrorism is no longer solely the responsibility of the government. Combating this movement requires a concerted effort by all those concerned with the spread of extremist ideologies to do what they can to counter the growing threat presented by global jihadism.

7. Bibliography

Akil N. Awan. "Virtual Jihadist Media: Function, Legitimacy & Radicalizing Efficacy." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3. http://ecs.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/10/3/389.

David Axe. "The Military's Internet Civil War." *The Washington Independent*. June 9, 2008. http://washingtonindependent.com/1112/the-militarys-internet-civil-war.

Jamie Bartlett, Jonathan Birdwell, Michael King. *The Edge of Violence: A Radical Approach to Extremism* (London: Demos, 2010).

Jarret Brachman. "Al Qaeda's Armies of One." *Foreign Policy* (January 22, 2010).

——— *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

Fred Cohen. "Terrorism and Cyberspace." *Network Security*, Vol. 2002, No. 5 (May 31, 2002).

Maura Conway. "Terrorism and New Media: The Cyber-Battlespace." In James J. F. Forest, ed. *Combating Terrorism and Insurgency in the 21st Century: International Perspectives. Volume 2: Combating the Sources and Facilitators* (Praeger, 2007).

——— "Terrorist 'Use' of the Internet and Fighting Back." *Information & Security*, Vol. 19 (2006). http://se2.isn.ch/serviceengine/Files/EINIRAS/20642/ichaptersection_singledocument/98576774-E62D-403F-8548-7606DE4DFF35/en/02_Conway_vol.19.pdf.

Alan Cullison. "Inside Al-Qaeda's Hard Drive." *The Atlantic Monthly* (September 2004).

Bruce W. Don, David R. Freligner, Scott Gerwehr, Eric Landree, and Brian A. Jackson. *Network Technologies for Networked Terrorists: Assessing the Value of Information and Communication Technologies to Modern Terrorist Organizations* (Washington: RAND Corporation, 2007). http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/2007/RAND_TR454.pdf.

Steven M. Furnell and Mattew J. Warren. "Computer hacking and cyber terrorism: the real threats in the new millennium?" *Computers & Security*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1999).

Sajjan M. Gohel. "The Internet and Its Role in Terrorist Recruitment and Operational Planning." *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 2, No. 12 (December 2009). http://www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/CTCSentinel-Vol2Iss12.pdf.

Joshua Green. "The Myth of Cyberterrorism." *Washington Monthly*, November 2002.

Bruce Hoffman. *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

——— "The Use of the Internet by Islamic Extremists." Testimony before the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, United States House of Representatives (May 4, 2006). http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/2006/RAND_CT262-1.pdf.

Brian M. Jenkins. "The Psychological Implications of Media-covered Terrorism." RAND Corporation (June 1981). http://www.rand.org/pubs/papers/2005/P6627.pdf.

Evan Kohlman. "A Beacon for Extremists: The Ansar al-Mujahideen Web Forum." *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (February 2010). http://www.ctc.usma.edu/sentinel/CTCSentinel-Vol3Iss2.pdf.

Angel Rabasa et. al. "The Lessons of Mumbai." RAND Corporation (2009). http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/2009/RAND_OP249.pdf.

Marc Sageman. *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

Charles B. Strosier, David M. Terman, and James W. Jones. *The Fundamentalist Mindset: Psychological Perspectives on Religion, Violence, and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Timothy L. Thomas. "Al Qaeda and the Internet: The Danger of 'Cyberplanning.'" *Parameters* (Spring 2003).

Jeff Victoroff. *Tangled Roots: Social and Psychological Factors in the Genesis of Terrorism* (IOS Press, 2006).

Gabriel Weimann. "Cyberterrorism: How Real is the Threat?" USIP Special Report No. 119. http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr119.html.

——— *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, The New Challenges* (Washington: US Institute of Peace, 2006).

——— "Virtual Training Camps: Terrorists' Use of the Internet." In James J. Forest, ed. *Teaching Terror: Strategic and Tactical Learning in the Terrorist World* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2006).

——— "www.terror.net: How Modern Terrorism Uses the Internet." *U.S. Institute of Peace Special Report 116* (March 2004).

Gilbert Wondracek, Thorsten Holz, Engin Kirda, and Christopher Kruegel. "A Practical Attack to De-Anonymize Social Network Users." *Technical Report TR-iSecLab-0110-001*. http://www.iseclab.org/papers/sonda-TR.pdf.