

TESTIMONY

Going Jihad

The Fort Hood Slayings and Home-Grown Terrorism

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Before the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

November 19, 2009

Mr. Chairman, Senator Collins, members of the committee, thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to address you concerning this tragic and disquieting event.

When I testified last January before this same committee on the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, in response to the question, Could a Mumbai-style attack happen in the United States? I said, “It could. The difference lies in the planning and scale. Assembling and training a ten-man team of suicidal attackers seems far beyond the capabilities of the conspirators identified in any of the terrorist plots in this country since 9/11.”

“However,” I continued, “we have seen lone gunmen and pairs of shooters, motivated by mental illness or political cause, run amok, determined to kill in quantity. The Empire State Building, Virginia Tech, and Columbine cases come to mind.”

“Therefore, an attack carried out by one or a small number of self-radicalized, home-grown terrorists armed with readily available weapons, perhaps causing scores of casualties, while still far beyond what we have seen thus far, is not inconceivable.”

It is noteworthy that the only terrorist attackers to succeed in killing anyone in the United States since 9/11 were lone gunmen. Authorities managed to thwart all of the other plots.

Major Nidal Malik Hasan has the characteristics of both political extremist and ordinary mass murderer. At a glance, his homicidal rampage looks a lot like what used to be called “going postal”—a deepening sense of personal grievance culminating in a homicidal rampage directed

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² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT336/>.

against co-workers, in this case, fellow soldiers. For Hasan, “going jihad” reflects the channeling of obvious personality problems into deadly fanaticism.

We must wait for a full inquiry to thoroughly understand Hasan’s motives and objectives, but on the basis of what has been reported in the news media, Hasan’s profile looks familiar. Descriptions of his inability to connect with others, absence of close relationships, passive rigidity, personal disillusion, and frustration at not being able to alter his life’s course indicate a man in crisis—a susceptible terrorist recruit.

Again, based solely upon what has been publicly reported, the path that takes Hasan to the Fort Hood slayings includes many of the signposts identified in the radicalization process: his search for meaning and spiritual guidance, his engagement via the Internet with jihadist ideology, his adoption of the jihadist view that the West and Islam are irreconcilably opposed, the broadening of his sense of grievance from the personal to what he saw as a besieged Muslim community, his reported on-line encounter with an enabler—a jihadist imam whose writings would morally validate and reinforce Hasan’s own feelings of anger and aggression, his expression of extremist views, and at some point, his decision to kill. If some of the markers of radicalization and recruitment are missing, it is because, except for Hasan’s reported correspondence with the imam, Anwar al-Awliki, his journey may have been entirely an interior one.

We seek the comfort of certain categorization. Precision is a prerequisite of the law. But human behavior is more complex and provides no bright line between murderer and terrorist.

In 1997, a 70-year-old Palestinian immigrant opened fire on the observation deck of the Empire State Building, killing one person and wounding seven others before taking his own life. He carried with him rambling, confused letters denouncing Zionists, France, and the United States, but there were also claims that he had been bilked by con artists who left him penniless. Although his motives reflect a tangle of personal and political grievances, his action is generally classified as an incident of terrorism.

In 2002, an Egyptian chauffer opened fire on passengers at the El Al counter at LAX. Again, there was no evidence of radicalization, but his choice of target made him a terrorist in the eyes of many.

The factors that drove these two men to kill are murky. We do not know how much to credit personal distress or political intent. As with Major Malik, the underlying motives may have been personal, but they were acted out in a political realm. Within the ranks of true terrorists, we also

find those who became terrorists in response to profound personal crises, rather than deep political convictions, muddled individuals who were swept along by others they happened to meet or who radicalized themselves, sociopaths attracted by the practice of violence. Terrorism, by its very nature, does not attract the well-adjusted.

Mass killings like the one at Fort Hood invariably prompt the question, Could it have been prevented? Seen through a rearview mirror, the clues appear tantalizingly obvious—if only we had been able to connect the dots. That famous phrase sometimes seduces us into overestimating what is reasonably knowable. While I await the government's own inquiry, in this case I remain skeptical. We do not, nor would we want, to live in a police state where every dubious remark, questionable correspondence, or relationship deemed suspicious is noted, recorded, and scrutinized for signs of dangerous deviancy. As a practical matter, it cannot be done. Communist East Germany's Stasi kept several hundred thousand officials busy poring over dossiers on its citizens. It is an obsession and a fate we would not want to emulate.

We must, however, recognize that all wars place great strains on any military organization. The long duration and nature of the conflicts we confront today create exceptional challenges to members of our armed forces. The stresses show up in the form of breakdowns, suicides, self-mutilations, and sometimes, homicides. This by no means excuses the actions of Major Hasan. It does suggest that we are going to have to be extraordinarily sensitive to the mindset, morale, and mental well-being of the men and women in uniform. The ability of America to achieve its aims depends on their continued commitment and spiritual strength.

According to research at RAND, except in Afghanistan and Iraq, the number and geographic range of al Qaeda-inspired attacks has been growing each year, although there has clearly been a decline in the quality of these operations. Some analysts say that al Qaeda is currently following a strategy of "leaderless resistance." Leaderless resistance envisions an army of autonomous terrorist operatives, united in a common cause, but not connected organizationally. Although it is difficult for authorities to destroy a leaderless enterprise, leaderless resistance is a strategy of weakness. Eight years of unrelenting pressure worldwide have greatly reduced al Qaeda's operational capabilities. Outside of Pakistan and Afghanistan, its leaders can do little other than exhort others to violence. However, leaderless resistance does enable terrorist leaders to assert ownership of just about every homicidal maniac on the planet, thus projecting an illusion of strength. Major Hasan's Internet imam was quick to praise the Fort Hood murders as another jihad victory.

Since 9/11, authorities in the United States have uncovered nearly 30 terrorist plots involving “homegrown terrorists.” This total includes plots to carry out attacks in the United States or abroad, as well as support for foreign terrorist organizations. Although not all of the plots, if undiscovered, are likely to have resulted in successful attacks, very little separates the ambitions of jihadist wannabes from a deadly terrorist assault. The essential ingredient is intent. Domestic intelligence collection remains a necessary and critical component of homeland security.

Authorities uncovered eight of these terrorist plots in 2009; adding two actual attacks (the shooting in Arkansas and the Fort Hood case) puts the level of activity in 2009 much higher than that of previous years. Apart from common inspiration, there is no evidence of any organizational connection between these events. They appear to be individual responses to jihadist propaganda in the context of U.S. policy decisions. American foreign policy should not be determined by a handful of shooters and would-be bombers, but we must accept the fact that what America does in the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Pakistan may provoke terrorism in the United States. Wars are no longer confined geographically.

Six of the plots since 9/11 targeted American soldiers or military facilities in the United States (Torrance, 2005; Fort Dix, 2006; New York City, May 2009; Arkansas, 2009; North Carolina, 2009; and Fort Hood, 2009), which could reflect in part jihadist exhortation and in part the plotters’ own perceptions that attacking military targets is more legitimate than attacking civilians. However, the majority of the plots appear to have been aimed at causing mass civilian casualties, especially in public transportation venues.

What does the Hasan case tell us about the radicalization of Muslims in America? Not a lot. In all, roughly 100 individuals in these plots have been charged with crimes related to terrorism. These include Muslim immigrants, native-born Muslims, and converts to Islam. Almost all were here legally. Most are U.S. citizens. A few, like Nidal Hasan, were veterans of military service.

Some of the terrorist plotters uncovered in the United States began to radicalize before 9/11, while others, like Hasan, are more recent converts to jihadist world views. Almost all were recruited locally—we have no evidence of terrorist sleeper cells being established in this country.

The plots show that radicalization and recruitment to terrorist violence is occurring in the United States and is a legitimate security concern. It has, however, yielded very few recruits. With roughly 3 million Muslims in America, although some estimates run much higher, 100 terrorists represent a mere 0.00003 percent of the Muslim population—fewer than one out of 30,000.

Terrorist violence is not a new phenomenon. Al Qaeda and its jihadist followers did not bring terrorism to the United States. Along with its immigrant communities, the United States has imported numerous terrorist campaigns. Cuban, Puerto Rican, Croatian, Serb, Palestinian, Armenian, Taiwanese, and Jewish extremists have all carried out attacks on U.S. soil, in addition to the homegrown terrorist campaigns of the far left and far right. In fact, the level of terrorist violence was greater in the United States in the 1970s than it is today.

The lack of significant terrorist attacks on the United States since 9/11 suggests not only intelligence and investigative success, but an American Muslim community that remains overwhelmingly unsympathetic to jihadist appeals. Modern communications, especially the Internet, offer access to violence-exalting narratives, but there is absolutely no evidence to show that attempts to exploit the dismay of some Muslims at policies that can be portrayed as an assault on faith or community have interrupted the integration of immigrant communities. What authorities confront are tiny conspiracies or the actions of individuals, which in a free society will always be hard to predict and prevent.