

# A Growing Terrorist Threat?

## Assessing “Homegrown” Extremism in the United States

A Report of the CSIS Homeland Security and  
Counterterrorism Program

### AUTHORS

Rick “Ozzie” Nelson  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Five events during the fall of 2009 thrust concerns over “homegrown” terrorism—or extremist violence perpetrated by U.S. legal residents and citizens<sup>1</sup>—into public view:

- September 19: Najibullah Zazi, an Afghan citizen and U.S. legal resident, was arrested on charges of conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction. Zazi later admitted to traveling to Pakistan to receive explosives and weapons training and to planning an attack in the United States.
- October 27: Federal authorities charged U.S. citizen David Coleman Headley with planning to attack a Danish newspaper. In December, revelations surfaced that Headley may have conspired with operatives of Lashkar-e-Taiba, a Pakistani terrorist group, in the 2008 Mumbai attacks.
- November 5: Major Nidal Malik Hasan, U.S. Army, allegedly killed 13 and wounded 30 at Fort Hood Army Base, outside Killeen, Texas. Early reports revealed that Hasan had previously communicated with a radical Yemeni cleric connected to al Qaeda.
- November 23: Federal officials unsealed indictments against eight people charged in connection with the alleged recruitment of approximately two dozen Somali Americans to fight with an insurgent group in Somalia.
- December 9: Five young Northern Virginia men were arrested in Sargodha, Pakistan. U.S. and Pakistani authorities claim that the group traveled there to fight alongside Taliban militants in Afghanistan.

This rash of arrests has important implications for policymakers and officials in charge of counterterrorism and homeland security because U.S. legal residents and citizens are lucrative assets for global terrorist organizations. Facing comparatively few restrictions, U.S. legal residents and citizens can travel abroad, connect with terrorist groups to gain explosives or weapons training, and return here to plan and execute attacks. Particularly troubling are homegrown extremists who possess facility with both American and foreign cultures, including language skills. Such multicultural familiarity could allow them to operate freely both at home and overseas and to elude—far more easily than foreign nationals—U.S. intelligence and law enforcement officials. Combating

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1. “Homegrown” terrorism does not have any one, official definition. In a June 2006 speech, FBI director Robert Mueller spoke of the threat posed by self-radicalized individuals living in the United States. (See <http://www.fbi.gov/pressrel/speeches/mueller062306.htm>.) The “Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism Prevention Act of 2007” defined homegrown terrorism, in part, as “the use, planned use, or threatened use, of force or violence by a large group or individual born, raised, or operating primarily within the United States...in furtherance of political or social objectives.” (See [http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=110\\_cong\\_bills&docid=f:h1955rfs.txt.pdf](http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=110_cong_bills&docid=f:h1955rfs.txt.pdf).) For the purposes of this study, we will define the term as terrorist violence perpetrated by U.S. legal residents or citizens.

these tendencies requires action at the local, state, and federal levels. Local governments, supported by federal agencies like the Department of Homeland Security, must continue to build strong partnerships with Muslim communities. This type of cooperation is important because the friends and family of suspected extremists often are the best resources for law enforcement officials.

The federal government also must continue to support official partnerships among local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. Such efforts—embodied in Joint Terrorism Task Forces and fusion centers—are crucial to apprehending domestic extremists because they combine local expertise (knowledge of neighborhoods and communities) with federal expertise (national intelligence and counterterrorism tools) to form a comprehensive approach to the threat.

Policymakers and officials at the national level also must address two key issues that play heavily in the five cases discussed here. First, they must consider new ways to interdict the growing trend of “Internet radicalization.” Many of last fall’s suspects connected with transnational terrorist recruiters via the Internet; stopping this sort of activity is crucial to stemming domestic extremism in the United States.

Second, several of those arrested last fall seemed to harbor the belief that the United States is at war with Islam. This is a “narrative” that al Qaeda and other global terrorist groups actively promulgate; it holds that U.S. counterterrorism efforts signify a “clash of civilizations” between the West and Islam. The United States must continue to work to puncture this narrative. White House officials already have discarded phrases like “war on radical Islam.” But ultimately, the United States needs to go further than this, because al Qaeda seizes on more than just U.S. rhetoric to galvanize support for its agenda; the group also points to America’s military presence in Muslim countries as evidence for its preferred narrative. The United States, then, should consider how to balance the need to combat global terrorism with the drawbacks of large-scale, direct military intervention. Doing so will require the United States to forge stronger partnerships with states plagued by extremist violence.

# A GROWING TERRORIST THREAT? ASSESSING “HOMEGROWN” EXTREMISM IN THE UNITED STATES

## Introduction

The five “cases”<sup>1</sup> discussed in this paper—which were part of a larger trend of heightened domestic extremism during 2009—proved so unsettling, in part, because they seemed to contradict much of the recent thinking concerning radicalization and terrorism in the United States. Both policymakers and the public have tended to classify extremist violence as a problem with origins outside the United States.<sup>2</sup> This trend gained momentum after the September 11, 2001, attacks, when President George W. Bush invoked the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars as part and parcel of the United States’ counterterrorism strategy. As the president said in a June 2005 speech, we were focused on “taking the fight to the terrorists abroad, so we don’t have to face them here at home.”<sup>3</sup>

But what if the terrorists we face already live here at home? As this report shows, the acceleration of domestic extremism poses a number of serious considerations for U.S. policymakers and officials in charge of counterterrorism and homeland security. Had they successfully linked up with militants in Afghanistan, for instance, the “Northern Virginia Five” could have used their fluency in English and understanding of American culture to aid Taliban attacks on U.S. troops. David Coleman Headley appears to have utilized his U.S. passport to gain access to India to undertake preparations for the Mumbai attacks; his alleged coconspirators, operating with Pakistani documentation, faced far more significant barriers to entry.

Najibullah Zazi offers the clearest example of an oft-discussed hypothetical—namely, that U.S. legal residents and citizens might travel abroad to receive explosives or weapons training in terrorist camps, then return here to plan and execute attacks. Given the United States’ largely effective post-9/11 efforts to prevent foreign terrorist infiltration, these sorts of homegrown recruits may represent the best chance for al Qaeda and other global terrorist organizations to launch a major attack in the United States. Of course, would-be domestic extremists need not acquire training abroad to inflict substantial harm at home, as the Fort Hood shootings revealed. The threats posed by homegrown extremism, then—even if not widespread—demand a close examination.

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1. The five events, or “cases,” described in this report were not the only instances of homegrown extremism in 2009. More than others, though, they captured the attention of the public and policymakers—whether by their intricacy (Najibullah Zazi), impact (Nidal Malik Hasan), or scope (the Minnesota Somalis). For these reasons, we have decided to examine these five cases and their bearing on domestic radicalization in the United States.

2. See, for instance, Peter Bergen, “The Terrorists among Us,” *ForeignPolicy.com*, November 19, 2009, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/11/18/the\\_terrorists\\_among\\_us?page=full](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/11/18/the_terrorists_among_us?page=full). “For many years after 9/11,” Bergen wrote, “the U.S. government had largely worried about terrorists coming into the country” rather than emerging from within our borders.

3. The White House, “President Discusses Patriot Act,” June 9, 2005, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/06/20050609-2.html>.

This report probes last fall's five major cases, situating them within the context of recent U.S. efforts to address domestic radicalization. Our goal is to suggest ways that policymakers might improve on current approaches to homegrown extremism. To begin, we offer brief sketches of each of the events. They differ in important respects, suggesting that there is no simple path to radicalization or common template for a homegrown extremist. Still, a few important similarities among the five cases do suggest some directives for policy in this area.

## Five Case Studies

### “It Would Have Been Deadly”

Najibullah Zazi's February 22, 2010, guilty plea to charges of conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction, conspiracy to commit murder in a foreign country, and provision of material support to al Qaeda ended months of speculation about the motives of a man behind what some government officials had called the United States' most serious terrorist plot since 9/11.<sup>4</sup> Appearing before a federal court in Brooklyn, New York, Zazi confirmed what U.S. officials had alleged since his September arrest: that he traveled to Pakistan to receive explosives and weapons training from al Qaeda and returned to the United States to plan a “martyrdom operation” in New York City.<sup>5</sup>

In the aftermath of Zazi's guilty plea, Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. contended that the plot “would have been deadly” had it succeeded.<sup>6</sup> Such alarm sprang from the extent of Zazi's plans. But the personal profile of the Afghan-born, U.S. legal resident also has raised concerns within the law enforcement and counterterrorism communities. Zazi most closely approximates what al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations look for in a homegrown extremist. As a U.S. legal resident, he can travel internationally with little scrutiny. His 10 years in the United States also endow him with the cultural and linguistic knowledge to aid in an attack here. At the same time, Zazi has roots in Afghanistan and Pakistan and appears to have maintained extensive contacts in the latter country. This type of “duality” was crucial to his being able to operate with facility in environments as starkly different as New York and Peshawar.

What exactly led Zazi to undertake such a serious plot? Early reports provided little evidence of a motive. But various anecdotes suggested that Zazi underwent a significant change in lifestyle during his teenage years. An October Associated Press story, for instance, described Zazi's transformation from a “snappily dressed young man with a taste for computer games and basketball to a bearded devotee of Islamic traditionalism.”<sup>7</sup> During this time, authorities suspect that Zazi grew to know Saifur Rahman Halimi, a close associate of Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and an imam at the Queens, New York, mosque Zazi's family attended.<sup>8</sup> Though the investigation is still ongoing—a point that Holder made clear on February 22—these reports suggest that Zazi may very well have become radicalized through his liaisons with Halimi. If true, this fact would high-

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4. David Johnston and Scott Shane, “Terror Case Is Called One of the Most Serious in Years,” *New York Times*, September 24, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/25/us/25zazi.html>.

5. A.G. Sulzberger and William K. Rashbaum, “Guilty Plea Made in Plot to Bomb New York Subway,” *New York Times*, February 22, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/23/nyregion/23terror.html>.

6. Ibid.

7. Samantha Gross, David Caruso, and Michael Rubinkam, “Radical Influences All Around NYC Terror Suspect,” Associated Press, October 3, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory?id=8741604>.

8. Sulzberger and Rashbaum, “Guilty Plea Made in Plot to Bomb New York Subway.”

light the role that transnational “intermediaries”—like extremist clerics or terrorist recruiters—can play in connecting U.S. legal residents and citizens with foreign terrorist networks.

Though questions about the mechanics of Zazi’s radicalization still linger, there is less doubt about the motives of the 25 year old. In his guilty plea, Zazi revealed that he initially sought to join the Taliban in Afghanistan but instead was redirected to an al Qaeda training camp in order to prepare an attack in the United States. His reason for traveling to the region was to “bring attention to what the United States military was doing to civilians in Afghanistan.”<sup>9</sup> This fact demonstrates a trend common to several of the individuals discussed in this paper: a seeming belief in the al Qaeda–driven narrative that U.S. military action in Afghanistan, Iraq, and other Islamic countries constitutes a war against Muslims.

## An American in Mumbai?

Federal officials arrested David Coleman Headley in October on charges that he planned to attack employees at a Danish newspaper. Weeks later, the FBI further accused the Chicago man—a Pakistani American born in Washington, D.C.—of conspiring in the November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks. Authorities claim that Headley conducted surveillance for the 10 Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) gunmen accused of the shooting and bombing campaign that left 173 people dead. According to a federal indictment unsealed on December 8, Headley traveled to India in April 2008; once there, he allegedly filmed video of downtown Mumbai to assist LeT members in the planning of the attacks.

All signs point to Headley being a dedicated LeT affiliate. He allegedly signed on as an operative sometime in 2005 and, since then, is purported to have made several visits to India and Pakistan. In February 2006, Headley even changed his legal name—he was born Daood Sayed Gilani—to hide his Muslim identity. This profile—Pakistani roots, U.S. citizenship, and a nondescript name, to boot—likely made him a lucrative asset for LeT operations. Indeed, Headley’s April 2008 scouting mission appears to have played an important role in the Mumbai plot—as a U.S. citizen, he was able to travel to India while facing relatively little scrutiny from officials there.<sup>10</sup> His alleged Pakistani coconspirators would have struggled to do this.

Headley left a lengthy paper trail that points to his eventual radicalization. The affidavit filed against him details numerous instances of communication—including in-person meetings, telephone calls, and e-mails—between Headley and alleged LeT members or affiliates. And in a much-publicized online message posted to a Yahoo group called “abdalians,” Headley wrote that he felt “disposed towards violence” for the Danish newspaper that published the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in 2005.<sup>11</sup> These and other writings suggest that Headley, like many of the individuals discussed here, seemed to be taken by the “West vs. Islam” narrative.

Headley’s relationship with transnational intermediaries appears somewhat vague. The affidavit implicates a number of accomplices and associates who seem to have planned the Mumbai attacks with the Chicago man. Unlike Zazi, the Minnesota Somalis, or the Northern Virginia Five, though, Headley does not seem to have required extensive help in order to travel abroad

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9. Ibid.

10. “Timeline of David Coleman Headley,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 2009, <http://www.latimes.com/news/nation-and-world/la-na-terror-timeline13-2009dec13,0,5945523.story>.

11. *United States v. David C. Headley*, AO91 (REV.5/85), Criminal Complaint, United States District Court, Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division, <http://blogit.mtv3.fi/elinkautinen/files/21700864-headley-complaint1.pdf>.

and connect with foreign militants. Part of this may be due to his extensive prior experience in Pakistan: Headley attended a preparatory school there and in 1998 was convicted of conspiring to smuggle heroin from Pakistan into the United States. This international experience, coupled with the fact that Headley seems to have “self-radicalized” (meaning he did not require an intermediary), makes for a particularly troubling case. Because he was able to assimilate into both American and Pakistani cultures, Headley’s actions and movements went relatively unnoticed until after the Mumbai attacks.

## The Tragedy at Fort Hood

More than any other event explored here, the shootings at Fort Hood captured America’s attention and stirred fears of domestic extremism. By now, the facts of the case are well known: on November 5, Major Nidal Malik Hasan allegedly entered the Soldier Readiness Center at Fort Hood and opened fire, killing 13 and wounding 30. Within days, details began surfacing about Hasan’s contact with radical Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaki. In 2001, the two met at a Falls Church, Virginia, mosque, where al-Awlaki was the imam. Beginning in December 2008, they exchanged as many as 20 e-mails; this was around the same time that Charles E. Allen, former undersecretary of homeland security for intelligence and analysis, warned in a speech that al-Awlaki “targets U.S. Muslims with radical online lectures encouraging terrorist attacks.”<sup>12</sup> Authorities now suspect that Hasan’s contact with al-Awlaki may have spurred the former to adopt increasingly radical views on the acceptability of religious violence.<sup>13</sup> Late last year, for instance, reports emerged that Hasan had asked al-Awlaki “whether killing American soldiers and officers is lawful” according to the dictates of sharia law.<sup>14</sup>

The FBI intercepted Hasan’s communications with al-Awlaki, but investigators determined that the nature of the dialogue was consistent with the army psychiatrist’s research on Muslims serving in the U.S. military. These e-mail exchanges proved to be part of a larger set of missed signals on Hasan’s wavering stability. Another was his now-infamous 2007 lecture while on staff at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. During the presentation—which drew public rebukes from some colleagues—Hasan suggested that Muslim soldiers be diverted from service in Afghanistan and Iraq because fighting there might put them in the position of “hurting/killing believers unjustly.”<sup>15</sup>

These anecdotes suggest two important things about Hasan’s apparent path toward extremism. First, his communication with al-Awlaki seems to have facilitated his radical turn. So Hasan, like Zazi, may have come to adopt extremist violence through increased contact with a transnational intermediary already well known for his support for radical activity. Second, both the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars—and their implications for Islam and Muslims—weighed heavily on Hasan. This

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12. Charles E. Allen, “Keynote Address at GEOINT Conference” (keynote address, GEOINT Conference, Nashville, Tenn., October 28, 2008), [http://www.dhs.gov/xnews/speeches/sp\\_1225377634961.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/xnews/speeches/sp_1225377634961.shtm).

13. Brian Ross and Rhonda Schwartz, “Major Hasan’s E-Mail: ‘I Can’t Wait to Join You’ in Afterlife,” *ABC News/The Blotter from Brian Ross*, November 19, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/major-hasans-mail-wait-join-afterlife/story?id=9130339>.

14. Associated Press, “Report: Hasan asked about killing troops in ’08,” MSNBC, December 24, 2009, [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34579275/ns/us\\_news-tragedy\\_at\\_fort\\_hood/](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34579275/ns/us_news-tragedy_at_fort_hood/).

15. “Hasan on Islam,” *Washington Post*, November 10, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/gallery/2009/11/10/GA2009111000920.html>.

fact suggests that he may have been influenced by the stock al Qaeda narrative—that the West is at war with Islam—as justification for his alleged actions.

## From Minnesota to Somalia

Last fall's fourth major case has roots in an investigation stretching back more than a year. In late 2007, several young, Minneapolis-area men of Somali descent went missing. By July 2009, the FBI had unsealed indictments filed in February against two men charged with recruiting the youths to fight with al-Shabaab, a Somali insurgent group with ties to al Qaeda. Then, in November, federal officials unsealed indictments against eight more men in what Minneapolis FBI special agent Ralph Boelter said was the "tipping point" in the lengthy investigation. As many as two dozen Somali Americans are believed to have traveled to Somalia to fight for al-Shabaab. So far, at least six of the youths have reportedly been killed in the fighting.<sup>16</sup>

Such an extensive recruiting effort—never before has such a large group of U.S. legal residents or citizens traveled abroad to join a terrorist organization—has roots in the latest iteration of Somalia's long-running civil war. In 2006, Ethiopia and secular Somali forces defeated the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), Mogadishu's Islamist government. Since then, al-Shabaab—an ICU spinoff—has waged a violent insurgency against the new Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Ethiopian troops withdrew from Somalia in January 2009; an African Union peacekeeping contingent now works to support the fragile TFG.

This chain of events stirred discontent within parts of the United States' Somali communities, and may have driven several Minnesota youths to join al-Shabaab. In July, a lengthy *New York Times* exposé featured interviews with several friends of the men who left for Somalia. Ethiopia's invasion and subsequent occupation "triggered a political awakening among young Somalis in Minnesota," wrote reporter Andrea Elliot, and spurred some to join "what they saw as a legitimate resistance movement." A desire for personal or religious "renewal," Elliot continued, also may have pushed young Somali Americans to embrace al-Shabaab's radical agenda; several of the recruits—poor, uneducated, and socially alienated—faced dim prospects in the United States.<sup>17</sup>

A deep network of al-Shabaab agents, culled partly from Europe's Somali diaspora communities, was well positioned to channel the anger of these young men. In late 2007, a group of recruiters traveled to Minneapolis and engaged with several Somali Americans at the Abubakar As-Saddique Islamic Center, the area's largest mosque. While details remain vague, the mosque appears to have served as an important gathering spot for the young men who eventually departed for Somalia. These details, again, illustrate the importance of transnational intermediaries in connecting would-be extremists with established foreign networks. In some cases, early recruits themselves even became transnational intermediaries. Cabdulaahi Ahmed Faarax, a man who fought in Somalia and later returned to Minneapolis to recruit other youths, was one such individual. He framed his pitch this way: like Faarax, the young men could experience "true brotherhood" if they joined al-Shabaab.<sup>18</sup>

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16. Laura Yuen, Sasha Aslanian, and Steve Mullis, "The Missing Somali Men: A Timeline of the Story so Far," Minnesota Public Radio, [http://minnesota.publicradio.org/projects/ongoing/somali\\_timeline/index.shtml](http://minnesota.publicradio.org/projects/ongoing/somali_timeline/index.shtml).

17. Andrea Elliot, "A Call to Jihad, Answered in America," *New York Times*, July 11, 2009, [http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/12/us/12somalis.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/12/us/12somalis.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all).

18. U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Minnesota, Department of Justice, "Terror Charges Unsealed in Minnesota against Eight Defendants," press release, November 23, 2009, <http://minneapolis.fbi.gov/doj-pressrel/pressrel09/mp112309.htm>.

## “On a Mission to Be Martyred”

Just days after FBI officials accused Headley of conspiring in the Mumbai attacks, authorities in Pakistan arrested five young men from Northern Virginia. Pakistani officials detained them in the town of Sargodha, at a house owned by the father of a member of the group. Extensive questioning, both by U.S. and Pakistani authorities, suggests that the D.C.-area contingent traveled to Pakistan to join Taliban fighters in neighboring Afghanistan. In one of the most chilling leaks of the still-ongoing investigation, one of the detained men apparently told an FBI official that the group was “on a mission to be martyred.”<sup>19</sup>

How did these young college students find themselves detained in Pakistan? Early reports suggest that YouTube videos showing Taliban attacks on the U.S. Army drew the attention of one of the men, Ahmed Abdullah Minni, who routinely lauded insurgent violence on the Web site’s user-generated comments sections. Soon, a purported Taliban recruiter known only as “Saifullah” contacted Minni via e-mail. The two began exchanging messages, and eventually Minni and four others traveled to Pakistan. A lack of bona fides, however, appears to have doomed their search for a host militant organization; likely fearful the men were U.S. spies, Jaish-e-Mohammed and Jamat-ud-Dawa, two Pakistani militant groups, reportedly rejected the group. After languishing for a short time in Sargodha, the men were arrested by Pakistani authorities.<sup>20</sup>

This most recent example of homegrown extremism is striking given the profiles of the five young men. Minni’s Internet postings suggest an extremist bent, but none of the other four youths seem to have ever demonstrated a proclivity toward radicalism. A December story in the Associated Press quoted numerous individuals who knew the group of five; all of them expressed shock that such “polite, quiet, even kind” men would look to join the Taliban.<sup>21</sup>

And unlike several of the Minnesota Somalis—who by their economic and social marginalization closely approximated the profiles of many young extremists in Europe—the Northern Virginia Five came from middle-class families well integrated into American society.

## Making Sense of the Cases

Last fall’s surge in extremist activity generated a flurry of analysis. One of the most persistent themes involved comparisons of homegrown extremism in the United States to that in Europe, a continent that terrorism expert Peter R. Neumann once described as “a nerve center for the global

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19. Asif Shahzad, “Police: Americans in Pakistan Had Taliban Contact,” Associated Press, December 12, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory?id=9319907>.

20. Mark Hosenball and Michael Isikoff, “Police Report Says Five Americans Wanted to Pursue Jihad After Being Inspired by YouTube Videos,” *Newsweek*, December 11, 2009, <http://blog.newsweek.com/blogs/declassified/archive/2009/12/11/police-report-says-five-americans-wanted-to-pursue-jihad-after-being-inspired-by-youtube-videos.aspx>.

21. Associated Press, “Did ‘Jihadi cool’ lure 5 Americans to Pakistan?” MSNBC, December 20, 2009, <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34500005>.

jihad.”<sup>22</sup> In December, for instance, both the *Washington Post*<sup>23</sup> and the *New York Times*<sup>24</sup> published stories that asked whether American Muslims, like their European counterparts, had grown more susceptible to radicalization. Writing for the *Times*, Scott Shane explained that U.S. counterterrorism officials had traditionally viewed American Muslims as being “not very vulnerable to radicalization.” After all, they tended to live in well-integrated, upwardly mobile communities and demonstrated “little of the alienation often on display” among European Muslims. The recent spate of arrests, Shane posited, had seemed to shake these assumptions.<sup>25</sup>

## Europe 2.0?

So is the United States growing closer to Europe in terms of radicalization? Muslims are suspected in all five major recent cases of U.S. homegrown extremism; in this sense, trends in the United States mirror those in Europe. But the similarities tend to end there. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 2005, immigration and terrorism expert Robert S. Leiken explained that Muslims in Europe “gather in bleak enclaves with their compatriots: Algerians in France, Moroccans in Spain, Turks in Germany, and Pakistanis in the United Kingdom.” Amid these conditions, religion, poverty, and social marginalization intersect to create a virulent strain of extremism. On the other hand, Leiken remarked, American Muslims “are geographically diffuse, ethnically fragmented, and generally well off.”<sup>26</sup>

Last fall’s arrests reflect this diversity. Poverty did not lead to the radicalization of Hasan, a medical doctor making around \$90,000 per year. It seems dubious, as well, to claim that the five young men from Northern Virginia—who were well integrated into mainstream society—faced social marginalization in their lives. Poverty and social segregation even fail to wholly explain the case of the Minnesota Somalis, who most conform to the “European model” of radicalization. While al-Shabaab’s first wave of recruits had struggled to find even low-paying jobs in Minneapolis, some later converts had attended college; as Elliot of the *New York Times* noted, this second group included young men looking to become doctors, engineers, and entrepreneurs.<sup>27</sup>

Despite these discrepancies, Europe’s experience with, and responses to, homegrown extremism have much to offer U.S. policymakers and officials. Large-scale initiatives—like Germany’s annual Conference on Islam, which seeks “to improve religious and social integration of the Muslim population in Germany”<sup>28</sup>—may not find traction among the United States’ diverse Muslim com-

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22. Peter R. Neumann, “Europe’s Jihadist Dilemma,” *Survival* 48, issue 2 (June 2006): 71–84, <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a747984995>.

23. Mary Beth Sheridan and Spencer S. Hsu, “Arrests suggest U.S. Muslims, like those in Europe, can be radicalized abroad,” *Washington Post*, December 12, 2009, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/11/AR2009121104404\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/11/AR2009121104404_pf.html).

24. Scott Shane, “New Incidents Test Immunity to Terrorism on U.S. Soil,” *New York Times*, December 11, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/12/us/12assess.html?ref=us&pagewanted=print>.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Robert S. Leiken, “Europe’s Angry Muslims,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 4 (July/August 2005), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/60829/robert-s-leiken/europes-angry-muslims>.

27. Elliot, “A Call to Jihad.”

28. “Federal Minister of the Interior Dr. Wolfgang Schauble opens the first German Conference on Islam in Berlin,” Federal Ministry of the Interior, Berlin, [http://www.en.bmi.bund.de/nn\\_148130/Internet/Navigation/EN/Topics/German\\_\\_Islam\\_\\_Conference/German\\_\\_Islam\\_\\_Conference\\_\\_node.html\\_\\_nnn=true](http://www.en.bmi.bund.de/nn_148130/Internet/Navigation/EN/Topics/German__Islam__Conference/German__Islam__Conference__node.html__nnn=true).

munities. But smaller measures, such as the United Kingdom's Quilliam Foundation, could suggest some directives for U.S. policy. Quilliam, a London think tank founded by former members of a UK-based Islamist organization, works with British law enforcement officials, as well as Muslim parents, teachers, and community leaders, to debunk radical propaganda.<sup>29</sup>

Initiatives like the Quilliam Foundation illustrate the value of official engagement with Muslim communities. U.S. officials need look no further than the case of the Northern Virginia Five for evidence on why such relationships matter. Upon the group's disappearance, family members contacted the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR),<sup>30</sup> an Islamic civil liberties group. CAIR officials then alerted the FBI about the missing youths. This type of cooperation proved vital in facilitating authorities' initial investigation of the plot.

This episode underscores the importance of creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect between government officials and Muslim communities. Outreach and engagement may not center on community integration or poverty reduction. But U.S. officials could step up efforts to foster "a candid dialogue between law enforcement and Muslim American communities about the handling of criminal cases and the use of informants," as a recent report by Duke University professors David Schanzer and Ebrahim Moosa and University of North Carolina professor Charles Kurzman suggested.<sup>31</sup> Such forms of outreach will prove vital to U.S. efforts to prevent home-grown terrorism, because the family and friends of alleged extremists often are investigators' first resource for information on suspected plots. And these individuals are far more likely to cooperate in an investigation when they know that the suspect in question can expect to receive due process and equal protection under the law.

To their credit, policymakers and officials seem to accept these premises. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (CRCL) has undertaken outreach efforts to Arab, Muslim, and South Asian communities. The rationale behind such initiatives, according to CRCL's David Gersten during 2007 congressional testimony, is that engaging key communities can help deter and even prevent radicalization.<sup>32</sup> CRCL's "E-Team" is active in eight metropolitan areas, including Minneapolis/St. Paul, the epicenter of al-Shabaab's U.S. recruit-

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29. "About Us," The Quilliam Foundation, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/about-us.html>.

30. Some critics have charged that CAIR maintains ties with global terrorist groups. The organization was listed as an unindicted coconspirator in a 2007 case against the Holy Land Foundation, a group charged with providing funds to Hamas; the trial ended in a mistrial. In 2008, the FBI ended its formal relationship with CAIR. Despite these recent developments, the group has indicated that it seeks to play a positive role in mitigating domestic extremism. U.S. officials should remain wary of illicit activity by CAIR or any other advocacy group. But this should not prevent federal officials from working with these groups toward productive ends, as in the case of the Northern Virginia Five.

31. David Schanzer, Charles Kurzman, Ebrahim Moosa, "Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans," Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University, January 6, 2010, [http://www.sanford.duke.edu/news/Schanzer\\_Kurzman\\_Moosa\\_Anti-Terror\\_Lessons.pdf](http://www.sanford.duke.edu/news/Schanzer_Kurzman_Moosa_Anti-Terror_Lessons.pdf).

32. House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing, and Terrorism Risk Assessment, hearing on *Radicalization, Information Sharing, and Community Outreach: Protecting the Homeland from Homegrown Terror*, 110th Congress, First Session, April 5, 2007, [http://ftp.fas.org/irp/congress/2007\\_hr/radical.pdf](http://ftp.fas.org/irp/congress/2007_hr/radical.pdf).

ment efforts.<sup>33</sup> Recent events have included a Boston-area gathering of Arab, Muslim, Sikh, and South Asian community leaders, along with participation in the December 2009 Muslim Public Affairs Council Convention in Long Beach, California.<sup>34</sup>

How else should the United States approach domestic extremism? The types of official outreach described above imply a key role for local actors—from both the government and Muslim communities—in preventing homegrown terrorism. Other initiatives, too, suggest an important role for local officials in dealing with domestic extremism. In particular, partnerships between federal and local law enforcement officials can help to interdict the links formed between would-be homegrown terrorists and their transnational recruiters.

## Federal-Local Cooperation

Long ago, policymakers first enlisted federal-local partnerships in efforts to identify and prevent major criminal conspiracies, including terrorism. The reason had to do with each party's specialties and skills. Federal agencies, like the FBI, possessed the authority and expertise to investigate terrorism. Local officials, on the other hand, had first-hand knowledge of the communities and towns in which homegrown suspects lived and operated. Fusing federal and local capabilities would, hopefully, create a model for cooperation in domestic terrorism cases.

This was the idea behind the FBI's first Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF), established in New York City in 1980. The small unit, composed of specialists from a handful of federal, state, and local intelligence and law enforcement agencies, works across agencies to investigate and interdict emerging threats. Other branches eventually followed New York's; today, 100 JTTFs operate in cities throughout the country.<sup>35</sup> In 2002, the National JTTF (NJTTF) was established in Washington, D.C., and now is collocated with the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC). From this position, the NJTTF manages JTTFs and facilitates the transfer of terrorism information from the national to the state and local levels.

Many states and large cities also have created "fusion centers" to increase cooperation within their jurisdictions and between federal and local law enforcement and intelligence officials. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) supplies these offices—which now number 72 nationwide—with personnel possessing operational and intelligence skills in counterterrorism.<sup>36</sup>

At times, these federal-local schemes have had great success in apprehending terrorism suspects. JTTFs, for instance, helped to disrupt the "Lackawanna Six" plot, and the New York JTTF intervened in the Zazi case. But these entities have also sometimes generated tension between fed-

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33. "Engagement with Key Communities Team," Department of Homeland Security, Washington, D.C., [http://www.dhs.gov/xcitizens/gc\\_1249415146102.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/xcitizens/gc_1249415146102.shtm).

34. "Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties First Quarter Fiscal Year 2009 Report to Congress," Department of Homeland Security, Washington, D.C., [http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/crcl\\_first\\_Quarter\\_Report\\_to\\_Congress\\_FY\\_2009.pdf](http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/crcl_first_Quarter_Report_to_Congress_FY_2009.pdf).

35. "Protecting America against Terrorist Attack: A Closer Look at the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Forces," Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, D.C., December 1, 2004, <http://www.fbi.gov/page2/dec04/jttf120114.htm>.

36. "State and Local Fusion Centers, Department of Homeland Security, Washington, D.C., September 16, 2009, [http://www.dhs.gov/files/programs/gc\\_1156877184684.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/files/programs/gc_1156877184684.shtm).

eral and local officials—the FBI and New York Police Department (NYPD), for instance, famously sparred over who would handle the Zazi investigation.<sup>37</sup> These types of disagreements can be expected when multiple federal, state, and local entities operate together. But they cannot be allowed to detract from the numerous benefits that interaction and cooperation can provide.

Federal-local partnerships also have struggled to procure the resources necessary to function efficiently. An April 2008 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report catalogued some of the challenges faced by DHS-sponsored fusion centers. State and local personnel were unable to access classified information without a federal security clearance; obtaining such a clearance proved difficult and time consuming. Officials in at least 43 fusion centers complained of staffing shortages; 54 fusion centers cited inadequate funding. Some of these shortcomings even threatened certain centers' very sustainability.<sup>38</sup>

In September 2009, DHS and the Department of Defense (DOD) announced a measure to allow select fusion center personnel access to classified terrorism information held in a DOD database.<sup>39</sup> And just months later, in November, DHS announced a range of new initiatives to fully fund fusion centers, signaling that the groups will be a key resource in the homeland security strategy of the department and the country.<sup>40</sup> These initiatives are encouraging, because fusion centers and other federal-local partnerships will be vital to interdicting the links formed between transnational intermediaries and domestic recruits. Federal officials possess the national intelligence and other resources necessary to track and apprehend international terrorists like Anwar al-Awlaki. And local officials are intimately connected to the communities—like the Minneapolis Somali one—that global terrorist groups may seek to exploit. Combining these talents at institutions like JTFs and fusion centers ensures that officials achieve a more complete picture of domestic radicalization.

Of course, federal-local partnerships are far from sufficient to sever ties between would-be domestic terrorists and transnational recruiters. Two issues, in particular, deserve more careful scrutiny. First, federal officials must work to address the growing role that the Internet plays in connecting potential domestic extremists with intermediaries. Second, policymakers must make combating the al Qaeda-driven, “West vs. Islam” narrative—which seemed to influence several of last fall's suspects—a top priority.

## Intermediaries and the Internet

One of the major similarities across the five cases was suspects' reliance on some sort of transnational intermediary, like an extremist cleric or a terrorist recruiter, to facilitate and catalyze their radicalization. Zazi's liaisons with Halimi, a close associate of Hekmatyar, may have facilitated his

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37. William K. Rashbaum, “Interagency Rift Cited in New York Terror Case,” *New York Times*, December 13, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/14/nyregion/14imam.html>.

38. Eileen R. Larence, “Homeland Security: Federal Efforts Are Helping to Address Some Challenges Faced by State and Local Fusion Centers,” GAO-08-636T, U.S. Government Accountability Office, Washington, D.C., April 17, 2008, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d08636t.pdf>.

39. “DHS Announces New Information-Sharing Tool to Help Fusion Centers Combat Terrorism,” Department of Homeland Security, Washington, D.C., September 14, 2009, [http://www.dhs.gov/ynews/releases/pr\\_1252955298184.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/ynews/releases/pr_1252955298184.shtm).

40. Bart R. Johnson, “Speech at National Homeland Defense Foundation Symposium” (keynote address, National Homeland Defense Foundation Symposium VII, Colorado Springs, Colo., November 9, 2009), [http://www.dhs.gov/ynews/speeches/sp\\_1257781061720.shtm](http://www.dhs.gov/ynews/speeches/sp_1257781061720.shtm).

integration into al Qaeda “central.” Hasan’s thinking took a radical turn as he increased his communication with al-Awlaki. The Minnesota Somalis appear to have depended on the support of al-Shabaab agents in planning their travel to Somalia. And “Saifullah” seems to have helped convince Minni and his four friends to travel to Pakistan for jihad. (Despite his numerous contacts in South Asia, Headley appears to have been something of a self-starter.)

These communications often occurred online, whether via e-mail, Facebook, YouTube, or one of thousands of extremist chat rooms. This phenomenon is hardly new; numerous reports have detailed the growth and potency of Internet radicalization in recent years. In March 2006, for instance, a report of the CSIS Transnational Threats Project discussed the 4,000 Web sites in the post-9/11 era that constitute the “communications backbone of a violent Islamist movement.”<sup>41</sup> The Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs (HSGAC) also has highlighted the role that Internet radicalization plays in promoting homegrown extremism; a March 2008 report catalogued the numerous cases of U.S. legal residents and citizens growing more radical by their online communications with transnational extremist figures.<sup>42</sup>

Unfortunately, as the HSGAC report noted, the U.S. approach to Internet radicalization remains deficient in a number of areas. Intelligence and law enforcement officials monitor online content, but the Web’s limitless scope allows for the relatively unchecked proliferation of radical material. Even given an aggressive approach to monitoring online forums and chat rooms, the government still has limited ability to interdict these sorts of connections. With the advent of new mediums—like “Second Life,” which allows users to conduct illicit financial transactions—the task of monitoring Internet radicalization is only likely to grow more difficult. Still, policymakers and officials must make the Web an important component of any strategy to reduce domestic radicalization. Strategically, this means developing a unified approach to the problem, one that enhances private-sector collaboration and increases government cooperation with international partners. Operationally, it means increasing the federal government’s capacity to deal with online threats. Success will require unique personnel, training, and technologies. Ultimately, the government must resource efforts to combat Internet radicalization as it would any other law enforcement environment or battlespace.

This approach to homegrown extremism should largely occur at a tactical, or operational, level. On a strategic level, U.S. policymakers need to think seriously about ways to puncture the toxic, “clash of civilizations” narrative propagated by al Qaeda and other global terrorist groups.

## Countering the Narrative

A second major similarity across the five cases was that many of the individuals seemed to believe that the United States and West are at war with Islam. Zazi claimed to act on behalf of Afghan civilians; the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars consumed Hasan; the Minnesota Somalis alleged U.S. backing

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41. Thomas N. Sanderson, Arnaud de Borchgrave, N. John MacGaffin III, *Open Source Information: The Missing Dimension of Intelligence* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, March 2006), <http://csis.org/files/media/csisis/pubs/060301-deborchgrave-opensourceinfo.pdf>.

42. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, *Violent Islamist Extremism, the Internet, and the Homegrown Terrorist Threat: Majority and Minority Staff Report* (Washington, D.C.: Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs, May 8, 2008), [http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/\\_files/IslamistReport.pdf](http://hsgac.senate.gov/public/_files/IslamistReport.pdf).

of Ethiopia's purportedly "Christian" ouster of Somalia's Islamist government; and the Northern Virginia Five claimed they sought to "defend Muslims" from U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan.

While it may be difficult, if not impossible, to prove that such sentiments caused radicalization, the anecdotes above suggest that something other than poverty or social marginalization is behind the rise of domestic extremism. Last December, for instance, terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman suggested that the United States' two ongoing wars provided the only logical impetus to the recent spate of plots.<sup>43</sup>

This hypothesis raises a troubling proposition: that some American Muslims may perceive U.S. military action in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and other Muslim countries as evidence of some broader war on Islam and its adherents.

The United States must counteract this narrative. Doing so will require policymakers and officials to work on two levels. First, they must discard rhetoric that portrays counterterrorism as a "war on radical Islam." As Middle East expert Marc Lynch argued after the Fort Hood shootings, al Qaeda thrives on the "clash of civilizations" framework, which pits terrorism as a battle between the West and Islam, largely because the narrative puts Muslims in the uncomfortable position of feeling as if their religious beliefs are under assault. A better way to confront extremist groups, Lynch contends, is to cultivate "a narrative in which al Qaeda and its affiliates represent a marginal fringe to be jointly combated," by the United States and its Muslim friends and allies.<sup>44</sup>

To its credit, Obama administration officials seem to have grasped this imperative. During an August 2009 speech outlining White House counterterrorism policy, for instance, John Brennan parted ways with the rhetoric that defined the early post-9/11 years.<sup>45</sup> Policymakers in Congress and other terrorism analysts would do well to follow suit.

Ultimately, though, the United States needs to go further than this. Al Qaeda and other global extremist groups do not merely seize on U.S. rhetoric as a way to rally support; they also point to U.S. military action in Muslim countries—particularly that which precipitates a sustained, long-term troop presence—as supposed evidence of an anti-Islam agenda. This is not to suggest that the White House allow would-be terrorists to dictate U.S. foreign policy. The Obama administration has stated that the United States has strategic interests in successful drawdowns to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. And the United States is unlikely to soon abandon its limited counterterrorism campaigns in Pakistan and Yemen.

Still, in the long term, policymakers must balance the need to combat global terrorism with the drawbacks of overt military action in Muslims countries. Doing so will require the United States to forge stronger partnerships with states threatened by extremist violence. Such an agenda should emphasize sustained investments in security, political, and economic development. In the end, these types of partnerships, more than large-scale, direct military intervention, are likely to bring about the most success in combating terrorism and extremist violence.

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43. Shane, "New Incidents Test Immunity to Terrorism on U.S. Soil."

44. Marc Lynch, "Ft. Hood and the Clash of Civilizations: Security vs. Political Correctness Revisited" *Foreign Policy*, November 9, 2009, [http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/11/09/al\\_qaedas\\_master\\_plan](http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/11/09/al_qaedas_master_plan).

45. John O. Brennan, "A New Approach to Safeguarding Americans" (keynote address, CSIS Statesmen's Forum, Washington, D.C., August 6, 2009), [http://csis.org/files/attachments/090806\\_remarks\\_john\\_brennan.pdf](http://csis.org/files/attachments/090806_remarks_john_brennan.pdf).

## Conclusion

Above all, these five cases demonstrate that extremist violence in the United States is far from monolithic; as such, there are no simple or easy fixes to the problem. Neither race, nor socioeconomic background, nor national origin unified last fall's suspects. Religion did, but basing policy solutions solely on this connection is likely to prove unfulfilling, create unachievable goals, and even potentially push more Muslims to embrace the fringe agenda of al Qaeda and other global terrorist groups.

Rather, sensible approaches to homegrown extremism must be grounded in concrete, tangible initiatives. A law enforcement paradigm offers an appropriate framework in which to assess the problem.<sup>46</sup> Around this base, U.S. policymakers and officials should continue efforts to build capacity at local, state, and federal levels. In this regard, partnerships and cooperation must reign supreme; local officials possess the community-based knowledge that is essential to prevent domestic terrorism, and federal officials have the expertise in counterterrorism necessary to interdict complex, transnational plots—including those with origins on the Internet.

Finally, the Obama administration must give special consideration to how homegrown extremism fits within the United States' larger strategic framework for dealing with global terrorism. As a basic matter, officials should dispel any and all notions that U.S. military involvement in Muslim countries constitutes some kind of anti-Islam agenda. Longer term, the White House must consider ways to shift the U.S. approach to counterterrorism away from large-scale and overt intervention and toward partnerships with countries plagued by extremist violence.

None of these measures are certain to reduce homegrown extremism in the United States, and this report does not endeavor to propose catch-all solutions for the threat. We do hope, however, that this analysis accelerates a much-needed debate on an emerging and troubling trend.

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46. See, for instance, "Terrorist Trial Report Card: September 11, 2001–September 11, 2009," Center on Law and Security, New York University School of Law, January 2010, <http://www.lawandsecurity.org/publications/TTRCFinalJan14.pdf>. The authors note that "the overall conviction rate for prosecutions involving terrorism charges" is now 89 percent and that "federal courts are capable of trying alleged terrorists and receiving high rates of conviction."



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