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Understanding the Logic: An Analysis of Jihadist Targeting and Tactics in Western Countries from 2000 to mid-2012

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Understanding the Logic:
An Analysis of Jihadist Targeting and Tactics in Western Countries from 2000 to mid-2012[1]

Shandon Harris-Hogan

This article presents an overview of the evolution of the Jihadist threat to the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia between 2000 and mid-2012. It also conducts a detailed analysis of the targeting and tactical preferences of Jihadists operating in these countries, revealing clear correlations between the origin of the threat and the target and attack methodology chosen. Overall, it was found that while the origin of the threat has evolved throughout the period studied, the targets chosen and tactics employed have remained relatively consistent over time.

This article aims to generate a more detailed understanding of the threat posed to the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia by Jihadists. The first section will explore the origins of plots which targeted each of these countries domestically, and how this threat evolved from 2000 through until mid-2012. The main analysis will then focus on what was specifically targeted in each plot, and the means by which each target was to be attacked. The purpose of this is to ascertain how target selection and operational requirements altered throughout the period studied. By analysing trends over time, this paper aims to increase the understanding of the specific type of threat posed by Jihadists to these countries domestically. Such findings will hopefully inform decisions in relation to risk management and the prioritising of defensive counter-terrorism practices and policies in Western countries.

Jihadism is here defined as violent manifestations of Islamism, while Islamism refers to "activism justified with primary reference to Islam".[2] The United States, the United Kingdom and Australia (collectively referred to in this paper as the West) were specifically chosen for analysis as they all currently recognise Jihadism as the predominant terrorism threat to the country, and each share broadly comparable historical traits. The United States, United Kingdom and Australia are multicultural liberal democratic nations with a

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[2] Thomas Hegghammer, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice between Domestic and Foreign Fighting', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 107 (2013), p. 1.

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strong and transparent rule of law, non-authoritarian policing and a range of social services available to citizens. These countries also use a mixture of hard and soft power to combat the threat of Jihadism, utilising broadly similar legal frameworks and policies.

Although Jihadism is a transnational phenomenon, this article seeks to analyse only Jihadist plots that have targeted American, Australian or British soil. Whilst the small sample of such terrorism plots makes traditional statistical examination difficult, paradoxically the low number of incidents makes detailed analysis of the specifics of individual events more possible. Indeed, when studying low incidence but high impact phenomenon such as terrorism, "it would be misleading to believe that quantitative research with large datasets, which—from a strictly methodological point of view—may be cleaner and more rigorous, is necessarily also the kind of research that will produce the most relevant insights about the phenomenon".[3] Hence, while an analysis of 71 individual incidents may ordinarily be considered a 'small n' in statistical terms, this study actually builds a comprehensive and detailed dataset from which conclusions regarding Jihadist plots targeting the West can be drawn.

A Jihadist plot targeting the West was included for analysis if it had progressed beyond condoning the use of violence, into actively preparing for an act of violence.[4] Foiled and failed plots were added to the sample as they provide "valuable information about the dynamics of terrorism".[5] Indeed, Alex Schmid notes that data which is in the public domain largely overlooks many failed or foiled terrorist attacks, and is frequently unable to clarify seemingly basic questions such as who was responsible for a particular attack.[6] Hence, the inclusion of failed and foiled plots provides a resource in itself, and boosts the sample to a size (71) where more detailed conclusions can be drawn with regards to target selection and attack style. Including foiled and failed plots also allows for the comparison of successful and failed operations in order to uncover if there are broad correlations between particular choices and outcomes.

The research design of this study is longitudinal in nature, whereby the transformation of various dimensions of Jihadist plots have been analysed over time. It aims to identify tentative trends and correlations by discerning, disaggregating and analysing empirical data relevant to each trend. Details

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[3] Peter Neumann and Scott Kleinmann, 'How Rigorous Is Radicalization Research?', *Democracy and Security*, vol. 9 (2013), p. 378.

[4] The inclusion of a specific plot should have no bearing on the guilt or innocence of those involved, nor was a guilty conviction a requirement for addition. Many cases remain before the courts.

[5] Manni Crone and Martin Harrow, 'Homegrown Terrorism in the West', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 23 (2011), p. 529.

[6] Alex P. Schmid, 'The Literature on Terrorism', in Alex P. Schmid (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 461.

regarding each plot's origins, the individuals involved, their preparation activities and planned target and attack methodology were extracted from available sources, catalogued and coded. A requirement for the inclusion of a plot was that there was sufficient publicly available material to be able to establish the necessary information required for analysis. Material was predominantly drawn from court documents and academic studies which utilised primary sources. These materials provided the most authoritative information and were the source of greatest detail regarding individual incidents. Information on individual cases was supplemented where necessary with news reporting, the reliability of which was considered inferior. Hence, any conclusions drawn from this work should be made with these limitations regarding data in mind.

Categories of Attack

The origins of each of the 71 attempted acts of Jihadist terrorism have been broadly divided into three categories. These include attacks directed by al Qaeda core, incidents connected to an external affiliate or likeminded international Jihadist group, and self-starting plots conceived of and (potentially) executed in isolation from known international Jihadist organisations. It should be noted that such generic groupings cannot possibly encompass all the nuances involved in each plot. However, these categories do provide an initial mechanism to differentiate between the origins of each of the 71 plots. The following provides a breakdown of the origin of each planned attack.

Al Qaeda was originally founded in a three-day meeting held in Osama bin Laden's house in Peshawar during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.[7] Even though the al Qaeda network has become increasingly decentralised since that time, a core central organisation still continues to provide a degree of direction to its members, affiliates and followers from Pakistan (although this group has been severely depleted in recent times by international counter-terrorism operations).[8] During the thirteen and a half year period studied, a total of 10 plots targeting US, UK or Australian soil were conceptualised and directed by members of al Qaeda core. Broadly, these cases involved individuals travelling to Afghanistan or Pakistan and receiving instruction to carry out a specific mission. Individuals also received some level of guidance from al Qaeda central upon their return to their Western destination. Notably, 8 of these planned attacks targeted the United States, showing America to be the clear point of focus for al Qaeda core (with only one plot aimed at either Australia or the United Kingdom). This is reflected in a statement made by a

[7] Peter Bergen and Paul Cruickshank, 'Revisiting the Early Al Qaeda: An Updated Account of its Formative Years', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 35 (2012), pp. 3-4.

[8] Katherine Zimmerman, 'The Al Qaeda Network: A New Framework for Defining the Enemy', *American Enterprise Institute*, September 2013, <http://www.criticalthreats.org/sites/default/files/ pdf_upload/analysis/Zimmerman_the_al_Qaeda_Network_September_2013.pdf> [Accessed 5 February 2015].

senior operational commander close to bin Laden who instructed al Qaeda members "that U.S. citizens are the main target of the organization".[9]

The second category of plot includes individuals or groups affiliated with, or assisted by, a wide range of international terrorist organisations who broadly share al Qaeda's ideological worldview. Al Qaeda's modus operandi has long relied on co-opting existing Jihadist organisations,[10] and reorienting locally focused groups towards conducting attacks against Western targets.[11] In the period studied, 19 externally assisted or affiliated plans to attack domestic Western targets occurred; divided almost equally between the United States (10) and the United Kingdom (8), with one also occurring in Australia. The degree of contact and assistance given by the international organisation varies in each case, and some may even have had an element of previous contact with al Qaeda core. However, what remains consistent is that plots included in this category have not developed in isolation, and have been assisted to some degree by an international Jihadist organisation.

The final category involves plots inspired by Jihadist ideology which were self-starting. Such plots include individuals or groups which have radicalised in isolation from known international Jihadist organisations. Planning and preparation may have occurred in a number of forums and locations, or the plot may have been entirely 'home-grown'. Indeed, small social networks of Jihadists have emerged among Muslim diaspora communities in each of the United States, United Kingdom and Australia. Such individuals feel an intense connectivity to a global community, here conceptualised as a complex global microstructure,[12] and may have interacted virtually with other like-minded individuals. However, these factors have ultimately only inspired rather than directly assisted the plot.

In the period sampled there were 42 self-starting plots, of which almost 80 per cent targeted the United States. This anomaly regarding the high number of self-starting plots in the United States may have some relationship to the specific nature of the home-grown Jihadist networks within each of the countries. UK militants form an integrated and cohesive network, with London the centre of a dense Jihadi community.[13] It also has a long-established

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[9] Cited in Martin C. Libicki, Peter Chalk and Melanie Sisson, *Exploring Terrorist Targeting Preferences* (Santa Monica CA: RAND Corporation, 2007), p. 8.

[10] Scott Helfstein and Dominick Wright, 'Success, Lethality, and Cell Structure Across the Dimensions of Al Qaeda', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 34 (2011), p. 379.

[11] Bill Braniff and Assaf Moghadam, 'Towards Global Jihadism: Al-Qaeda's Strategic, Ideological and Structural Adaptations since 9/11', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 5 (2011), p. 43.

[12] For a description of complex global microstructures and how this relates to Jihadism see Karin Knorr Cetina, 'Complex Global Microstructures: The New Terrorist Societies', *Theory, Culture and Society*, vol. 22 (2005).

[13] Eliane Tschaen Barbieri and Jytte Klausen, 'Al Qaeda's London Branch: Patterns of Domestic and Transnational Network Integration', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 35 (2012), p. 421.

facilitation network connecting individuals to international Jihadist organisations. Australia has a small interconnected network of Jihadists which transcends time and specific operations.[14] Each operational cell which emerged in Australia also contained at least one member who had trained overseas.[15] By contrast the US network appears more dispersed and is better described as a diffuse collection of autonomous actors.[16] The geographically sparse nature of US Jihadism meant that during the period studied the United States did not appear to have any consistent established network able to connect individuals internationally. Hence, US Jihadists may have been more likely to become involved in self-starting plots as it was more difficult for those inspired by the ideology to connect with international Jihadist organisations, including al Qaeda core. This discrepancy may also reflect differences in the way counter-terrorism operations are run in the United States, with plots often brought to fruition earlier by undercover operations.[17]

Evolution over Time

Although categorising the origins of the Jihadist threat to the West is broadly instructive, it is clear that over the period studied the threat evolved in response to a range of events. Figure 1 visualises the number of each category of plot from 2000 through until mid-2012. What becomes immediately apparent is that between 2000 and 2008 the Jihadist threat remained relatively consistent. In each of these years there were between 3 and 5 plots (barring 2006 with 7). Hence, the number of incidents could be considered to be relatively stable. However, in more recent times the number of plots perpetrated annually has escalated. The period between 2007 and 2012 contained 71 per cent of all Jihadist plots in this sample, and in the final three and a half years studied a total of 32 plots were uncovered. The following will attempt to unpack some possible explanations for this escalation in the frequency of planned attacks.

In the period between 2000 and 2003, 60 per cent of plots were al Qaeda directed. This period also accounted for 80 per cent of the total number of al Qaeda directed plots (8 of 10). Consequently, plots originating from and directed by al Qaeda core should be viewed as the dominant threat between 2000 and 2003. However, from 2004 onward, al Qaeda core's ability to attack the West on their own soil was degraded significantly, with international counter-terrorism efforts rendering the threat virtually non-existent for the

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[14] Shandon Harris-Hogan, 'Australian Neojihadist Terrorism: Mapping the Network and Cell Analysis using Wiretap Evidence', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 35 (2012).

[15] Shandon Harris-Hogan, 'The Australian Neojihadist Network: Origins, Evolution and Structure', *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict*, vol. 5 (2012).

[16] Barbieri and Klausen, 'Al Qaeda's London Branch', p. 423.

[17] Beau D. Barnes, 'Confronting the One-Man Wolf Pack: Adapting Law Enforcement and Prosecution Responses to the Threat of Lone Wolf Terrorism', *Boston University Law Review*, vol. 92 (2012).

following decade.[18] By contrast, the number of attacks planned by individuals or groups somewhat affiliated with international terrorist organisations remained consistent, with 19 plots relatively evenly spread across the period.

Figure 1: Origin of Plot over Time
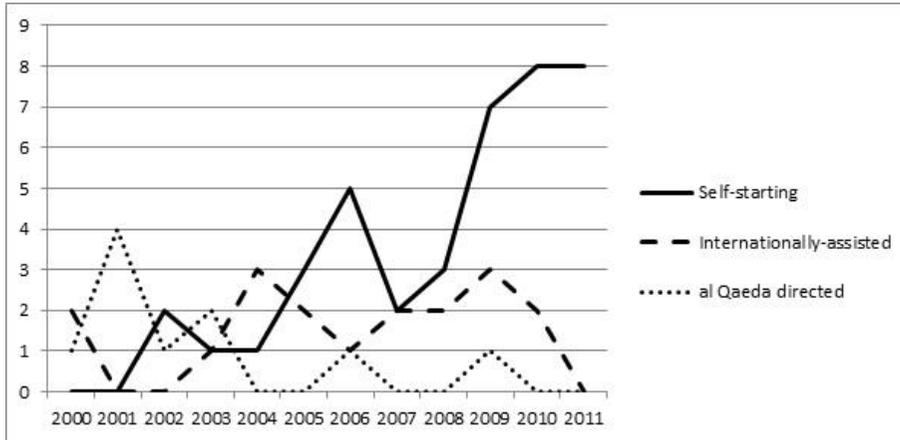
While the annual number of internationally directed or connected plots has remained relatively stable, the nature of the threat at the end of the sample period is vastly different to what it was in the early 2000s. In the period between 2000 and 2005 only 30 per cent of plots were self-starting. However, post 2006 this category accounts for 60 per cent of the threat. Moreover, from 2010 onwards self-starting plots accounted for 85 per cent of planned attacks. Hence, self-starting plots clearly escalated in frequency over the sample period, and their increase largely accounts for the more recent overall increase in attempted attacks. It has been argued that following the collapse of the US economy in September 2008, the Jihadist phenomenon entered a new period, termed its "strategy of a thousand cuts" phase, which focused on smaller but more frequent attacks.[19] This shift in strategy appears to be almost exclusively executed by those inspired by the al Qaeda narrative.

Notably, this shift towards self-starting Jihadist plots could be said to roughly equate with the surge in popularity of figures such as Anwar al-Awlaki. For instance, Roshonara Choudry (who stabbed British MP Steven Timms in 2010) noted that her radicalisation really accelerated when she started to

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[18] For a full description of the factors impacting the evolution of al Qaeda over this period see: Jason Burke, *The 9/11 Wars* (England: Penguin Group, 2011).

[19] Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, 'Bin Laden's "War of a Thousand Cuts" Will Live On', *The Atlantic*, 3 May 2011.

listen to Anwar al-Awlaki lectures.[20]   Along with a prominent YouTube presence, Awlaki also assisted Samir Khan to produce *Inspire* magazine which first emerged in mid-2010*. Inspire* is a glossy English language jihadist magazine created by AQAP, which provided a sanction to commit violence in Western countries by publishing the writings and rulings of revered international Jihadist figures such as Abu Mus'ab al Suri and Awlaki himself.[21] In 2011 Australian Security Intelligence Organisation Director General David Irvine noted that the targeting of young, English-speaking Muslims in Western countries through *Inspire* was of "particular concern".[22] The first two editions of the magazine advised 'brothers in the West' to "acquire weapons and learn methods of war … they can cause great harm to the enemy".[23] The second edition strongly encouraged "our brothers to fight jihad on US soil. In fact even if travelling to join the fronts of jihad was accessible, we would still encourage them to perform operations in the West".[24]   The extent to which the acceleration in the number of self-starting plots is potentially related to the rise in the popularity of figures such as Awlaki and propaganda publications in the mould of *Inspire* is an issue which requires detailed analysis moving forward.

Success Rate

It is important to note that the 71 Jihadist plots did not all advance to the same stage. Approximately 70 per cent of plots were intercepted by authorities during the planning phase. Though there are multiple countries and numerous law enforcement authorities involved in this sample, this figure of 70 per cent intercepted falls short of other benchmark rates. Benchmark interdiction rates include the "80% achieved by British counter-terrorism forces during the IRA campaign in England" and the "90% achieved by Israeli counter-terrorism forces during the second Palestinian Intifada".[25]

This 70 per cent interception figure leaves behind 17 plots which were not identified by authorities. These undetected plots are spread throughout the period studied, and are relatively evenly dispersed between al Qaeda directed, internationally affiliated and self-starting. Of these 17 undetected plots, 6 were ultimately successful (with success being defined as the death

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[20] Vikram Dodd, 'Roshonara Choudry: Police Interview Extracts', *The Guardian,* 4 November 2010.

[21] Shandon Harris-Hogan, 'Inspire Magazine: Inciting Terrorism in Australia?', *The Conversation,* 10 December 2012.

[22] David Irvine, 'Director-General Speech: Address to the Security in Government Conference 2011 – Australia's Security Outlook', Canberra, 26 July 2011, <http://www.asio.gov.au/ Publications/Speeches-and-Statements/Speeches-and-Statements/26-July-2011-Security-in-Government-Conference.html> [Accessed 5 February 2015].

[23] 'Interview with Shaykh Abu Basir: The Head of al Qa'idah in the Arabian Penninsula', *Inspire Magazine,* vol. 1 (Summer 2010), p. 17.

[24] Yaya Ibrahim, 'Tips for Our Brothers in the United States of America', *Inspire Magazine,* vol. 2 (Fall 2010), p. 55.

[25] Gordon Woo, 'Interdiction of Plots with Multiple Operatives', in Uffe Kock Wiil (ed.), *Counterterrorism and Open Source Intelligence* (New York: Springer, 2011), p. 50.

of at least one individual targeted not including the perpetrator). These successful plots include the al Qaeda directed September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States,[26] the July 2002 shootings at Los Angeles airport,[27] the internationally assisted July 2005 London Public Transit suicide bombings,[28] the July 2006 shooting at the office of the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle,[29] the June 2009 shooting at a US Army-Navy Career Centre in Little Rock, Arkansas,[30] and the November 2009 shooting of soldiers at Fort Hood in Texas.[31] The three most successful (when measured by body-count) contain one of each category of origin, showing no one type to be clearly more effective.

While 85 per cent of planned attacks post 2010 fall into the self-starting category, many self-starting plots broadly appear less well prepared and executed than those connected internationally. Hence, while they may be more frequent in number, the less sophisticated nature of self-starting plots means they are more limited in their ability to inflict mass casualties. However, this shift in strategy towards smaller and more frequent, but less sophisticated attacks, was not a change endorsed by Osama bin Laden.[32] Bin Laden did not approve of publications such as *Inspire* and warned of the magazine's "dangerous consequences … due to its tasteless content and no doubt to the poor planning of the operations it promotes".[33] Bin Laden instead "urged methodical planning of suicide operations" and "not to send a single brother on a suicide fida'iyya operation".[34] Moreover, while a number of self-starting plots claimed to be carrying out actions called for in al Suri's 1,600-page manifesto (The Call for Global Islamic Resistance), Pantucci notes that it is unclear whether al Suri would "necessarily approve" of publications such as

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[26] For a description of the plot see: *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004).

[27] For a description of the plot see: Jeffrey Thomas, 'Jihadist Terrorism: Targeting America', *Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress,* 17 May 2012, p. 3.

[28] For a description of the plot see: Mitchell D. Silber, *The Al Qaeda Factor: Plots Against the West.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 121.

[29] For a description of the plot see: Lorenzo Vidino, 'Homegrown Jihadist Terrorism in the United States: A New and Occasional Phenomenon?', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 32 (2009), p. 10.

[30] For a description of the plot see: Jerome P. Bjelopera and Mark A. Randol, 'American Jihadist Terrorism: Combating a Complex Threat', *Congressional Research Service,* 7 December 2010. pp. 91-3.

[31] For a description of the plot see: J. M. Berger, 'Why U.S. Terrorists Reject the Al Qaeda Playbook', *The Atlantic*, 19 July 2011.

[32] Don Rassler, Gabriel Koehler-Derrick, Liam Collins, Muhammad al-Obaidi and Nelly Lahoud, *Letters From Abbottabad: Bin Laden Sidelined?* (West Point: Combating Terrorism Centre, 3 May 2012).

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

Inspire, and would not be "impressed by the religious and ideological knowledge displayed by the army of young people who are taking up arms".[35]

However, shortly after the death of Bin Laden, al Qaeda's media production arm released a video urging sympathisers to attack Western targets with firearms, and a document found on an alleged Austrian al Qaeda operative (believed to be written by a senior al Qaeda figure) recommended that foreign fighters should be trained quickly and sent home to enhance the group's ability to target the west regularly.[36] Therefore it appears that despite bin Laden's reluctance to adopt a strategy of smaller but more frequent attacks, this methodology has become the preferred modus operandi of al Qaeda and those inspired by the group's ideology following his death.

Regardless of the perceived ideological legitimacy of the different approaches, the actual likelihood of a plot remaining undetected prior to an attempted attack remains (in percentage terms) almost identical for each category. Hence, no one manifestation should be considered more likely to succeed. Given that designing defensive counter-terrorism measures and prioritising Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) efforts have largely become an exercise in risk management,[37] it is necessary to look beyond the origins of a plot to understand the domestic threat to the West posed by Jihadist violence. To further this endeavour the focus of this article will now turn to understanding what specifically has been targeted and how these targets were to be attacked.

Target Selection

Though studies of targeting have been somewhat neglected in terrorism literature,[38] it is widely accepted that acts of terrorism do not simply involve random killing. Rather, killing is a strategy used to achieve a political and/or ideological goal. Indeed, terrorists are rarely mindless or indiscriminate in their attacks. Nemeth notes that "extant narratives from terrorists of all stripes, as well as contributions from previous scholars has established that the targeting and execution of terrorist acts are dictated by more substantial logics than the need to merely cause destruction".[39] At the most basic level target selection is limited by an individual or group's overall capacity and resources, as well as the feasibility of attacking a particular target. However, capability says

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[35] Rafaello Pantucci, 'Whither al Suri?', 26 January 2012, <raffaellopantucci.com/tag/abu-musab-al-suri/> [Accessed 5 February 2015].

[36] Virginie Andre and Shandon Harris-Hogan, 'Mohamed Merah: From Petty Criminal to Neojihadist', *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, vol. 14 (2013), p. 315.

[37] Woo, 'Interdiction of Plots with Multiple Operatives', p. 50.

[38] Peter Toft, Arash Duero and Arunas Bieliauskas, 'Terrorist Targeting and Energy Security', *Energy Policy*, vol. 38 (2010), p. 4411.

[39] Stephen Nemeth, 'Adaptive Tactics: Terrorist Targeting and Regime Type', Paper prepared for presentation at the Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, 20-23 April 2006, p. 21.

nothing about what a group wants to achieve. Drake notes that given a choice of targets, terrorists acting rationally "will choose to attack those which confer the greatest benefits upon their cause".[40] What these potential benefits may be is framed by the group's ideology, which provides the prism through which individuals view the world, defines a group's enemies, identifies a range of 'legitimate' targets, and offers the associated explanation for their targeting.[41] Therefore, the probability that a group or individual will select any given target, and the associated attack modality, can be described as a function of two variables; capability and motive.

As violence is being used in support of a specific cause, attacking a certain target will also be designed to convey a specific message. This message must be carefully designed to simultaneously influence decision-makers,[42] cause fear among the country or people targeted and create sympathy and admiration among supporters of the cause.[43] In order to convey this message to all relevant audiences, the target attacked must be prominent and hold enough symbolic relevance to gain significant media attention. Attacking a small or obscure target will have comparably less impact, somewhat explaining al Qaeda's focus on cities and targets well known in the Islamic world.[44] Thus capability and strategic objectives combine together into an attack designed to deliver a specific message to the largest possible audience.

In order to convey the correct message to a particular audience, target selection must be modified depending on the specific location. For example, a study of bombings carried out by Chechen rebels found that, "civilian targets were more likely to be bombed in Russia and that non-civilian targets were more likely to be bombed in Chechnya".[45] In this way the targets chosen were seen to be 'legitimate' to the group's supporters. Silke notes that targets can be selected only "provided that the support base for the movement supports such decisions".[46] Support for a group perpetrating an attack and its cause could be jeopardised if there is a large loss of lives perceived as innocent, or if the action is considered excessive or unjustified. For instance, the Algerian

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[40] C. J. M. Drake, 'The Role of Ideology in Terrorists' Target Selection', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 10 (1998), p. 54.

[41] See Adam Dolnik, *Understanding Terrorist Innovation: Technology, Tactics and Global Trends* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 14.

[42] Libicki, Chalk and Sisson, *Exploring Terrorist Targeting Preferences*, p. 10.

[43] Martha Crenshaw Hutchinson, 'The Concept of Revolutionary Terrorism', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 16 (1972), pp. 383-96.

[44] Peter Bergen, Bruce Hoffman and Katherine Tiedamann, 'Assessing the Jihadist Threat to America and American Interests', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 34 (2011), p. 88.

[45] Lisa M. McCartan, Andrea Masselli, Michael Rey and Danielle Rusnak, 'The Logic of Terrorist Target Choice: An Examination of the Chechen Rebel Bombings from 1997-2003', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 31 (2008), p. 63.

[46] Andrew Silke, 'Understanding Terrorist Target Selection', in Anthony Richards, Pete Fussey and Andrew Silke (eds), *Terrorism and the Olympics: Major Event Security and Lessons for the Future* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 55.

Armed Islamic Group (GIA) was dealt a major blow when diaspora support declined following widespread objections to its indiscriminate violence.[47] More recently, AQAP issued a public apology and offered to pay blood money after 'rogue' militants killed fifty-six people (including doctors, nurses and patients) at a hospital in Sanaa.[48] In this way the supporters and sympathisers of a group impose the guidelines and limits on what should be targeted, and ensure the logic driving the attack remains, gaining the most benefit for the cause.

Jihadist Targeting in Western Countries

A specific target had been explicitly identified (or at least discussed in enough detail that conclusions about intentions could be made) in 67 of the 71 cases of Jihadist terrorism documented. Within these 67 cases distinct patterns can be seen in the choice of target. What became immediately apparent was that over two-thirds of plots (45 of 67) targeted civilians or 'non-combatants'. Conversely, only 22 cases planned to attack 'combatants' (a term encompassing both government and military targets).

There are also distinct correlations between the origin of the threat and the type of target chosen. For example, 18 of the 22 cases which targeted combatants were initiated by self-starters. That the threat to military and government targets in Western countries has overwhelmingly come from self-starting plots supports research by Berger, who notes that "self-starters show a strong tendency to choose military targets".[49] Indeed, prior to 2009 only 12 per cent of plots targeted combatants. Yet in the last four years of the sample, 55 per cent of plots selected combatants. Hence, the threat to government or military targets and those perceived as 'combatants' dramatically escalated towards the end of the period studied, in direct relation to an increase in self-starting plots. However, the finding that self-starting plots are more likely to target combatants is surprising considering that self-starters tend to be poorly prepared and less sophisticated in their attack methodology. Such a finding suggests that although many self-starters may be inspired to attack hardened targets, they may overestimate their own capabilities to do so.

Yet, the fact remains that plots targeting non-combatants outnumber those that target combatants more than two to one. From an operational standpoint, civilians are undoubtedly easier targets to attack, making them the more realistic target choice. Notably, 90 per cent (9 of 10) of all al Qaeda core directed plots targeted non-combatants and 83 per cent (15 of 18) of all

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[47] Alison Pargeter, *The New Frontiers of Jihad: Radical Islam in Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), pp. 83-93.

[48] James Bone, 'Al-Qa'ida Apologises for Attack on Yemen Hospital that Killed 56', *The Australian,* 23 December 2013.

[49] Berger, 'Why U.S. Terrorists Reject the Al Qaeda Playbook'.

internationally affiliated plots targeted civilians. The overwhelming priority of internationally connected plots has therefore been to target civilians.

There is also a distinct pattern to the type of civilian target selected. Of the 45 plots which targeted non-combatants in this sample, 44 per cent planned to target mass transport. Mass transport is an attractive target as it provides high concentrations of people, causes significant economic and physical destruction and has a profound psychological impact on the society targeted.[50] Mass transport is also particularly vulnerable as it "operates on an advertised schedule and has less physical security than … hard-target infrastructure, making it easier for terrorists to both plan and carry out attacks".[51] Notably, 85 per cent of plots targeting some form of mass transport were either al Qaeda directed (6) or assisted by an internationally affiliated organisation (11). Indeed, mass transport accounts for the majority of all targets chosen by both al Qaeda directed and affiliated plots in the West. Moreover, 10 of the 20 plots aimed at mass transport specifically targeted airports or aircraft. Despite airports and aeroplanes having had an enormous amount of money invested in their protection since the 9/11 attacks (becoming probably the most heavily guarded civilian sites when it comes to preventing terrorist attacks),[52] air travel has remained a consistent target choice. The threat to mass transport has also remained consistent over time, with at least one plot against this type of target in all but two of the years analysed.

While transport appears to be the priority target of internationally connected attacks, when self-starting plots target civilians, they target transport only 8 per cent of the time. One potential explanation for this discrepancy may be that many successful and spectacular attacks on mass transport have often involved the synchronisation of multiple attacks. Synchronisation of attacks can lead "to a large number of casualties, especially in the case of employment of secondary and tertiary devices, where the whole premise is to attract a large crowd as close to the location of a large explosive device as possible".[53] Yet in the West, synchronisation and multiplication of attacks has largely only been attempted by internationally directed or affiliated plots. Perhaps as a result of their more restricted capabilities self-starters have come to have a different set of priorities when it comes to targeting civilians.

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[50] Steve Swain, 'Securing the Transport System', in Anthony Richards, Pete Fussey and Andrew Silke (eds), *Terrorism and the Olympics: Major Event Security and Lessons for the Future* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 76.

[51] Transportation Security Administration: Office of Intelligence, 'Mass Transit System Threat Assessment', United States Department of Homeland Security, 29 February 2008, <info.publicintelligence.net/masstransitthreat.pdf> [Accessed 5 February 2015], p. 3.

[52] Victor Asal, R. Karl Rethemeyer, Rose Bellandi, Richard Legault and Robert Tynes, 'Making the Wrong Connection: The Determinants of Terrorist Targeting of Airplanes and Airports', Paper presented at the International Studies Association Annual Convention, New Orleans, 17-20 February 2008. p. 11.

[53] Dolnik, *Understanding Terrorist Innovation*, p. 53.

Indeed when targeting civilian populations, self-starting groups and individuals tended to be far less discriminating in their target choice. Of the 15 plots in this sample which could be said to indiscriminately target crowds (in places such as shopping centres or sporting events), 11 were self-starting. Indeed, 28 per cent of all self-starting attacks specifically aimed to simply kill civilians, with very little symbolic significance to the target. In this instance the message appears primarily about instilling fear in the target population or delivering some form of retribution. Additionally, only self-starting plots have planned to target religious institutions. It can therefore be argued, that plots connected in some manner to international Jihadist organisations appear to give more thought as to whether the broad support base for the movement will approve of their actions, and are far more likely to accept that there are limits to what they can do. Conversely, self-starters seem much less likely to acknowledge such restrictions and appear to place a higher priority on killing or retribution as the primary message.

Attack Method

In terms of the method of attack, 65 per cent of all planned attacks involved the use of explosives, with bombs more likely to be used overall at a rate of 2 to 1 when compared to conventional weapons. This reliance on explosives is relatively unsurprising. Dolnik notes that explosives have been the preferred weapon in the arsenals of terrorist groups and that "the vast majority of high fatality terrorist incidents have all been bombings".[54] Over the period studied, internationally affiliated or al Qaeda directed plots demonstrated a distinct preference towards using explosives, doing so 76 per cent of the time. Conversely, self-starters were almost equally as likely to use explosives as they were to use weapons against targets in the West.

Over the period studied there are distinct correlations between the origin of the threat, and the target and weapon type selected. Eighty-three per cent (35 of 42) of all plots which planned to use explosives targeted civilians, demonstrating bombs to be the overwhelmingly preferable method of targeting non-combatants. Seventy per cent of all internationally connected plots (including both al Qaeda directed plots and those connected to an international affiliate organisation) planned to use explosives against civilians. Seventy-five per cent of all plots to kill civilians by self-starters also planned to use bombs. These numbers demonstrate a clear preference by Jihadists to use bombs in order to attack civilian targets.

There is also similar consistency in the targeting of those considered combatants. Of the 22 plots which targeted combatants, 18 were conceived of by self-starting Jihadists. Moreover, 15 of these planned to use conventional weaponry. There is therefore a very strong relationship between self-starters and a desire to use conventional weapons against military and

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[54] Ibid., p. 36.

government targets. A significantly large proportion of the planned attacks against military and government targets have also occurred post 2009, demonstrating this to be an emerging trend in the West. Therefore, when prioritising counter-terrorism initiatives to combat a recent increase in the number of plots, particular emphasis should be placed on protecting military and law-enforcement personnel against *fida'iyya* style attacks by self-starting Jihadists.

The above analysis of Jihadist plots targeting Western countries has demonstrated that the origin of the plot has a significant influence on both the target selected, and the attack method chosen. Indeed, the type of targets chosen and type of tactics employed remained relatively consistent over the period studied. Only 5 planned attacks (7 per cent) identified an alternative method to carry out the plot. These included the 9/11 attacks, the December 2001 arrest of an al Qaeda operative researching poisons and conducting reconnaissance on dams and waterways in the United States,[55] the January 2003 plot to spread ricin throughout the London Underground,[56] the plot to collapse the Brooklyn Bridge using gas cutters[57] and the March 2006 attempt by a naturalised US citizen to drive a sports utility vehicle into a crowd at the University of North Carolina campus at Chapel Hill.[58] Notably, 4 of these 5 plots were al Qaeda directed, demonstrating al Qaeda core directed plots to be the only real source of innovation in attack methodology among Jihadists operating in Western countries. For the most part, Jihadists appear particularly conservative and display remarkable consistency in their tactical and targeting deliberations. Indeed, there has been very little in the way of innovation in the tactics and targets chosen post 9/11, and any such innovation appears only incremental adaptation of existing methods. This preliminary insight (albeit in a very limited context) support previous research by Hoffman,[59] Clarke and Newman,[60] Omand[61] and Dolnik[62] who all note that despite changing circumstances over time, with the exception of a few prominent examples terrorists are not particularly innovative in their tactical or targeting choices.

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[55] For a description of the plot see: Thomas, 'Jihadist Terrorism', p. 3.

[56] For a description of the plot see: Robin Simcox, Hannah Stuart and Houriya Ahmed, *Islamist Terrorism: The British Connections* (London: The Centre for Social Cohesion, July 2010), p. 16.

[57] For a description of the plot see: Bjelopera and Randol, 'American Jihadist Terrorism', pp. 111-2.

[58] For a description of the plot see: Vidino, 'Homegrown Jihadist Terrorism in the United States', p. 11.

[59] Bruce Hoffman, 'Terrorist Targeting: Tactics, Trends and Potentialities', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 5 (1993), p. 12.

[60] Ronald V. Clarke and Graeme R. Newman, *Outsmarting the Terrorists* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), p. 93.

[61] David Omand, 'The Terrorist Threat to the UK in the Post–9/11 Decade', *Journal of Terrorism Research*, vol. 3 (2012), pp. 6-12.

[62] Dolnik, *Understanding Terrorist Innovation*, p. 56.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that the annual number of plots aimed at domestic targets in Western countries, either directed by al Qaeda core or connected to an international Jihadist group, remained relatively stable over the years analysed. However, there was an escalation in the number of plots seen towards the end of the sample period, and this increase can largely be attributed to a significant growth in the number of self-starting plots targeting the United States, United Kingdom and Australia. In the period between 2000 and 2005 only 30 per cent of plots were self-starting. However, since 2006 this category accounted for 60 per cent of the threat. Moreover, looking only from 2010 onwards, self-starting plots accounted for 85 per cent of planned attacks. Yet, it is important to note that while the frequency of planned attacks increased, the likelihood of a plot remaining undetected prior to an attempted attack remained (in percentage terms) almost identical for each category.

There were also clear links identified between the origin of the threat, and the target and attack methodology chosen. For instance, there was a very strong relationship between self-starters and a desire to use conventional weapons against non-civilian targets. A significantly large proportion of these planned attacks by self-starters against military and government targets have also occurred post 2009, demonstrating this to be an emerging trend in the West. Conversely, 70 per cent of all internationally connected plots (including both al Qaeda directed plots and those connected to an international Jihadist organisation) planned to use bombs against civilian targets, with a particular focus on mass transport. This threat remained relatively consistent over the period studied. Thus the origin of the threat has a distinct bearing on the target and attack methodology chosen, a phenomenon likely caused by the ideological differences between al Qaeda core and more recent influential Jihadist figures such as al Suri and al Awlaki.

This paper contributes towards understanding how the Jihadist threat to the West has evolved historically. The challenge now presented is how best to formulate future counter-terrorism and countering violent extremism (CVE) policy to combat the threat. Looking forward, Thomas Hegghammer tentatively predicts a 'second wave' of large-scale attacks in the West in four to six years.[63] The emergence of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, and attempts by a number of foreign fighters to conduct attacks on their return from fighting in this conflict,[64] demonstrates early potential for this prediction to be

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[63] Thomas Hegghammer, 'The Future of Anti-Western Jihadism', Prepared Testimony for the Hearing on "Global al-Qaeda: Affiliates, Objectives, and Future Challenges", House Foreign Affairs Committee: Subcommittee on Terrorism, Non-proliferation, and Trade, 18 July 2013, <fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Hegghammer_Testimony_alqaeda_terrorism_July2013.pdf> [Accessed 5 February 2015].

[64] Lisa Lundquist, 'Analysis: Blowback from the Syrian Jihad has begun', *The Long War Journal*, 4 June 2014, <www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/06/syrian_jihad_the_blo.php> [Accessed 5 February 2015].

fulfilled. Indeed, this study has identified an already emerging increase in the number of Jihadist attacks conducted on Western soil, largely due to an increase in self-starting plots targeting military, government and law enforcement personnel. However, this analysis indicates that such future acts would likely involve less sophisticated, small-scale operations, conducted by individuals or groups using conventional weapons such as firearms and knives. This increase in the number of individuals with no connection to international Jihadist organisations attempting to commit violence places pressure on Western law-enforcement and intelligence agencies to accurately identify radicalising individuals, and for governments and communities to conduct early interventions ahead of a potential attack. Achieving success in this area will require the development of specialised evidence-based assessment tools, the training of law enforcement and intelligence personnel, the growth of niche capacities within existing community and social services to address radicalisation, the expansion of CVE programs focused on intervention (as well as prevention) and the independent evaluation of such programs.

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