

Explaining the Limited Terrorist Threat in the United States

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Draft

[NDISC Colleagues: I am including as background reading a draft chapter for an anthology by regional experts on global patterns of terrorism edited by scholars in the U.K. The project I will present on 2/26 relates generally to the arguments here. In addition to information on the United States, it draws from primary research on plots in Europe from 2001-2018 and two case studies of Al Qaeda and 9/11 and the Belgian network that perpetrated the Paris 2015 and Brussels 2016 and several other terrorist attacks.]

Since 2001, the threat of terrorist attacks posed by ISIS and Al Qaeda has been foremost among Americans' security concerns. The U.S. government has spent enormous sums on counterterrorism related initiatives and Americans continue to prioritize the terrorist threat posed by these groups.¹ Indeed, more than forty percent of Americans believe that the threat of a major attack from overseas militant groups is now greater than it was after 9/11.²

Despite these fears, Americans in fact remain relatively safe from terrorist plots carried out by Al Qaeda, ISIS or their affiliates. A limited number of attacks have been successfully perpetrated by individuals inspired by these groups' ideology. These individuals, however, have acted independently, without direct guidance or instruction from ISIS or Al Qaeda leaders. There have been no successful attacks in the United States in which Americans have died in which leaders or operatives of the foreign groups, or individuals trained overseas by them, have

¹ Andre McGill, "Americans are more worried about terrorism than they were after 9/11," *The Atlantic*, 8 Sept. 2016. John Mueller and Mark Stewart, *Public Opinion and Counterterrorism Policy*, Cato Institute, 2018 <https://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/white-paper-public-opinion-counterterrorism-policy.pdf>

² "Fifteen years after 9/11, a sharp partisan divide on ability of terrorists to strike U.S." Pew Research Center, 7 Sept. 2016. Risa Brooks, "Muslim "Homegrown" Terrorism in the United States: How Serious is the Threat," *International Security* 2011. For a critical analysis of counterterrorism expenditures see John Mueller and Mark Stewart, "Responsible Counterterrorism Policy," Cato policy analysis 755, 10 Sept. 2014. <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/responsible-counterterrorism-policy>

participated in planning or executing the plot. Moreover, of the handful of lethal attacks by self-initiated terrorists that have killed Americans, all have been relatively unsophisticated, relying on readily available weapons against soft targets with little premeditation or skill required.

Americans, in short, have been relatively safe overall from terrorist attacks—and from terrorist spectacles in particular—especially in comparison with their European allies, and states in the Middle East whose populations have faced the brunt of Al Qaeda and ISIS’s lethal violence.

What explains why American citizens have faced a relatively limited terrorist threat from Salafist Islamist militant organizations such as ISIS and Al Qaeda? The conventional answer relates to differences in the assimilation and social status of American Muslims, which renders them less motivated to engage in terrorist activity compared with some marginalized Muslim communities in Europe.³ While important, however, this is only part of the answer. Despite the widespread rejection of militancy by American Muslims,⁴ these foreign terrorist organizations retain the means through which they could, at least in principle, orchestrate complex plots. Some contend, for example, that the internet provides opportunities for these organizations to “remote control” attacks among the small number of Americans who do become indoctrinated by extremist ideology.⁵ Al Qaeda and ISIS also have access to overseas safe havens and could train Americans who travel there and then return home to plot attacks. They could also just forgo the use of Americans altogether and rely on vetted and trained foreign recruits, as Al Qaeda did with

³ On the assimilation and success of American Muslims, especially the immigrant population, see Byman, “Europe versus America”; Dave Phillips, “Muslims in the Military: The Few, the Proud, the Welcome,” *New York Times*, August 2, 2016.

⁴ See “Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the U.S. and around the World,” Pew Research Center, July 22, 2016 (www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/22/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/).

⁵ Rukmini Callimachi, “Not Lone Wolves After All,” *New York Times* 4 Feb. 2017.

the hijackers in 9/11. Indeed, it is precisely the fear that these groups' safe havens will facilitate another 9/11 that has led American presidents repeatedly to prioritize eliminating them.⁶

In this chapter, I explore the reasons why the foreign terrorist threat has remained limited in the United States to only basic (if sometimes lethal) attacks. I argue that the key lies in understanding what is required to plan, prepare, and execute a complex terrorist attack.⁷ Terrorist attacks are not singular acts, but rather the outcome of a series of precursor and preparatory steps undertaken by militants. Carrying out those steps requires technical capability on the part of militants who have been trained and instructed for the task. It also requires that those militants have security in proximity to their target to prevent their precursor activities from being detected and the plot foiled. Without the ability to locate trained or experienced operatives in the area of operations (in this case, the United States) and supply them with local security, foreign militant organizations like Al Qaeda and ISIS are extremely limited in what they can accomplish. In short, it is the basic requirements of plotting complex plots—and foreign organizations inability to meet those requirements in the United States—that explains why the threat to Americans has remained limited.

In recent years there has been relatively little attention paid to the threat that ISIS or Al Qaeda will execute complex attacks compared with concerns about simpler, so-called lone wolf attacks inspired by these groups' propaganda. In part this may reflect the absence of sophisticated plots, such that their importance has received less attention in public discussion of

⁶ Eliminating that territorial havens have been a major and consistent rationale for military action in the Middle East since 9/11 across the Bush, Obama and now Trump administrations. Cites.

⁷ A complex attack involves one of the following: a network or cell that uses firearms that are not easily acquired (e.g., assault rifles in Europe), or high impact explosives, such as those made from Aluminum Nitrate or TATP; in a temporally clustered set of coordinated attacks; and/or against secured targets. In contrast, more basic attacks involve attacks by solo or intimates (married couples; siblings) using readily available firearms or easy to fabricate, lower impact explosives (pipe or "pressure-cooker" bombs), against accessible targets that do not require evading defensive security measures.

terrorism in the country. Yet, the lack of spectacular attacks by these groups merits investigation, for both analytical and practical reasons. Analytically, focusing on the causes of these non-events sheds light on what factors facilitate sophisticated attacks—that is, by evaluating why complex attacks have not occurred in the United States, we can better understand what enables terrorist organizations to undertake them. On a practical level, complex attacks—of the kind experienced by Londoners in 2005, or by Parisians in 2015—are important because they can have significant strategic and political effects. Research shows that event characteristics affect the psychological impact of terrorist attacks: more complex attacks generate more media attention and more fear among target populations.⁸ Understanding what factors have insulated the United States from these attacks is crucial.⁹

This chapter is organized as follows. I begin by reviewing the pattern of terrorism in the United States since 9/11, breaking it into four categories: successful, failed, foiled and attacks and terrorist related activities that do not constitute plots in the United States. I then explore the basic prerequisites for plotting complex attacks. The chapter then details the reasons why Al Qaeda and ISIS are unable to meet those basic requirements and explains why the United States has not experienced terrorist spectacles since 9/11.

Al Qaeda and ISIS Terrorism in the United States Since 9/11

Terrorist activity inspired by Al Qaeda and ISIS within the United States can be grouped into four categories.

⁸ Ginny Sprang, “The Psychological Impact of Isolated Acts of Terrorism,” in *Terrorists, Victims and Society*, Andrew Silke, ed., John Wiley & Sons, 2003; See Adrienne Stith Butler, Allison M. Panzer, Lewis R. Goldfrank, eds., *Preparing for the Psychological Consequences of Terrorism: A Public Health Strategy* (Washington D.C.: National Academies Press, 2003), pp. 56-57.

⁹ A basic attack, of course, can still be lethal (an easily acquired automatic weapon used against an enclosed, highly populated venue can do a lot of harm as Americans saw when Omar Mateen attacked the Pulse nightclub in 2016).

The first category is *successful* attacks, or those in which a plot within the country was executed and was at least partially successful in that the weapon operated as intended (e.g., the explosive detonated) and the attack resulted in deaths or injuries other than the perpetrator.¹⁰ In the years between 2001 and 2017, there have been 25 attacks in which at least one person was injured and which involved Muslim Americans who appear in part to be politically motivated. Some of these attacks have been serious efforts by individuals clearly inspired by Al Qaeda or ISIS ideology and propaganda. Alternatively, a few have been motivated by anti-Israel sentiments and do not appear to be inspired by Al Qaeda or ISIS (the attacks by Hesham Hadayet in 2002 and in 2006 by Naveed Haq-see Table One). Other plots have included those where mental illness played a role, and complicate assessments of the perpetrators' motivations, such as the case of Matthew Llaneza, who had a history of Schizophrenia and bipolar disorder when he was arrested in 2014 and charged with plotting to blow up a bank building.¹¹ In other cases, the motivation is ambiguous, such as the 2014 killing by Alton Nolan of his former co-workers in a supermarket, or the racially tinged 2017 killings by Kori Muhammad. Eight of these 25 incidents were non-lethal and involved only injuries to bystanders (in some cases serious, and in others not).¹² There have been 144 total fatalities. Most are the result of four attacks: the husband and wife team who in 2015 killed 14 work colleagues in San Bernardino; Omar Mateen's 2016

¹⁰ A plot is defined here as involving an attack at a target in the United States in which at least a basic concept is established and an initial step toward operational development has occurred. "Material Support" acts like joining a foreign terrorist organization, or sending money overseas are excluded from my definition of terrorist plots in the United States. Also excluded from the count are incidents in which no concrete actions were taken and the individuals were arrested, for example, for making threatening statements online or trying to encourage others to engage in terrorism, or where police officers were injured when a suspect was taken into custody for those actions. If no concept is development, weapon is acquired and pre-operational steps taken toward an attack, it is not counted as a plot. In my accounting of "foiled" plots below I have excluded incidents that do not meet this basic threshold. For a similar distinction see Petter Nesser, "How Did Europe's Global Jihadis Obtain Training for their Militant Causes,?" *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 2 (2008), 234-56.

¹¹ <https://www.nbcbayarea.com/news/local/San-Joses-Matthew-Llaneza-Faces-Prison-In-Bombing-Case-247628271.html>

¹² These include the attacks by Taheri Azar; Zale Thompson; Elton Simpson and Nader Soofi; Faisal Mohammed; Dahir Adan; Ahmad Khan Rahimi; Abdul Razak Ali Artan; and Akayed Ullah. See Table One for details.

shooting spree, which left 49 dead in the Pulse nightclub; Major Nidal Hasan's 2009 killing of 13 soldiers at Fort Hood; and the Tsarnaev brothers who in 2013 bombed the Boston Marathon and killed 3 (but injured many more).

Table One

Politically Motivated Attacks by Muslims in the United States Resulting in Deaths or Injuries, 2002-2018.

2002	Hesham Hadayet opens fire at the El Al Los Angeles airport ticket counter, killing 2 and injuring 4.
2006	Mohammed Reza Taheri-Azar drives his SUV into students at University of North Carolina, injuring 9 (none seriously).
2006	Naveed Haq kills four and wounds two in a shooting at a Jewish Federation building in Seattle. He professed anger at Israel.
2009	Army psychiatrist Major Nidal Malik Hasan kills 13, injuries 30 in a shooting at Fort Hood military base.
2009	Adbullah Mujahid Muhammad (aka Carlos Bledsoe) kills one soldier and injures another in a shooting outside an army recruiting center in Little Rock Arkansas.
2013	Brothers Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev bomb the Boston Marathon with homemade pressure cooker bombs killing 3 and injuring dozens, many seriously.
2014	In several shootings between April and June, Ali Muhammad Brown kills four men in New Jersey and in Washington State. He states that he is targeting gay men in a violent "Jihad" consistent with his religious beliefs.
2014	Alton Nolen beheads one and mortally wounds another former co-worker at a supermarket. His motives are not clear.
2014	Zale Thompson injures two police officers (one seriously) in an attack with a hatchet on a sidewalk in Queens, NY.
2014	Ismaaiyl Abdullah Brinsley shoots and kills two police officers sitting in their patrol vehicles in Brooklyn, NY in a revenge killing against police. His motivations are unclear.
2015	Elton Simpson and Nader Soofi injure a security guard in a shooting at an anti-Muslim event in Texas.
2015	Faisal Mohammed stabs four at UC Merced.
2015	Mohammed Abdulazeez kills 5 military personnel in two attacks, in a drive-by shooting at a naval recruiting center and at a U.S. Navy Reserve center in Chattanooga, Tennessee.
2015	Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik shoot co-workers at social service building in San Bernardino, California, killing 14.
2016	Edward Archer shoots and injures a police officer in a car in Philadelphia.
2016	Omar Mateen kills 49 people at the Pulse Nightclub in Florida.
2016	Dahir Adan injures 10 people with a knife at a Minnesota mall.
2016	Ahmad Khan Rahimi injures 30 with a pressure cooker bomb in New York City.
2016	Arkan Cetin kills five in a Seattle mall. Motivation is unclear.
2016	Abdul Razak Ali Artan injures 11 (none critically) when he stabs and drives his car into students on the Ohio State campus.
2017	Esteban Santiago kills 5 and injures 6 at Fort Lauderdale airport. He has been diagnosed with Schizophrenia and initially blames government mind control and later ISIS videos for his act.
2017	Joshua Cummings shoots and kills a police officer on a Denver street. His motives for the attack at trial are unclear.
2017	Kori Ali Mohammed, a Muslim convert, shoots and kills three in Fresno, California in an attack that appears at least in part to be racially motivated.
2017	Saifullo Saipov kills 8 when he drives a vehicle into pedestrians in New York City.
2017	Akayed Ullah injures 5 in a failed pipe bomb explosion at a bus terminal near Times Square. Ullah was the only one seriously injured when the crude bomb failed to ignite.
2018	17 year old Corey Johnson stabs friends and mother at a sleepover, killing one 13 year old child

A second category of terrorism events is *failed* attacks. These are attacks that were attempted (carried out to the execution phase) prior to the perpetrators coming to the attention of law enforcement. The plots, however, failed to unfold as planned and no bystanders were harmed. These include the failed 2009 attempt to bomb Times Square by Faisal Shahzad; a homemade bomb placed by Abdullatif Aldosary in 2012 outside an Austin social security building that failed to detonate. They also include the 2011 arrest of Yonathan Melaku for shooting at military buildings in Virginia, in which no one was harmed. Although I have included them in successful attacks in Table One, two other attacks might also be classified as failed. These include the 2017 failed pipe bomb explosion by Akayed Ullah near a crowded bus terminal in NYC in which some bystanders were injured, but none seriously and Ahmad Khan Rahimi's 2016 New York and New Jersey bombings. Although Rahimi planted multiple bombs, only one pipe bomb and one pressure cooker bomb went off as intended; the blast from the latter was largely absorbed by the metal dumpster in proximity to where Rahimi chose to place his bomb (effectively neutralizing much of the effect of the blast).¹³

A third larger class of plots are those *foiled* prior to execution: the plot is uncovered and the militants apprehended or charged with offenses prior to the implementation phase. In the United States this has constituted the bulk of all plots. There have been between 2011 and 2017 61 plots in which a militant had some aspiration to attack a target in the United States (as opposed, for example, to seeking to join a group fighting an insurgency overseas).¹⁴ The aims and operational development of these plots varies widely, however, as do when they are discovered and foiled. In many cases, the perpetrators have been discovered early when their

¹³ Michael Wilson, "Bomber sentenced to two life terms for Manhattan attack," 13 Feb. 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/13/nyregion/bomber-chelsea-manhattan.html>

¹⁴ For what is counted as a "plot" see footnote 10.

plots were more aspirational than operational (e.g., they have yet to acquire weapons or the means to produce explosives), such as when they have only expressed extremist views or a desire to engage in violence, but have not taken concrete steps to carry them out.¹⁵ In addition, most of these aspiring militants are poorly skilled amateurs.¹⁶

Various factors have led to the exposure of these militants in the United States. Foiled plots are discovered at an early phase due to basic errors in operational security, such as individuals broadcasting their intentions online, or trying to openly recruit co-conspirators on social media.¹⁷ One means of exposure has involved tips by alert spectators, such as the chemical supplier and freight company that reported Khalid Aldwasari to the FBI after he ordered phenol under suspicious circumstances.¹⁸ In other cases, family members have turned in militants.¹⁹ According to figures compiled by the New America Foundation, a significant source of information about suspected militants has come from tips from Muslim community members in the United States.²⁰ Informants recruited by law enforcement have been another source of

¹⁵ See the annual reports by Charles Kurzman on Muslim-Americans involvement in extremism. Available at <http://kurzman.unc.edu/>

¹⁶ Michael Kenney, “‘Dumb’ Yet Deadly: Local Knowledge and Poor Tradecraft among Islamist Militants in Britain and Spain,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33 (October 2010): 914–915; Daniel Byman and C. Christine Fair, “The Case for Calling Them Nitwits,” *The Atlantic*, July/August 2010, pp. 106–08; *Terrorism since 9/11: The American Cases*, edited by John Mueller (Mershon Center, Ohio State University, March 2016).

¹⁷ For a recent example see “Jalil Bin Ameer Aziz sentenced for conspiracy to provide material support and resources to designated foreign terrorist organization and transmitting a communication containing a threat to injure,” Dept. of Justice Press Release, 20 Dec. 2017. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/jalil-ibn-ameer-aziz-sentenced-conspiracy-provide-material-support-and-resources-designated>

¹⁸ “Texas resident arrested on charge of attempted use of weapon of mass destruction,” FBI press release, Feb. 2011, <https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/dallas/press-releases/2011/dl022411.htm>

¹⁹ See Adam Goldman “An American saved their son from joining the Islamic State. Now he might go to prison,” *Washington Post* 6 Sept. 2015. Matt Apuzzo, “Only Hard choices for parents whose children flirt with terror,” *New York Times* 9 April 2016.

²⁰ See the comments by FBI Director James Comey, “U.S. officials say American Muslims Do Report Extremist Threats,” *Reuters*, Jun 16, 2016. See the data available on the New America Foundation’s website, “Terrorism in America after 9/11” (www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/).

exposure; recruited by law enforcement, these are individuals who report to authorities any suspicious behavior among those they observe in their communities or social networks.²¹

Another common tactic employed by law enforcement in the United States is the use of undercover “sting” operations to expose potential plots. In a sting operation, an undercover FBI agent befriends an individual suspected of harboring militant tendencies. The suspected militant is then supplied with resources and with comradeship as he or she moves from expressing extremist views to taking actions preparatory to an attack. FBI agents have been known to supply fake weapons, discuss potential targets and in some cases provide basic material support, even rent money, as well as emotional support to militants.²² These tactics are controversial, although they are deemed essential tools by law enforcement given the challenges of surveilling large numbers of individuals; they allow law enforcement to accelerate the planning stage to see who is capable of violent activity. Analytically, however, they are important when assessing the terrorist plots in the United States because they can lead to an inflated estimation of the actual terrorist threat. The assistance law enforcement provides is in some cases extensive. Consequently, it is uncertain whether those plots would have been advanced in the absence of this support; the use of these methods can generate plots that otherwise might have never been attempted, or otherwise fizzled, whatever the odious beliefs of the perpetrator.²³ Given increased

²¹ Matt Apuzzo and Adam Goldman, *Enemies Within: Inside the NYPD's Secret Spying Unit and bin Laden's final plot against America*; Trevor Aaronson, “To Catch the Devil: A Special Report on the Sordid world of FBI Informants,” *Foreign Policy* <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/12/to-catch-the-devil-fbi-informant-program/#>

²² Lisa Rose, “How a Suicidal Pizza Man found himself ensnared in an FBI sting,” 29 Nov. 2017. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/29/politics/aby-rayyan-fbi-terror-sting-pizza-man/index.html>

²³ For discussion of this point see Risa Brooks, “Muslim ‘Homegrown’ Terrorism in the United States: How Serious Is the Threat?” *International Security* 36 (2011): 7–47.

reliance on these methods in recent years, this is an important consideration when evaluating the terrorism threat in the United States.²⁴

A final category of terrorism plots are not actually plots—but actions that involve supporting or assisting overseas terrorist organizations. Overall arrests for “terrorism related activity” undertaken on behalf of foreign organizations are commonly included in data on the terrorist threat to the United States.²⁵ This may include providing material support (e.g., money) to overseas militants, or seeking to join a foreign terrorist organization. This constitutes the majority of terrorism related arrests in the United States. According to Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, of the 71 people arrested for some terrorist related offense associated with support for ISIS between 2013 and late 2015, for example, 73 percent were not involved in plotting in the United States (they were charged with attempting to travel to join ISIS or provide material support).²⁶ Many terrorism statistics do not differentiate material support activities from plots aimed at targets in the United States. Yet the distinction can affect how the terrorism threat is interpreted. Joining or supporting a foreign insurgency is different than attacking Americans here at home; collapsing the former into counts of “plots” in the United States distorts understanding of the terrorism threat.

Regardless of how the numbers are compiled, however, one thing is notable: there have been no successfully executed complex attacks since 9/11 in the United States. As complex plots

²⁴ Eric Lichtblau, “FBI Steps Up Use of Stings against ISIS,” *New York Times*, June 7, 2016.

²⁵ This has all arrests on terrorism related activity inside the United States, or against American targets located abroad (e.g., fighting in support of a militant group overseas).

<https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/who-are-terrorists/>

²⁶ Notably, over half of those arrested had been subjected to sting operations. Figures appear in Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, “ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa,” Center for Extremism, p. 7

https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/ISIS%20in%20America%20-%20Full%20Report_0.pdf

are defined here,²⁷ all successful attacks in the United States since September 11 have been basic in nature. In fact, only two plots aimed at targets inside the United States that reached an advanced stage of development qualify as complex. These include the 2009 failed effort by Faisal Shahzad to bomb Times Square and the foiled effort by Najibullah Zazi to employ TATP devices against the New York subway.²⁸

What explains the absence of complex plots and the inability of overseas militant groups to execute them in the United States? I argue that these groups lack two vital ingredients to carrying out complex attacks: gaining access for skilled militants trained by the group to the area of operations (in this case, the United States) and local security once there to carry out tasks essential to preparing an attack. Understanding why these deficiencies are so important becomes clear when we examine the prerequisites to terrorist plotting. I discuss these next.

The Fundamentals of Terrorist Plotting

Carrying out a sophisticated terrorist plot is an involved and technically challenging process. A number of phases or precursor steps are involved. These include developing an operational concept, recruiting operatives, developing a working relationship among them, undertaking surveillance of local conditions (especially security measures), acquiring weapons or ingredients, fabrication of weapons (explosives), practice or dry-runs, and execution of the plot. Each phase or step must be undertaken in a manner to avoid exposure; maintaining operational security (OPSEC) is critical. A complex plot with many steps and sub-steps can be especially fraught in this regard, as each step has some associated risk of drawing scrutiny and when cumulated yield an overall significant risk of exposure. It only takes one breakdown in OPSEC

²⁷ See footnote 7 for definitions.

²⁸ For discussion see Risa Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism."

to lead to the unraveling of a cell's activities, as many aspiring militants in the United States have discovered.²⁹

To overcome these obstacles requires that militants have particular skills and training. They require technical skills in acquiring and handling weapons (explosives and firearms), or in fabricating explosives when using readily available materials in the case of acetone based TATP, a popular material for bomb-making by terrorists in Western countries. It also requires what is called skills in "terrorist tradecraft," as well as experience, which allows militants to translate their technical knowledge into practical know-how.³⁰

Success also requires a forgiving environment to neutralize the risks of exposure that are inherent in plotting, and the mistakes that almost all militants make. A permissive environment helps provide cover and concealment and to compensate for errors in operational security. Take, the 9/11 attacks. Although often considered the iconic terrorist spectacular undertaken by a cell of disciplined and ruthless operatives, a closer look raises questions about this depiction of the hijackers. In fact, they committed several egregious mistakes in operational security. Two of the hijackers, Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid Mihdhar, behaved bizarrely during flight lessons in San Diego, and drew the attention of their instructors.³¹ Mihdhar subsequently left without approval to see family in Yemen when he became homesick.³² Hazmi bragged to his roommate that he

²⁹ Many plots have been foiled by a single mistake that led to their exposure. Take, for example, Najibullah Zazi's aforementioned plot to bomb the NY subway with TATP explosives. The plot was foiled when Zazi emailed a militant contact in Pakistan in order to get clarification about how to fabricate explosives. The email address had been used by another militant involved in a major plot in the U.K. that had been exposed also by mistakes, so was being monitored by British authorities.

³⁰ See Michael Kenney, "Beyond the Internet: *Metis, Techne*, and the Limits of Online Artifacts for Islamist Terrorists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22 (April 2010); Blake W. Mobley, *Terrorism and Counterintelligence: How Terrorist Groups Evade Detection* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

³¹ The men, for example, asked to skip training on small planes and instead focus on large Boeing aircraft; and they showed little interest in learning how to take off or land. *The 9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 221–22.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 222.

would soon be famous and, according to the 9/11 report, told employees at a gas station at least something about his involvement in a terrorist plot.³³ Another al Qaeda operative in the United States, Zacarias Moussaoui, prompted an instructor at a flight school in Eagan, Minnesota, to report his odd behavior to authorities.³⁴ Even Mohammed Atta, the plot's disciplined tactical ringleader, violated his own prohibitions against contacting relatives when he called his father overseas prior to the attack.³⁵ Even more striking is that these men were carefully vetted and trained under near ideal conditions by skilled terrorists in part in a foreign safe haven. Still they made major errors in operational security—errors that if made today would have likely exposed the plot.

In sum, to execute successfully complex attacks, foreign terrorist organizations need capable individuals operating in an environment that provides cover and concealment for their preparations. That is, they require “access” for a skilled group of militants to the area of operations and “local security” once there. Below I explain why Al Qaeda and ISIS have been handicapped on both fronts in the United States.

“Access” and “Local Security” in the United States

There are three ways in principle that a foreign terrorist organization could provide itself skilled operatives in the United States. First, it could rely on individuals who are already in the country, and who already have skills and training to prepare a complex plot. Second, it could recruit U.S. citizens or residents who travel overseas to their territorial safe havens, receive guidance and training there and then return to execute attacks. Third, it could infiltrate foreign

³³ Kenney, “Dumb, but Deadly,” p. 916; 9/11 Commission Report, p. 222, 249-50.

³⁴ Ibid., 246-47.

³⁵ Ibid., 249.

operatives into the United States who have previously been trained and vetted (as in the case of 9/11).

None of these pathways, however, constitutes a reliable means for these organizations to provide skilled operatives in the United States. Tapping into a local talent pool is problematical because the United States lacks a cohort of former foreign fighters, or a network of experienced militants from which the groups could hope to draw. This is one significant difference with Europe, where members of past networks of Algerian militants, and those with Al Qaeda ties dating from the 1990s have played a role in several terrorist cells.³⁶ The United States also lacks the radical networks and pockets of extremism that have in the past thrived in parts of Europe, such as the famous mosques central to “Londonistan,”³⁷ or in Hamburg, Germany where the core operatives in 9/11 met and established close relationships.³⁸

Relying on those who travel to the territorial safe havens is also a poor option for terrorist organizations. In part, this originates in the “remoteness” of their territorial havens from the United States and the difficulty of accessing them and returning without drawing the attention of authorities. That remoteness is the product of geography and the logistical obstacles of moving

³⁶ Although the U.S. does not have the legacy of established foreign militant networks as does Europe, there have been since the 1980s some Americans who have traveled to join militant groups, notable those fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. Some of these individuals were involved in the 1993 World Trade Center Bombing. Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, “ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa,” Center for Extremism, p. 14

https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/ISIS%20in%20America%20-%20Full%20Report_0.pdf

³⁷ Raffaello Pantucci, “The Tottenham Ayatollah and the Hook Handed Cleric: An examination of all their jihadi children.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33 (2010), 226-245.

³⁸ Since 9/11 the closest we have seen to militant networks or cells are some clusters of individuals who have sought to provide material support to ISIS or Al Qaeda and their affiliates and specifically sought to travel together to fight overseas, tried to recruit others to do so, or sent money or goods to associates who have. These include, a group of Somalis who sent money to support a Somali American in 2014 who joined ISIS; a group of immigrants from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan who gave money to a friend to purchase flight to join ISIS; a group that was charged for efforts in 2012 to provide money and other assistance to Anwar Al-Awlaki and AQAP; and Bosnian Americans associated with Abdullah Ramo-Pazara who rose to a position to leadership in ISIS in Syria, before his death. On the latter see Seamus Hughes and Bennett Clifford, “The Bosnian-Muslim Who Joined ISIS,” *The Atlantic* 25 May 2017. See <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/four-men-charged-providing-material-support-al-qaeda-arabian-peninsula>

people to and from overseas camps and battlefields. But security obstacles and political barriers also intensify that remoteness; the barriers to accessing the United States are not just geographic, but political in origin, the result of the significant hardening of immigration control and port security, as well as monitoring of foreign travel. Consequently, traveling to the Middle East, acquiring training and returning without being exposed to authorities is not an easy proposition in the contemporary United States. Some Americans have sought to travel to join Al Qaeda affiliates, ISIS or other militant groups, although most have been caught before they successfully made it overseas. A smaller number have fought with those groups and later been caught by authorities.³⁹

Similar problems limit opportunities to infiltrate foreign militants trained in safe havens. Doing so requires deploying a cell of foreign militant into the United States who has been vetted and trained in militant camps into the United States, where the individuals lack local knowledge and experience. In the United States, since 9/11, there have been almost no arrests of purely foreign infiltrators (defined as citizens of foreign countries trained, vetted and selected for a specific plot prior to entering the United States).⁴⁰ The one potential exception is the arrest of

³⁹ These include the following cases: Adbirahman Mohamud who had been trained by the former Al Qaeda affiliate al Nusra Front and was arrested in April 2015. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/ohio-man-pleads-guilty-providing-material-support-terrorists>; Eric Harroun who was arrested in 2013 for joining and fighting with al Nusra Front. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edva/pr/us-citizen-indicted-conspiring-provide-material-support-foreign-terrorist-organization>; Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati who fought with al Nusra front who was first interviewed by FBI agents in March 2015 in Ankara, Turkey/Arrested in April 2015/California, USA.; Sinh Vinh Ngo Nguyen (alias Hasan Abu Omar Ghannoum) fought against the Assad regime (Arrested in October 2013/Mexico); Bilal Abood charged with fighting in Syria in May 2015. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/iraqi-born-us-citizen-sentenced-48-months-prison-making-false-statements-fbi>

⁴⁰ In the years preceding and following the 9/11 attacks, there have been some failed plots involving foreign recruits that were directed by Al Qaeda and its affiliates. These include failed “shoe bombing” in 2001 by Richard Reid and failed “underwear bomb” in 2009 by Umar Farouk Abdullamatub. Although they were aiming at U.S. targets (transatlantic airliners), they initiated their plots at foreign airports outside the United States and were not infiltrated into the country. There are also a small number of instances where militants had contact online with militant group leaders overseas online in recent years. But with the exception of Faisal Shahzad’s failed Times Square bombing and Najibullah Zazi’s foiled subway plot there have not been complex plots in which foreign organizations have had a direct hand in training, planning or directing them.

two Hezbollah operatives, Ali Kourani and Samer el Debek, recruited in 2008 by the group's Islamic Jihad Organization who were, according to the men's account supposed to act as a sleeper cell.⁴¹

Even were AQ or ISIS capable of infiltrating foreign operatives, or training Americans to return to carry out plots, however, those operatives face a second obstacle: the lack of local security in the area of operations. In other words, militants operate in a hostile security environment in the United States that renders them vulnerable to exposure while undertaking essential preparatory steps (meeting with co-conspirators, fabricating and practicing with weapons, undertaking surveillance) or due to the breakdowns in operational security to which, as noted above, even the most seasoned militants succumb. Given that even relatively basic plots require some antecedent steps⁴² and associated risks of exposure, the challenge of carrying out a complex plot without attracting law enforcement attention during those activities, or making errors that draw the attention of authorities are significant.

To appreciate the demands of preparing and plotting a complex plot—and the need for security in order to hide or obscure preparations—consider the 2008 Mumbai plot planned by American David Headley on behalf of Pakistani militants. Despite the fact that the attack aimed at soft targets (a train station and hotels), Headley engaged in extensive surveillance in five extended trips to Mumbai, beginning in March 2008.⁴³ These included taking surveillance video of the Mumbai harbor and hiring fishermen to take him on private tours of the harbor to

⁴¹ Benjamin Weiser, "Bronx Man Accused of Casing J.F.K. airport for potential Hezbollah Attack," *New York Times* 8 June 2017. Note that there is some debate about whether the Lackawanna 6, which were arrested in 2002 constituted an Al Qaeda sleeper cell.

⁴² A study of plots in the United States shows that even basic attacks have required between 4 and 10 antecedent activities, such as meetings, surveillance, and acquiring weapons. "Update on Geospatial Patterns of Antecedent Behavior among Perpetrators in the American Terrorism Study" (October 2013). START

⁴³ Bruce Hoffman, "American Jihad?" *National Interest*, May/June 2010.

scout locations for the militants to land.⁴⁴ He also stayed in the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel (one of the main targets) at least twice. Similarly, the 9/11 attackers preparations including preparation and surveillance of targets, including numerous rides on commercial aircraft to assess security conditions and a flight up the Hudson River corridor to observe local conditions.⁴⁵ In short, complex plots require often significant precursor steps, which risk attracting attention, especially in a hostile security environment where they cannot conceal these activities.

The ability of militants to benefit from local security depends on several factors: the capacity of intelligence and law enforcement and especially how well different units coordinate and communicate; the availability of local supporters who are willing (at the least) to passively abide the presence of militants, and not report suspicious activity to authorities; and the overall level of societal awareness or vigilance about aberrant or suspicious behavior, which affects whether individuals in the local community detect terrorist plotting in the first place. Social support from a larger community has long been a salient theme in explaining the organizational capacity and resilience of terrorist organizations.⁴⁶ Groups that derive support from radicalized communities, such as the Provisional IRA or the Basque militant group ETA, have been able to mount sophisticated terrorist campaigns;⁴⁷ some research, in fact, ties the organizational sophistication of their terrorist attacks to the magnitude of their social base.⁴⁸ Local security, however, also depends on the role of the state and the efficacy and capacity of the counterterrorism effort. These factors together play a major role in shaping the security

⁴⁴ “Chicagoan charged with conspiracy in 2008 Mumbai attacks in addition to foreign terror plot in Denmark,” Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, December 7, 2009.

⁴⁵ *The 9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 242–45.

⁴⁶ For an overview see Christopher Paul, “How Do Terrorists Generate and Maintain Support ?” in *Social Science for Counterterrorism: Putting the Pieces Together*, edited by Paul K. Davis and Kim Cragin (RAND, 2009).

⁴⁷ Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann, “The Radical Milieu: Conceptualizing the Supportive Social Environment of Terrorist Groups.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 27 (2014), 979-998.

⁴⁸ Lindsay Heger, Danielle Jung and Wendy H. Wong, “Organizing for Resistance: How Group Structure Impacts the Character of Violence,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 5 (2012), 743-68.

environment and providing opportunities for militants to obscure the preparatory phases of a terrorist plot from authorities.

The network that carried out the 2015 Paris and 2016 Belgian attacks illustrates the facilitating role that local security provides. The local security was a product of several factors, including serious deficiencies in intelligence and law enforcement coordination. There was, for example, flawed cross-national cooperation that would have possibly aided detection of the movements of some of the operatives who had traveled to Syria. Consequently, Abdelhamid Abbaoud, who helped plan and coordinate the attack, was able to travel in and out of Europe via the Balkan route, after first going to Syria to fight in 2013.⁴⁹ Within Belgium, there were also some alarming deficiencies in the monitoring and investigation of known militants prior to the attacks.⁵⁰

In addition, the militants were able to conceal their activities and hide in neighborhoods in Brussels—principally Molenbeek.⁵¹ Several operatives involved in both the Paris and Brussels attacks had ties to Molenbeek.⁵² Najim Laachraoui, who had been trained and sent by ISIS to Europe, is believed to have fabricated explosives for both attacks in the suburb of Schaerbeek.⁵³ The militants thus benefited from local security, in which they could congregate, interact with local coordinator with ties to ISIS in Syria and plan and prepare attacks.

⁴⁹ <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-europe-left-itself-open-to-terrorism>

⁵⁰ Krishnadev Calamur, “The Brussels Attacks: What the Belgians Missed,” *The Atlantic* 25 March 2016.

⁵¹ Roger Cohen, “The Islamic State of Molenbeek,” *New York Times*, April 11, 2016; Nima Elbagir, Bharati Naik and Laila Ben Allal, “Why Belgium is Europe’s front line in the War on Terror,” *CNN.com*, 24 March 2016.

⁵² Several of the operatives in both plots had links to Brussels. Larry Buchanan and Hayeon Park, “Uncovering the Links between the Brussels and Paris Attackers,” *New York Times*, April 9, 2016.

⁵³ Weapons from Molenbeek were also used in other plots, such as the shootings at a Paris supermarket attack by Amedy Coulibaly in January 2015 and the May 2014 shooting at the Jewish Museum in Brussels. Liam Stack and Palko Karasz, “How Belgium Became Home to Recent Terror Plots,” *New York Times*, March 23, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/11/15/world/europe/belgium-terrorism-suspects.html>

Finally, to see the importance of this combination of access for trained operatives and local security consider the record of complex attacks that have occurred in Europe. Every major complex attack that has been executed in Europe since 9/11 (those that involved coordinated/temporally linked attacks, or high impact explosives, such as TATP bombs) have included at least one member who has been trained by militant organization. The 7/7 London bombings, 2004 Madrid train bombings, Charlie Hebdo attacks, Paris 2015 and Brussels 2016, and Manchester attacks⁵⁴ evince this pattern.⁵⁵ It also includes many of the more serious plots that were foiled at an advanced phase, such as the network and vast arsenal uncovered in 2015 in Verviers, Belgium (whose members had ties to the Molenbeek based network responsible for the Paris and Brussels attacks) and the 2004 foiled complex plot in the U.K. involving fertilizer bombs (often referred to as Operation Crevice).

Conclusion

[conclusion to be revised]

The United States has faced a limited terrorist threat from Al Qaeda and ISIS since 9/11. While some lethal attacks perpetrated by individuals inspired by these groups' ideology and propaganda have occurred, Americans have not experienced complex attacks, especially of the

⁵⁴ The perpetrator of Manchester attack (which used TATP explosives) had been trained in Libya (apparently by a group with ties to the Paris/Brussels network).

⁵⁵ As Bergen notes the head of the 7/7 plot had received explosives training from al Qaeda in Pakistan. Peter Bergen, "Paris Explosives are a Key Clue to Plot," CNN.com 17 Nov 2015

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/11/17/opinions/bergen-explosives-paris-attacks/>; The bombers in the London attacks had relied on community institutions, including a local bookstore, community center and youth annex in Leeds. Aidan Kirby, "The London Bombers as 'Self-Starters,'" A Case Study in Indigenous Radicalization and the Emergence of Autonomous Cliques" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30 (2007), 418. "Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005." inquiry by the House of Commons, 16-17 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/11_05_06_narrative.pdf; In Madrid, the plotters relied on access to a local mosque to plan and coordinate the plot. Javier Manas, Jordan Fernando M. and Nicola Horsburgh, "Strengths and Weakness of Grassroots Jihadist Networks: The Madrid Bombings" *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31 (2008), 17-39, 2008. On Al Qaeda's alleged role see [Fernando Reinares, "The Madrid Bombings and Global Jihadism," *Survival* 52, no. 2 \(2010\), 83-104.](#)

kind endured by some of their European counterparts despite both groups stated intentions and demonstrated interest in attacking the territorial United States. Two factors help explain why the threat has remained limited. First, Al Qaeda and ISIS do not have ready access to skilled operatives in the United States. The absence of pre-existing militant networks in the United States that might provide a pool of experienced terrorists, along with challenges in training Americans overseas or in infiltrating foreign operatives present obstacles to these groups. In addition, militants lack local security to carry out essential pre-operational steps. The combination of dramatic expansion of investments in law enforcement and intelligence, increased societal awareness of terrorism (for better or for worse), and the absence of radical communities in which to hide or obscure their activities, means that militants lack security to provide essential cover and concealment for plotting and executing terrorist attacks.