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# Devolving Jihadism

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## Abstract

The danger and effectiveness of religiously motivated terrorist organizations is undeniable. However, a different type of threat is on the rise on the global playing field as a result of the ongoing operations against these organizations. "Devolved" jihadism, Islamist terrorism conducted by native, amateur, untrained and unfunded individuals, or small ad hoc groups, has recently garnered headlines and the attention of terrorists and counterterrorists alike. These devolved jihadist operations are planned and carried out by native members of a country's populace, radicalized in their home country, resulting in the interchangeable monikers of "homegrown" or "grassroots" jihadism.

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## Introduction

Traditional jihadist terrorism has rightfully dominated the attention of both nations' populations and their security apparatus for the past decade. Referring to terrorism conducted by trans-national, hierarchical, professionally trained and organized groups of Islamist terrorists, traditional jihadism has posed a serious threat with well-planned, well-funded, and complex, high casualty attacks. These groups are formed by operatives who travel expressly to receive sophisticated training and attack targets outside of their home countries. The gold standard of this form of jihadism would be the original core of al-Qaida, or "al-Qaida Central,"<sup>1</sup> in

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Afghanistan, which created the franchise system of separate traditional organizations cooperating and coordinating through the leadership of al-Qaida Central's "executive" staff.

These traditional, hierarchical groups still pose a significant threat throughout the world. The Islamist force Al-Shabab controls nearly the entire southern half of war-torn Somalia, and has recently launched renewed attacks on the presidential palace and African Union troops assigned to back the UN-recognized government.<sup>2</sup>

The religiously-motivated Taliban in Afghanistan has stepped up its operations as well, in late May 2010 launching almost back-to-back attacks on Bagram and Kandahar, two of the International Security Assistance Forces' largest bases, along with a suicide bombing in Kabul. The attacks killed several high-ranking officers, and even forced three senior British Ministers to abruptly divert their official visit.<sup>3</sup> These attacks were more daring and direct than the typical insurgent attack and showed that despite surges and new grand strategies, the Taliban is far from defeated.

Franchise organization al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has become a leader in the field of traditional jihadism. It has established several bases, engaged Saudi forces on the Yemeni border, and very nearly assassinated the Kingdom's security chief with a "keistered" bomb.<sup>4</sup> The group publishes its own propaganda, and has claimed credit for the failed 2009 Christmas Day bombing attempt on a flight to Detroit.<sup>5</sup> In many ways, through doctrine, propaganda, and physical operations, AQAP has arguably taken the forefront in jihadism from al-Qaida Central.

The danger and effectiveness of religiously motivated terrorist organizations is undeniable. However, a different type of threat is on the rise on the global playing field as a result of the ongoing operations against these organizations. "Devolved" jihadism, Islamist terrorism conducted by native, amateur, untrained, and unfunded individuals or small ad hoc groups, has recently garnered headlines and the attention of terrorists and counterterrorists alike. These devolved jihadist operations are planned and carried out by native members of a country's populace, radicalized in their home country, resulting in the interchangeable monikers of "homegrown" or "grassroots" jihadism.<sup>6</sup>

Both traditional and devolved jihadism are carried out by dangerous individuals determined to carry out what they believe is a religiously mandated struggle against evil, and both are credible threats. Devolved jihadism, spurred by the Global War on Terror and other counterterrorism initiatives, is becoming an increasingly popular tactic, and has many

advantages over traditional jihadism, though it has several drawbacks as well. In terms of physical damage and number of casualties from attacks, homegrown jihadism is something of a paper tiger, but its potential for psychological impact and damage means it is still a threat that must not be underestimated.

## Impetus to Devolution

Grassroots jihadism, indeed homegrown terrorism of any kind, is not new. The Unabomber was a homegrown terrorist. El Sayyid Nosair, convicted of killing Rabbi Meir Kahane and involvement in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing conspiracy, was a foreign-born but domestically radicalized terrorist. For decades, homegrown terrorists have acted without official training or organizational support.

The emergence of al-Qaida, however, grabbed any attention away from homegrown terrorism. With its franchise system of established hierarchical terrorist organizations hitching their wagon to ibn Ladin's core group for training and funding, and model of complex, professional, and high-damage attacks—like the USS Cole bombing and 9/11, al-Qaida Central dominated security apparatus' attention. The term "jihadist" became lodged in the public consciousness, and grew to mean foreign fighters trained in desert terrorist camps to carry out well-planned, logistically-backed attacks.

Interestingly, the response to this model of jihadism, the Global War on Terror, is what ultimately led to devolution. The Global War on Terror began with *Operation Enduring Freedom* and one primary, legitimate goal: "to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations." This was the initial intent for the invasion of Afghanistan,<sup>7</sup> and in this regard, the invasion of Afghanistan was a definitive success.

Negative media attention on military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq has often overshadowed the degrading of terrorist capabilities and the positive downward effects on global terrorism trends. Al-Qaida Central has not carried out a major attack in nearly a decade, and is nearly marginalized on the front lines.<sup>8</sup> The disruption caused by the Global War on Terror has relegated al-Qaida Central to a doctrinal and propaganda role, supplying theoretical and spiritual support rather than physical. This inability of al-Qaida prime to launch subsequent successful international attacks in the mold of 9/11, or even the USS Cole bombing, has brought about the prominence of franchise organizations such as AQAP and the devolved, grassroots jihadists.<sup>9</sup>

Would-be jihadists, cognizant of increased security crackdowns and al-Qaida's loss of safe haven in Afghanistan, have understood they cannot travel to training camps or take delivery of large sums of funding. They have adapted to this hurdle with individual, amateur operations; some small-scale, some of a more ambitious nature. As stated previously, homegrown terrorists are not a new phenomenon, but the recent rise in headline-snatching operations and catchy names like "Jihad Jane" have renewed the novelty of grassroots jihadism.<sup>10</sup> In fact, "Jihad Jane" delivers more Google hits than "Adam Gadahn" (an American citizen who has risen to the top ranks of al-Qaida) and "Zawahiri" (al-Qaida's number two man) combined. Terrorism depends on psychological impact as much as physical, and the shock value and notoriety of a blue-eyed blonde from Philadelphia carrying out jihad points out how psychologically dangerous homegrown jihadism can be.

## Dangers and Vulnerabilities of Grassroots Jihadism

So far, *successful* attacks by grassroots jihadists have been relatively small affairs in terms of physical impact, though any loss of life is a tragedy. Handguns can only do so much damage. Attacks with the potential for more damage, such as the New York plot to attack a synagogue and National Guard base, or the recent Times Square car-bomb attempt, often prove unsuccessful for reasons that will be discussed below.

The true danger from grassroots jihadism comes from its psychological aspect, its "fear factor," which indeed is one of the defining aspects of terrorism. The psychological impact has three facets; the shock of Americans carrying out attacks, the public nature of the targets, and the unpredictability of and difficulty in preventing the attacks.

The first facet is easy to understand. The American populace rightfully has difficulty understanding how an Army major can decide to shoot up a base, or how a Baptist-raised Arkansas man can open fire on a recruiting station in the name of Islam. Fear and distrust, especially against innocent Muslim Americans, can easily be sown and lead to a cycle of oppression that serves to validate jihadist claims.

The public nature of the attacks is both a restraint and boon of the grassroots jihadists. Amateur terrorists with limited resources and training are unlikely to have the wherewithal or logistics to access strategic military or government installations and often must settle for public areas. An attack on public areas, crowded with civilians and often symbolic of America, however, can have more of an impact than attacks on the military.

Perhaps the biggest factor to sow discord and fears of insecurity is the seeming inability of the government and security infrastructure to prevent these attacks. While media outlets' likeliness to under-report security successes may skew public opinion, this bias cannot be ignored, as public perception is a key battleground of terrorism. Hasan had been posting anti-American rhetoric on websites and verbalizing same to fellow officers. Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, the Little Rock recruiting center shooter, had been investigated by the FBI after an arrest in Yemen, where he had been carrying fake Somali documents.<sup>11</sup> The Christmas Day bomber had been reported by his father to American authorities and was even placed on the Terrorism Identities Datamart Environment.<sup>12</sup>

The difficulties and failures have been enough to prompt the resignation of the Director of National Intelligence,<sup>13</sup> arguably a hefty accomplishment in favor of the jihadists. Instilling a lack of trust in the nation's security apparatus and causing high-visibility disruptions in the United States is a far greater coup for global jihadism than the deaths of a few infidels.

The difficulty is not simply due to failings by the government. The FBI, tapped to lead terrorism operations in the United States, is ultimately an investigative body, primed more to take action *after* a crime has been committed. The real danger of grassroots jihadism is that it is impossible to act on what "might happen." In cases such as Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, though he had been investigated for his arrest in Yemen, there was little to nothing to suggest he was about to carry out an attack. Homegrown terrorists, especially lone wolves, often carry out their attacks with little or no advance notice of their plans.

There is a positive side to the trend of amateur jihadism, though, in that it is just that: amateur. Homegrown terrorists may easily be able to grab a gun and open fire, but they lack the sophistication and tradecraft of professional terrorists, which limits the impact of their attacks. While the Ft. Hood shooting deeply resonated across the country, a successful Times Square bombing would have caused far greater emotional and psychological trauma for Americans.

The complexity, operational security, and expected damage of an attempted attack are proportional to its difficulty and likelihood of failure. The Times Square bomb was ultimately a dud and was called "amateurish," as the builder did not have the training and skill to construct and detonate a functional weapon.<sup>14</sup>

One of the greatest faults of almost all homegrown jihadists is a lack of operational security (protecting critical information, plans, and resources

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that can be exploited by an adversary), especially in the pre-operational phase. Grassroots jihadists lack the experience and training of traditional jihadists, and are more likely to draw attention to themselves, either by getting noticed while surveilling a future target, or by alerting authorities, letting their plans be known to the wrong person. The New York cell attempting to bomb a synagogue and shoot down a military plane was apprehended because they attempted to buy bomb parts and Stinger anti-aircraft missiles from undercover FBI agents, showing lack of fieldcraft and operational security.<sup>15</sup>

This is, to borrow a term from private intelligence company STRATFOR, the "grassroots paradox."<sup>16</sup> Homegrown terrorists may have the advantage of being low-key and unpredictable, but they suffer from lack of training, sophistication, and downright ability. Quite simply, amateur terrorists make amateur mistakes.

## Recognition of the Threat

The U.S. Government has wisely taken note of the threat posed by homegrown, domestically radicalized individuals. For the first time in at least twelve years and three presidential administrations, domestic terrorism has received more than a passing mention in the President's National Security Strategy.<sup>17</sup> In a section of the guideline document devoted to security at home, a substantial paragraph is addressed to grassroots terrorism:

"Empowering Communities to Counter Radicalization: Several recent incidences of violent extremists in the United States who are committed to fighting here and abroad have underscored the threat to the United States and our interests posed by individuals radicalized at home. Our best defenses against this threat are well-informed and equipped families, local communities, and institutions. The Federal Government will invest in intelligence to understand this threat and expand community engagement and development programs to empower local communities. And the Federal Government, drawing on the expertise and resources from all relevant agencies, will clearly communicate our policies and intentions, listening to local concerns, tailoring policies to address regional concerns, and making clear that our diversity is part of our strength—not a source of division or insecurity."<sup>18</sup>

The 1998 National Security Strategy made no mention of domestic terrorism, despite the Oklahoma City bombing of the Murrah Federal building

three years prior.<sup>19</sup> The fact that it is given such wide recognition attests to both the level of the threat, and the necessity to develop a defense against it. The Strategy calls for increased cooperation, education, and communication at all levels to counter domestic terrorism issues, a big step in the right direction to combating this dangerous and inherently elusive threat.

## Encouraging the Amateurs

The "professional" traditional jihadist organizations like al-Qaida have recognized the utility of homegrown, amateur terrorism and have encouraged it. The October 2009 issue of AQAP's propaganda and doctrine magazine, *Sada al-Malahim* (Echo of Battle), included an article titled "War is a Trick." The article advised burgeoning jihadists that they "do not need to sacrifice huge efforts, or large amounts of money, to make 10 grams of explosives," and exhorted them to use materials in "your mother's kitchen and between your hands" to attack Crusaders, airliners, and transport systems wherever they are found.<sup>20</sup>

Less than a month after the release of this article, U.S. Army psychiatrist Major Nidal Malik Hasan shocked the nation with a devastatingly simple attack. Walking up to a crowded section of Ft. Hood, armed with only two pistols, Hasan managed to kill thirteen people before being shot and apprehended.<sup>21</sup> While an unsophisticated attack with a moderate number of casualties, the attack met the typical goal of terrorism: to attack the target's psyche rather than its material resources.

Hasan's attack inspired new calls to arms; the jihadist elite used this attack as an example to further promote the unsophisticated model. AQAP's December 2009 issue of *Sada al-Malahim* labeled Hasan an "heroic mujahid brother," and prompted service members to repent and "kill every Crusader using all the killing methods available."<sup>22</sup>

Al-Qaida prime senior propaganda spokesman Adam Gadahn specifically dedicated his March 2010 English language message to Hasan. "A Call to Arms" extolled Hasan's virtue as a mujahid brother correcting his youthful mistake of joining a "Crusader" army, and extolled his use of available materials to carry out his jihad. Gadahn further urged homegrown jihadists to use "a little imagination and planning and a minimal budget" to choose weapons, and to attack any number of a myriad of strategic targets.<sup>23</sup>

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The recognition and promotion of grassroots jihadism by the Islamic terrorist elite is not insignificant. The purpose of this propaganda is to increase the base of support and it is, thus, easy to find on the Internet. Gadahn's "A Call to Arms" explicitly demands Muslims living among the "unbelievers and apostates" to emulate Hasan and carry out further attacks;<sup>24</sup> inspiring new homegrown terrorists is the sole purpose of the communiqué.

Al-Qaida is laying out a game plan that almost anyone can follow, and global security services should be prepared for more and more would-be, amateur jihadists to do so. Every new attack carried out by a grassroots jihadist, successful or not, is likely going to be followed by more calls for this relatively simple tactic.

## Recommendations

The grassroots aspect of homegrown jihadists most definitely imparts significant advantages to those wishing to do harm to the United States. It is incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to foresee and subsequently prevent a "never-seen-before" terrorist from firing on a crowd of people, or driving a truck or light aircraft into a heavily-populated building. Posting a manifesto proclaiming the act as jihad will instantly turn it into a fear-fomenting phenomenon.

The "grassroots paradox," the danger of previously unknown terrorists juxtaposed against their lack of operational experience, however, provides security services and the public with the opportunity to combat homegrown terrorism. Amateur terrorists lack the know-how and sophistication of professionals, and this lack of tradecraft is their primary vulnerability.

While it is a good turn of luck when attacks fail due to this incompetence, it is much more beneficial to exploit the incompetence in the planning/surveillance "pre-operational" phase. This exploitation would take advantage of homegrown terrorists' lack of experience. Operatives are at one of their most vulnerable points when initially surveilling or staking out a target as part of their planning. New people constantly walking around, taking pictures, notes, or video of a building or public place can stand out and get noticed if they aren't careful. Training people to be aware of the signs of pre-operational surveillance can lead to detection of homegrown terrorists before they take overt action.

The FBI has been doing commendable work with undercover agents exploiting the poor operational security of would-be terrorists, and apprehending cells seeking to purchase advanced weaponry, but this approach fails to address those who don't plan to use Stinger missiles, like the previously mentioned New York cell. It can also strain the resources of the FBI, which has fewer employees than the New York City Police Department, yet has the entire nation as its jurisdiction. Security forces, and indeed the general populace, must be educated about pre-operational activities, such as surveillance and resource gathering, and how to recognize them, as this is where grassroots jihadists will lack the most tradecraft and act sloppily. Cooperation between local, state, and federal agencies must be melded with increased public situational awareness to create a surveillance net able to detect pre-operational activities.

People taking detailed photographs of or notes about public buildings, posting threatening rhetoric on the Internet, or purchasing suspiciously large amounts of things like fertilizer and diesel fuel can all be key suspects worthy of reporting. A sharp-eyed citizen reporting an obvious stakeout may not be enough to justify apprehending a would-be bomber, but it is enough to draw law enforcement's attention to the person, leading to the possible disruption of an attack before it occurs. After all, it was a hot-dog vendor in Times Square who first reported the suspicious smoking Nissan in the failed bombing attempt.<sup>25</sup>

## About the Author

Aaron Rosler is a recent graduate of Henley-Putnam University's Master's Degree program, having earned his Master's of Science in Terrorism and Counterterrorism Studies. His thesis studied disaffection as a societal and cultural prerequisite for entry into terrorism, and how to address sources of disaffection to effectively prevent and combat terrorism. He plans to begin his studies towards a Doctorate of Strategic Security shortly. Mr. Rosler holds a B.S. in History from the U.S. Air Force Academy. He is a former Air Force officer and has just launched a new career with the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security. Mr. Rosler can be reached at: [roslermail@gmail.com](mailto:roslermail@gmail.com).

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