THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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LIFE | IDEAS | THE SATURDAY ESSAY

Can We Stop Homegrown Terrorists?

Law enforcement is making progress against 'lone-wolf' jihadists, but the threat will persist for years to come—and remain relatively modest

The 11 people pictured were arrested in the U.S. and pleaded guilty to crimes related to support for Islamic State. For more details, see our graphic 'ISIS-Related Arrests in the U.S.,' below. *ILLUSTRATION: U.S. ATTORNEY'S OFFICE; AUSTIN POLICE DEPARTMENT; AP (3); FORSYTH COUNTY JAIL; REUTERS; GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS; ZUMA PRESS; SHERBURNE COUNTY JAIL; GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS*

By **PETER BERGEN**

Jan. 22, 2016 2:44 p.m. ET

At 11 a.m. on Dec. 2, some 60 miles east of Los Angeles, Syed Rizwan Farook and his wife, Tashfeen Malik, stormed into a Christmas party for employees of the San Bernardino county public-health department, where Farook worked. Wearing military-style clothing and black masks, the couple unleashed a barrage of bullets. They killed 14 people, and minutes after the attack, Malik pledged an oath of allegiance to Islamic State on her Facebook page. It was the most lethal terrorist attack in the U.S. since 9/11.

Farooq and Malik were married parents and college graduates. They were solidly middle-class, without criminal records or documented mental-health issues. He

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was a native-born American, she had recently emigrated from Pakistan, and there was nothing in the basic details of their backgrounds to suggest that they were any special threat.

They were, in short, very much in the social mainstream of American life—and that, perhaps surprisingly, turns out to be typical of homegrown jihadists, whose numbers have been increasing in recent years. In 2015, the FBI investigated supporters of Islamic State in all 50 states, and more than 80 Americans were charged with some kind of jihadist crime, ranging from planning travel to Syria to plotting an attack in the U.S. It was the peak year since 2001 for law-enforcement activity against Americans who had chosen to join a group or accept an ideology whose goal is to kill fellow Americans.

Working with a research team, I have assembled an exhaustive data set of the roughly 300 jihadists indicted or convicted in the U.S. for some kind of terrorist crime since 9/11. Those crimes ranged from the relatively minor—sending small sums to a terrorist group—to murder.

These individuals represent just a tiny fraction of an American Muslim population estimated at more than 3 million, but 300 homegrown jihadists is still 300 too many. Is the U.S. intelligence and law-enforcement community any closer to knowing how to identify such would-be terrorists and stop them before they act? There has been definite progress, but the sobering truth is that the best efforts of agencies like the New York Police Department and the FBI still fall short—and we are likely to be dealing with this low-level terrorist threat for years to come.

We found that American jihadists are overwhelmingly male (only 7% are women), and their average age is 29. More than a third are married, and more than a third have children. A little more than one in 10 has served time in prison, similar to the rate of incarceration for all American males, and around 10% had

Police caution tape around the Inland Regional Center Conference Center in San Bernardino, Calif., where 14 people were killed in December. *PHOTO: ZUMA PRESS*

some kind of mental-health issue, which is lower than the general population. In everything but their deadly ideology, they are ordinary Americans.

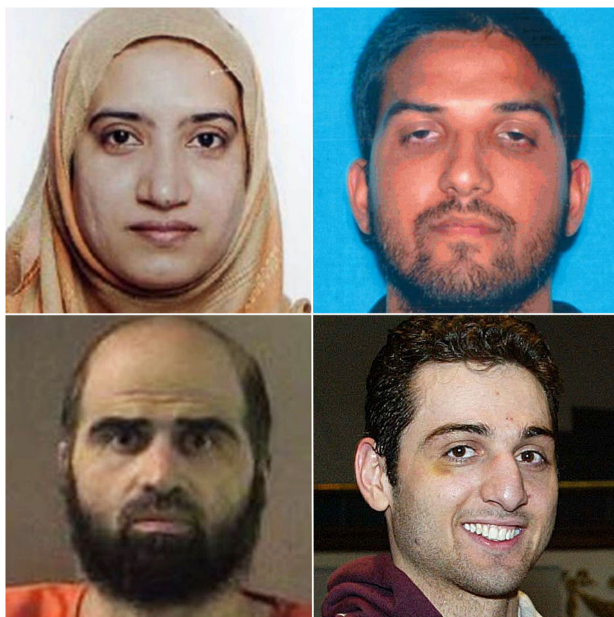
Today's concerns about terrorism from inside the U.S. are rooted, ironically, in the success of efforts to thwart terrorist plots from abroad. The last foreigner who came close to a successful attack on the U.S. was the "underwear bomber" Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian recruited by al Qaeda who tried to bring down a Detroit-bound American passenger jet on Christmas day in 2009.

Since 9/11, the U.S. government has done a great deal to prevent such a catastrophic attack from occurring again. An expanded "no-fly" list has made it much more difficult for terrorists to reach American soil, and an aggressive drone campaign in countries such as Pakistan and Yemen has eliminated many threats. Meanwhile, institutions created since 9/11, especially the National Counterterrorism Center, have brought together intelligence officials from across the government to "connect the dots" of impending terrorist plots.

All of this helps to explain a stark fact: Every lethal jihadist terrorist attack in the U.S. since 9/11 has been carried out by individuals with no formal connection to foreign terrorist groups. The threat today is so-called lone wolves. This is a smaller problem for U.S. law enforcement but in some ways a more vexing one. By definition, lone wolves don't send emails or make calls that can be intercepted by the National Security Agency or attend meetings with co-conspirators that can be detected by the FBI.

In response, law-enforcement officials have focused on what they call counterradicalization. They want to figure out who becomes a radical and why,

in the hope of understanding the process and intervening before an American commits jihadist violence.



(Left to right, top to bottom) San Bernardino attackers Tashfeen Malik and Syed Rizwan Farook, a married couple who killed 14 last December; former Army psychiatrist Nidal Hasan, who killed 13 in a 2009 shooting spree; 2013 Boston Marathon bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev. *PHOTO: DMV/FBI/ZUMA PRESS (2); AP (2)*

The first such effort was undertaken by the New York Police Department in the years after 9/11. A 2007 NYPD report concluded that most homegrown jihadist terrorists were "unremarkable" male Muslims, aged 15 to 35. Generally well-educated and middle-class, many had grown up as nonobservant Muslims or had converted to Islam. Most had no formal links to terrorist organizations, but they had undergone some kind of personal crisis—the loss of a job, the death of a close relative, an encounter with racism, a rising sense of moral outrage over the way their fellow Muslims were suffering in foreign conflicts—that provided a "cognitive opening" for a turn to fundamentalist beliefs.

As their views became more extreme, the NYPD concluded, such individuals separated themselves from Western society, spending more time with others who had been radicalized. The report described a last stage that it labeled "jihadization," just before a radical decided to perform an act of terrorism, often entailing travel abroad for training.

Because much of the NYPD analysis focused on the outward signs of radicalization—fundamentalist beliefs, traditional Islamic clothing, newly grown beards, radical views about U.S. foreign policy—the report was controversial when it was released. Many in the Muslim-American community argued that it supported widespread and unfair suspicions of Islam. As one formal response put it, the report had blurred "lines between mainstream Muslims and fringe elements by focusing on religious beliefs rather than indicia of violent acts of terrorism."

The report's analysis tracked in many respects the assumptions that, after 9/11, informed the work of the NYPD's intelligence division, which secretly deployed plainclothes officers and informants to dozens of New York City mosques. In 2011, the Associated Press broke the news of this mass surveillance, causing much consternation in the Muslim community. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio has now closed down the program.

Despite the controversy over the NYPD report, it neatly describes the trajectory of some notorious terrorists, like the Boston Marathon bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev. A nonobservant Muslim for most of his life, he became a religious fanatic and traveled to Russia in 2012 in an unsuccessful bid to join Islamist militants there.

But other homegrown terrorists have defied this model. David Coleman Headley of Chicago, who played a key role in planning the 2008 attacks in Mumbai in which 166 people were killed, exhibited none of the markers of religiosity described by the NYPD. He partied with the Bollywood elite even as he was conspiring to commit his awful crimes.

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A different approach to the problem of homegrown radicalization has been developed by the FBI. The bureau's framework focuses not on ideology or religious radicalization but on behaviors that suggest an individual is on the "pathway to violence."

The FBI's approach is rooted in the work of psychologists and law-enforcement officials who have made a deep study of criminal behavior. One influential guide has been a 2009 primer called "Threat Assessment and Management Strategies" by the security experts Frederick Calhoun and Steven Weston. Drawing on a series of case studies, Mr. Calhoun and Mr. Weston identified a multistage process—grievance, self-justification, research, preparation—through which a "hunter" generally moves before committing an act of violence.

In 2013, the authors refined their theories by laying out a series of "inhibitors" that tend to keep people from going down the pathway to violence, such as "family ties, financial resources, holding down a good job, religious beliefs." Sometimes, they wrote, these inhibitors "topple like dominoes, with one inhibitor knocking over the next in a sequence of decline." The loss of a job, for instance, might trigger a divorce, which might trigger the loss of a house and so on.

The FBI found this a fruitful way to identify individuals who might commit a violent act. As one counterterrorism analyst with the bureau explained, "If we can look at your life and see you're at the preparation phase—you're shooting paintballs, you're exercising daily, you're preparing—that's concerning to us. We look at the things in your life that will keep you from acting out versus the things that are encouraging that. And if it's entirely lopsided, then you're either much higher-risk or much lower-risk."

The advantage of this approach is that it doesn't try to get inside the heads of would-be terrorists to determine whether their worldview might be dangerous. In the words of the FBI analyst, "We don't get as wrapped round the axle with philosophies...Our focus is more on behavior. What have they done? What can we observe?"

This behavioral lens has proved effective in trying to understand a number of jihadist attacks, but all too often, the FBI's analysis has been applied too late, only after the fact. The bureau's approach didn't allow it to head off the Boston Marathon bombers or the San Bernardino attackers; nor did it raise a red flag about Nidal Hasan, a Virginia-born Army psychiatrist who killed 13 at Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009.

Elements of both approaches, by the NYPD and the FBI, should continue to be part of U.S. counterterrorism strategy against homegrown jihadists. A useful complement to both is the monitoring of social media. Online networks are often seen as a boon for would-be radicals, but in fact, many Americans attracted

11 ARRESTS

ILLUSTRATION: KURT WILBERDING

The individuals in the cover illustration are (top row, from left): Mohamad Saeed Kodaimati, San Diego; Michael Todd Wolfe, Austin, Texas; Mufid Elfgeeh, Rochester, N.Y.; Donald Ray Morgan, Rowan County, N.C.; Samuel Rahamin Topaz, Fort Lee, N.J.; and Jonas Edmonds, Aurora, Ill. Bottom row, from left: Hanad Mustafe Musse, Minneapolis; Adam Dandach, Orange, Calif.; Abdullahi Mohamud Yusef, Minnesota; Zacharia Yusuf Abdurahman, Minnesota; and Leon Nathan Davis, Augusta, Ga. For more details, go here.

to Islamic State have triggered investigations because of their inveterate use of social media to proclaim their sympathies. They are seemingly oblivious to the fact that it is perfectly legal for the FBI to monitor public accounts on Twitter, Facebook and the like. A senior FBI official told me, “I think all the social media is more useful [to law enforcement] than not. If only they knew.” (The San Bernardino attackers were careful to restrict their public social-media profiles, which helps to explain why the couple wasn’t known to the FBI.)

Yet another crucial part of confronting the problem of lone-wolf attackers is expanded outreach to America’s large and overwhelmingly patriotic Muslim community.

In early 2013, a preacher at the Islamic Society of Boston gave a talk in which he called Martin Luther King Jr. a great man. Tamerlan Tsarnaev, just weeks away from his attack on the Boston Marathon, stood up and shouted that the preacher was a “nonbeliever.” Several elders from the mosque met with Tsarnaev and told

him to stop interrupting prayer services. His public outbursts ended, but the intervention clearly didn't turn the future bomber from the pathway to violence.

By contrast, Imam Mohamed Magid—who presides over one of the largest mosques in America, the All Dulles Area Muslim Society in northern Virginia—has had real success in talking members of his flock out of infatuations with Islamic State. In late 2014, Mr. Magid started hearing about young men in his community who were receptive to the group's siren call. He spent long hours with them at his mosque, countering their arguments and discussing the many Islamic texts that teach against taking innocent lives. Erudite clerics such as Mr. Magid can talk to would-be militants in the theological terms to which they are most likely to respond.

One of America's greatest counterterrorism assets is its own Muslim community, which is far better integrated than Muslim populations in Western Europe—and far less likely to turn to jihadism. We dare not squander this advantage by confirming the propaganda of Islamic State, which tries to rally young, disaffected Muslims by pointing to the U.S. as a hotbed of anti-Muslim bigotry. Populist fear-mongering about the whole Muslim-American community doesn't help.

Efforts to counter jihadist tendencies within America's Muslim community won't always succeed, of course, but the fact is that none of the strategies available to us can bring an end to the threat of lone-wolf attacks in the U.S. The FBI says that in 2015, it mounted some 900 investigations into militants in the U.S. The bureau has a solid record of monitoring and arresting those Islamic State recruits who come to its attention, but would-be killers who conceal their behavior and lack any sort of incriminating record will continue to present a serious challenge.

Still, some perspective is in order about the nature and extent of the danger that the country now faces. It is very unlikely that Islamic State could mount a large-scale attack in the U.S., akin to the November attack in Paris. To date, a few dozen Americans at most have been trained by the terrorist group, and none of them appears to have returned to the U.S. That compares favorably to the thousands of Europeans who have been trained by Islamic State, many of whom have returned home. For the foreseeable future, the threat in the U.S. will come almost entirely in the form of homegrown, self-radicalizing lone wolves.

In its heyday, al Qaeda worked with trained operatives bent on mass-casualty attacks; today, Islamic State happily claims credit for any ranting malcontent