

Al Qaeda's Western Volunteer Corps

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As the hostage crisis and terrorist attack on the In Amenas Algerian gas complex unfolded over four days in early January of 2013, security and terrorist experts were quick to point to Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the North African Al Qaeda affiliate, as responsible for the heinous acts that resulted in the death of 38 Westerners. Flush with cash from years of kidnapping and ransoming Western hostages and well-armed after Qaddafi's substantial weapons depots opened up, many had said it was only a matter of time before AQIM raised their game and attempted more sensational attacks—which clearly the In Amenas attack represented.

However, what has surprised security and terrorist experts worldwide has been the confirmation that among the attackers, and potentially in leadership roles, were two Canadians in their 20s—both from middle class families from Ontario.ⁱ

In a related matter, when a British journalist and his Dutch colleague were kidnapped by an Al Qaeda related group, Al-Dawla al-Islamiya, in July of 2012 as they crossed into Syria from Turkey, some of their captors turned out to young men with distinctly "south London accents". These British born jihadists had noted that, "we're not Al Qaeda, but Al Qaeda is down the road," suggesting a loose affiliation. However, they were members of a group of foreign fighters battling against Syrian government forces and their group, which numbered between 30 and 100, had close to 15 British nationals in it.

In October, Shajul Islam, a 26-year-old British doctor who worked for the British National Health Service, was arrested upon his return from the Middle East to the UK at Heathrow airport for his alleged participation in this very kidnapping as well as other terror-related offences.ⁱⁱ

Similarly, in March of 2012, three attacks with a firearm occurred in the French cities of Montauben and Toulouse resulting in the death of seven people and the serious injury of five others. The perpetrator was a French citizen, 23-year-old Mohammed Merah, who had traveled at least once to Pakistan and Afghanistan, where he may have received some paramilitary training, but who radicalized to violence in Toulouse.ⁱⁱⁱ

Though the events in Syria, Algeria and France are separated by hundreds of miles and the nature of conflict in each environ is quite different, the presence of young Western-born foreign fighters who were radicalized to violence in London, outside of Toronto, and in Toulouse underscores a important trend worthy of the attention of terrorism experts and security officials worldwide—almost a dozen years since the attacks of September 11, 2001, "Al Qaeda"^{iv} is still able to call upon, both formally and informally, an international corps of Western volunteers to fill their ranks to join larger Islamist struggles abroad as well as at home and to indirectly continue to make war against the West and its allies. Radicalization in the West is unfortunately still alive and well, just manifesting itself in new ways in 2013.

The resilience of this phenomenon triggers a number of important questions. How significant is this threat from Westerners who radicalize to violence? What has its frequency been and how has it manifested itself over the past few years and what is its potential impact globally and locally in the West? As Western police, security and intelligence services struggle to detect and disrupt these homegrown terrorists, where is the balance between civil liberties and security?

Recent Trends Among Western Jihadists

Dating back to the international brigades of the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s to more recent campaigns in the Balkans and Africa, British, Canadian, American, and French citizens of varied ethnic and religious backgrounds have volunteered to take part in overseas military actions as mercenaries, freelancers, freedom fighters, or self-proclaimed holy warriors. Their motivations have run the gamut from ethnic, religious, or ideological zeal, to a desire for adventure or heroism, and often for both.

Since the attacks of September 2001, with increasing frequency, Western volunteers from London, Toronto, New York, and Paris have traveled to war zones in an effort to fight overseas, receive paramilitary training, develop skills, provide supplies for or to receive sanction and direction from Al Qaeda or one of their affiliates or allies. Some of these individuals have returned to their home countries to launch devastating attacks like the London July 7, 2005, tube and bus bombings on behalf of Al Qaeda. However, others have chosen to volunteer to act at home, on Al Qaeda's behalf, without traveling overseas. Together these two groups represent Al Qaeda's Western volunteer corps.

This article will consider and discuss the most relevant events in France, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada since 2010 to provide a survey of some of the most recent manifestations of this phenomenon over the last three years in the West.

Canada

Since September 2001, the most significant plot against Canada had been the "Toronto 18" plot, which was disrupted during the summer of 2006. As many as 18 men, primarily with Canadian citizenship, but from diverse backgrounds, plotted to attack the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service building (CSIS), the Toronto Stock Exchange, and a military base near Toronto. Using informants, this plot was disrupted by Canadian authorities as the men were taking delivery of ammonium nitrate. Though the plot was not linked to Al Qaeda, the men were inspired by Al Qaeda. The most significant plots in Canada since 2010 include:

Project Smooth

In April of 2013, two individuals were arrested in Montreal and Toronto, who were alleged to be plotting to attack a train operated by Via Rail Canada, the government-owned rail system, that travels between Toronto and New York City. According to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the two men had studied train movements and rail lines in and around Toronto.

The plot was to derail an Amtrak or Canadian Via train as it crossed over the Whirlpool Rapids Bridge from Canada into the United States. The effects would have been devastating had they succeeded, as a 115-year-old arch bridge spans the Niagara River 225 feet above the water between the Canadian and U.S. border. As one official noted, "The plan was to take out a train with passengers on board and the crossing trestle...it was meant to be spectacular and there would have been a lot of carnage."^v

Origins

The suspects were identified as Chiheb Esseghaier, 35, a Tunisian-born Ph.D. student at a Université du Québec nanotechnology lab, who has been living in Montreal and had studied at the University of Sherbrooke since 2008, and Raed Jaser, 30, of Toronto, who has been living in Canada for twenty years with his family, which was Palestinian by heritage. Though neither man had Canadian citizenship, all of the

members of the Jaser family had received Canadian citizenship, other than Raed, whose record of fraud related convictions in Canada prevented him from getting Canadian citizenship.^{vi}

Radicalization

In 2004, Canada's Citizenship and Immigration considered deporting Raed, however, instead his family paid a fine and he remained in Canada. However, in the next few years, Raed began to adopt an extremist version of Islam and his father began to worry about the radicalization of his son.^{vii}

"He came to me about his son saying how concerned he was getting about the rigidness of his son and his interpretation of Islam. He was becoming self-righteous, becoming pushy, pushing his views on how much they [his family] should be practicing as a Muslim," said Robert Heft.^{viii}

Al Qaeda link

Although very little information has been revealed about the travel overseas by Jaser and Esseghaier, Canadian authorities have claimed that the two men received "direction and guidance" from "al Qaeda elements living in Iran," but clarified that there was no evidence that the effort had been sponsored by the government of Iran. Canadian authorities declined to explain how the link to Al Qaeda had been made. One news outlet in Canada, the Canadian Broadcast Network, has claimed that a member of Al-Qaeda living in Iran, on the border with Afghanistan, was guiding and motivating the alleged suspects.^{ix}

Project Samossa

In August 2010, Canadian authorities disrupted one of the most peculiar but serious plots in Canada in recent years—also referred to as the *Canadian Idol plot*, since one of the conspirators auditioned for the Canadian Idol TV competition show.

According to security sources, the three conspirators discussed specific targets in Canada may have received some explosives device training overseas. They were charged in with "possessing plans and materials to create makeshift bombs and of being involved in a conspiracy to commit a violent terrorism attack. Among other things, the men had in their possession when arrested—approximately 50 electronic circuit boards, which can be used as remote-control triggers for bombs.^x

Origins

The three men, Hiva Mohammad Alizadeh, Khurram Sher, and Misbahuddin Ahmed were from Ottawa, Winnipeg, and Montreal. The men were all Canadian citizens, one born and raised in Montreal and the other two having immigrated to Canada at young ages. All three were educated men, pursuing professional careers—one was a graduate of McGill University and an X-ray technologist, another was a pathologist and a third studied to be an electrical engineer. Police allege they were conspiring with others in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, and Dubai, to facilitate terrorist activity.^{xi}

Radicalization

To date, Canadian officials and media outlets have not provided much insight on whether and how the men, who were Canadian citizens, radicalized to violence.

Al Qaeda link

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police arrested the men in 2010 and alleged that the men conspired with three other men—who were named and other unnamed individuals in Canada, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Dubai as part of their plot. To date, it has not been revealed as to whether any of these linkages were to existing overseas terrorist groups.^{xiii}

While one member of the trio is alleged to have travelled to the Afghanistan–Pakistan border region and been trained in bomb-making (unclear by whom or which group), another is accused of gathering funds for foreign terror groups that would have been used to buy arms to target Canadian and allied troops in Afghanistan. Neither the RCMP nor CSIS would discuss what motivated the alleged plot or what its targets were, except to say that the group was a threat to the capital region and Canada's national security. However, it has been suggested that the motivation for the attack was Canada's participation in the war in Afghanistan.^{xiii}

Project Severe

On March 29, 2011, the RCMP arrested an individual in the Toronto area for terrorism-related offenses. Mohamed Hassan Hersi was arrested and charged for attempting to participate in terrorist activity and for providing counsel to a person to participate in terrorist activity.

The subject was arrested without incident at Toronto Pearson International Airport and it is alleged that he was about to board a plane bound for Cairo, Egypt transiting through London, England, to then go to Somalia with an aim to joining the Al Qaeda affiliate, al Shabaab and to participate in terrorist activities.^{xiv}

Origins

Mohamed Hassan Hersi was 25-year-old, who was born in Somalia but moved to Canada as a child. He graduated from University of Toronto with a science degree but was working a job as a security guard. According to many accounts, Hersi had grown frustrated with his life living in a dilapidated public housing unit and tired of watching his mother, a widow who had raised four children alone, struggling to make ends meet. “He was frustrated with his life,” the cousin said. “He started saying, ‘I’m going to Egypt to get the morals I’ve lost.’ But he never mentioned any of this terrorist thing.”^{xv}

Radicalization

According to many who knew him, Hersi was a “regular kid” from the West, who loved movies and liked R&B and hip hop, said his cousin. However, it is possible that his frustrations motivated him to explore his religious heritage. A cousin of Hersi’s noted that he had heard from other relatives that Hersi was becoming increasingly religious and frequented the Salaheddin Islamic Centre in Scarborough, a mosque where individuals tied to the 2006 Toronto 18 has radicalized. Nevertheless, the cousin noted, “Hersi wasn’t radical”.^{xvi}

While Canadian authorities have not discussed the radicalization to violence of Hersi in any detail, Canadian police and others have expressed concern about the number of young Somali-Canadians who have been recruited, radicalized, and indoctrinated by al-Shabab, which is dedicated to overthrowing Somalia's transitional government. A recent Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) report acknowledged several Canadians left for terrorist training camps in Somalia in 2009 from Canada, demonstrating “the attraction for some of travelling abroad for training and becoming ensconced within groups coordinating and planning violent ‘jihad’ against the West.”^{xvii}

Al Qaeda links

Al Shabaab, the group that Hersi was potentially volunteering to join is a group in Somalia that is officially allied with Al-Qaeda and has called for terrorist attacks in Canada and a host of other countries.

United Kingdom

The UK has seen its share of Al Qaeda associated or inspired plots since September 2001. In fact, no Western country has been targeted as frequently as the UK by both Al Qaeda directed and inspired plots as the UK. Some of this may be due to the familial links that many south Asian families still have to Kashmir and other areas of conflict in Pakistan. The deadliest plot was clearly the July 7, 2005, London metro bombings that killed 52, but there were equally if not more lethal plots that were disrupted or failed like the July 21, 2005 metro bombing attempt as well as the 2006 transatlantic airlines plot which was disrupted. Though the tempo of terrorist operations against the UK has slowed since 2006, since 2010, there have been some very serious plots which include:

London Stock Exchange Plot

On December 30, 2010, three groups of arrests occurred in the UK in Cardiff, Stoke-on Trent and London. The nine individuals, ranging in age from 19 to 28 years plotted to launch a Christmas bomb attack on the London Stock Exchange, Big Ben, the American embassy, and the home of London Mayor Boris Johnson. In the fall of 2010, two of the men conducted a surveillance trip around central London and also talked about launching a Mumbai-style attack on Parliament. They were also in the process of building pipe bombs based on instructions from the on-line magazine, *Inspire*.^{xviii}

Origins

All nine men, who are of Bangladeshi origin and between the ages of 19 and 28, lived in the UK. Seven out of the nine men were born in the UK and the other arrived at much younger ages. "The plotters met through membership of various extremist Islamist groups and stayed in touch over the internet, through mobile phones and at specially arranged meetings—held in parks in a bid to make surveillance difficult. It is understood that some of the Stoke group had been planning to travel to Pakistan to a training camp with the aim of developing a long-term plot, probably within the UK."^{xix}

Radicalization

Since the men plead guilty to the charges, only limited information is available on their processes of radicalization. Law enforcement in the UK has characterized the leaders, Mohammed Chowdhury and Shah Rahman from London and the Cardiff contingent as "more like self-starters who probably held radical views for a long time but had taken the next step after immersing themselves in the philosophy of *Inspire* magazine, which promotes the ideology of Anwar al Awlaki who was an operational leader of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). British authorities assert that the men had decided to implement the main idea from recent editions of *Inspire magazine*, which suggested that individuals should "get out there and do it."^{xx}

According to one British account, "The nine-strong gang all followed a similar path, from poppy burning and militant preaching to terrorism." Interestingly a number of the

men had public profiles as very visible political and religious activists who had already become known for their violent views and were well known to police.

“The terror cell members started out by distributing extremist leaflets and DVDs outside mosques and regularly set up stalls in Cardiff and Stoke, radicalizing vulnerable members of the community.” The men chatted over Paltalk in extremist video chat rooms and were known to be associated with extremist Islamist groups like Al Muhajiroun and its successor organization Islam4UK.^{xxi}

Al Qaeda links

It was not believed that the men had any operational connections to any terrorist group overseas. Although the gang in Stoke talked about attacking local pubs and clubs, they had decided to travel abroad to get more training, but were interrupted before they could travel. Al Qaeda's role seems to have only been inspirational in this plot as “al-Qaeda inspired books and leaflets, including instructions on making a pipe bomb, were also uncovered during the counter-terrorism operation.”^{xxii}

The British Airways Plot

On February 25, 2010, Rajib Karim, an employee of British Airways (BA), was arrested by officers of Scotland Yard's Counter Terrorist Command. Rajib worked in the IT department of BA and although he had a low profile, was in direct contact with Anwar al Awlaki, the operational leader of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Together, they contemplated how they could exploit Rajib's position within the airline company to launch a terrorist attack that would involve destroying a flight from the United Kingdom to the United States. He was convicted in February of 2011 on of five counts of engaging in conduct in preparation of acts of terrorism.^{xxiii}

Origins

Rajib Karim arrived in the UK from Bangladesh at age 26 in 2006. Unlike many of Al Qaeda's other volunteers from the West, Karim came to the West already radicalized and with the deliberate intention to set out to find a job that would be useful to him to plan terror attacks. From his spot in the IT department of British Airways, he kept a low profile. However, at home, he was busy making violent propagandist videos for proscribed terrorist organization Jamaat -ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB).^{xxiv}

Karim also worked with his younger brother Tehzeeb Karim and other associates to raise funds for JMB, Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations who were then involved in the insurgent activity in Iraq, in the border areas of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and also in the Yemen.^{xxv}

Radicalization

Rajib and Tehzeeb began their turn to violence growing up in Bangladesh as they explored radical Islamist thinking over the internet and in study circles while they were in school. Despite being raised in a wealthy family in Bangladesh they and their friends who were educated at the same private school began to be politically active and supported Jammah-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), which fought to establish an Islamic state in the country. The group, banned in both Bangladesh and the UK, launched a violent bombing campaign in 2005—but its leaders were arrested and later executed. Rajib subsequently traveled to the UK in 2006 with his British wife to seek medical attention for their sick young son.^{xxvi}

Al Qaeda links

In December 2009, Tehzeeb and two others travelled from Bangladesh to Yemen where they successfully made contact with radical cleric Anwar al Awlaki, and the new division of Al-Qaeda which had established itself there, known as Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsular (AQAP). Tehzeeb put al-Awlaqi in touch with his brother Rajib, prompting an exchange of messages between the radical cleric and the BA worker, as they contemplated how they could exploit Rajib's position within the airline company to launch a terrorist attack.^{xxvii}

Rajib volunteered information on how he could cause disruption to BA both operationally and financially, by attacking their computer servers, which he said would ground their entire fleet. He also offered to begin recruiting other people. Karim also attempted to train to join a cabin crew; however, he did not have enough time in service. When that failed, AQAP's operational leader, Al-Awlaqi urged Karim to be patient, to stay in the UK while applying for his UK passport, and not to engage in any activity that would expose him to scrutiny as there was a longer-term goal. He wrote: "Our highest priority is the US. Anything there even on a smaller scale compared to what we may do in the UK, would be our choice. So the question is, with the people you have, is it possible to get a package, or a person with a package on board a flight to the [US]...". So, clearly, Rajib Karim, who volunteered his services to AQAP, was working directly on the group's behalf.^{xxviii}

The Birmingham Plot

In September of 2011, 12 men were arrested by British authorities in and around the Birmingham area for conspiring to carry out the most devastating attacks in the UK since the July 7, 2005, bombings. The goal was to explode up to eight homemade bombs in rucksacks in crowded places, essentially emulating the July 7, 2005 attacks. The three leaders of the plot were all British citizens. "The men were still discussing potential targets and weapons when they were arrested in September 2011 as they drove across Birmingham, prosecutors said. From bugged conversations and police questioning, the court heard, the men were known to have discussed using rucksack bombs, rifle attacks on crowded streets and targeted strikes against British soldiers." Three of the men were convicted on terrorism-based offenses and eight other men plead guilty to lesser related charges.^{xxix}

Origins

The plotters came from areas in Birmingham that are known for being a stronghold of the hard-line Islamic sect, Deobanismo, which began as a fundamentalist revivalist movement against British imperialism in India as well of Kashmiri political and military activism, given that Birmingham is where many people from Kashmir settled. Both movements have in the past been an onramp for individuals who later turned to violence on behalf of Al Qaeda.^{xxx}

One of the plot leaders had a religious revival while in university and subsequently gravitated to more extremist clerics. Though he earned a pharmacy degree, he dropped out of pharmacy work to teach at an Islamic high school and college in Birmingham. Another was a university student in information technology who dropped out and came from a family with strong links back to disputed area of Kashmir. A third worked as a receptionist in a gym. The group's chief financier, a law graduate, exploited his position

as a volunteer area coordinator for Muslim Aid to steal money from the charity by organizing bogus street bucket collections.^{xxxi}

Radicalization

Although not much is known about the path the men took to become aspiring terrorists, the court heard that the leader of the group and his fellow plotters were heavily influenced by the propaganda of Anwar al Awlaki. The Queens Counsel prosecutor, Brian Altman described all the men as having a "shared, identical jihadist mindset" influenced by the Yemen-based hate extremist preached Anwar al Awlaki

Al-Qaeda links

Two of the men, Mr. Naseer and Mr. Khalid, were tracked by the security services leaving Britain and entering terrorist training camps linked to Al Qaeda on the Pakistan–Afghanistan border. The men travelled twice to this region, once in 2009 and once in 2010. During both trips, the men received some type of paramilitary training. While the 2009 trip did not reveal details of the nature of the training and who provided the training, Naseer and Khalid admitted that on the second trip, they received training from the Kashmiri militant Islamic group, Harakat ul Mujahedeen (HuM), which has allied itself with Al-Qaeda. It is unclear how the men linked up with Al-Qaeda, but according to Judge Richard Henriques they did. He noted, "Your plot had the blessing of Al-Qaeda and you intended to further the aims of Al Qaeda," he told him. "Clearly nothing was going to stop you short of intervention of the authorities."^{xxxii}

France

France, with its aggressive counterterrorism strategy, has often made terrorism related arrests since 2001 at an early phase when plots were still inchoate. As a result, France has been fortunately spared significant linked or associated plots Al Qaeda plots on its territory beyond micro-conspiracies that were disrupted before targets were chosen. The most significant plot in France, related to Al Qaeda type terrorism, occurred in 2011.

Mohammed Merah Attacks

The deadliest terrorist attacks in France since 1995 occurred in March 2011. On March 11, 2012, in Toulouse and then again on March 15 in Montauban, a total of three French soldiers were shot dead by a man wearing a helmet who arrived and left on a motorized scooter. The first attack was on an off-duty French paratrooper of North African descent on the street, outside of the gym. The second attack, on three off duty soldiers, also of North African descent, happened at an ATM machine. Then, on March 19, four people, including two children, were shot dead at the Ozar Hatorah Jewish day school in Toulouse. The perpetrator was identified as Mohammed Merah, a 23-year-old Frenchman of Algerian extraction. His motives included opposition to French participation in the war in Afghanistan, anti-Semitism, and acting to avenge the deaths of Palestinian children killed in Gaza. Mr. Merah was killed after a 30-hour standoff when security officers raided his apartment in Toulouse.

Origins

Mohammed Merah was born in France to French parents of Algerian descent, as one of five children. When his parents divorced, he was five and subsequently, he was raised by his mother in a tough part of Toulouse. During his youth he was arrested many times for petty crime such as purse snatching and ultimately served two prison terms, first for

robbery and second for thefts and driving offenses. As a youth he was described as violent and someone with behavioral problems who the police were constantly in contact with.^{xxxiii}

Merah also had a history of psychiatric problems and attempted to commit suicide by hanging in 2008 before he attempted to join the French Army twice but was rejected. After a failed attempt to join the French Foreign Legion, and by 2010, Merah began to investigate religion and traveled to Egypt to learn Arabic and then subsequently also went to Pakistan in 2010 and 2011.^{xxxiv}

Merah had reportedly split from his wife days before the shootings. He was unemployed at the time of the shootings after having worked as a mechanic.^{xxxv}

Radicalization

During the siege of Merah's apartment he told French authorities that it was during one of his stints in prison in 2009 that he became more religious and politicized. After his release, Merah dabbled with relationships with Islamists. Court documents which have redacted information from the French intelligence services note that over time he became involved in the "*Salafist movement Toulouse*". However, in other French accounts Merah was more difficult to classify in terms of his level of religiosity, as, "sometimes Merah wore a beard, and sometimes shaved it off. Sometimes he seemed devout to friends; at other times he'd go clubbing, staying out to listen to *rai*, popular Arab music." Subsequently, he traveled to Afghanistan and Pakistan on his own where he claimed he received paramilitary training in Waziristan from Al Qaeda.^{xxxvi}

Al Qaeda links

Mohamed Merah was in many ways the ultimate Al Qaeda volunteer—born in the West, radicalized in the West, but then traveled to Afghanistan and Pakistan as a volunteer for the cause and to get training and then acted in the name of Al Qaeda. Thus, it is not surprising that Interior Minister Claude Guéant said that Mr. Merah told the police that he called himself one of the "mujahedeen" and claimed to be a member of Al Qaeda. However, there was no Al Qaeda recruiter to catalyze this process but rather as Jean-Louis Bruguière, a former French counterterrorism judge and expert on European terrorism noted, "He appears to be part of the new generation of Islamic terrorists who act alone, abetted by jihadi Web sites and their own anger."^{xxxvii}

United States

Although the United States had seen few if any homegrown, Al Qaeda inspired plots in the immediate years after September 2001, the plot against Fort Dix, which was thwarted in April of 2007, heralded a wave of plots, arrests, and even some successful attacks among wannabe Al Qaeda volunteers in the United States. Although this wave crested by the end of 2010, since then there have been some consequential plots and arrests which were punctuated by the deadly Marathon Bombing in Boston on April 15, 2013, which killed four and wounded more than 250.

Some of the American Al Qaeda volunteers who either planned to act at home or abroad between 2007 and 2010 without direct links to overseas terrorist organizations included, the "Fort Dix Six" conspirators' attempt to attack that base in New Jersey, Carlos Bledsoe's June 2009 shooting of Little Rock, AK military recruiting station, which killed one, Major Nidal Hasan's attack on soldiers in Fort Hood, which killed 13 and injured 29, and the case of Sharif Mobley, an American man formerly employed at

nuclear power plants in New Jersey, who was arrested in 2010 in Yemen on suspicion of being associated with an unnamed terrorist group within the Arabian Peninsula (possibly Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula).

Other cases involved Americans who either attempted to or were successful in linking up with Al Qaeda affiliated groups overseas and either decided to fight abroad or return to the United States to conduct a plot against America. Some of the more prominent of these cases include Omar Hammami, who traveled abroad and joined Al Shabab in Somalia, the five U.S. citizens from the Washington DC area who traveled to Pakistan with the intention of joining a jihadist group, but were instead arrested in Pakistan, Najibullah Zazi, and his two associates, who traveled to Pakistan, linked up with Al Qaeda Core and were involved with an attempt to detonate bombs within the New York City subway system in September 2009 and Faisal Shehzad, who had only recently received U.S. citizenship before he traveled to Pakistan to volunteer to join Tekerek-e-Taliban, the Pakistani Taliban, and then subsequently returned to New York City in May 2010 and attempted to explode a vehicle in Times Square in May 2010.

Three examples of American volunteers to "Al Qaeda" since 2010 worth discussing in further detail include: the case of the Boston Marathon bombers, Jose Pimintel and Samir Khan and Anwar al Awlaki—Americans who joined AQAP.

Americans in Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula

On September 30, 2011, both Samir Khan and Anwar al Awlaki were killed in a drone strike in the Al Jawf governorate of Yemen. While the strike targeted Awlaki, who had become Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) head of External Operations, Khan was killed by accident. These two men with American citizenship, volunteers to al Qaeda, had arrived in Yemen from the United States, joined the group and were at war with the country in which they both had citizenship—Awlaki had been played a critical role in the attempted Christmas Day Underwear Bombing attack in December of 2009.

Origins

Samir Khan was born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, to parents of Pakistani descent and grew up in Queens, New York. He also spent some of his teenage years living in Westbury, New York. He wrote for the high school newspaper, participated in cheerleading, and was an active member of the glee club.^{xxxviii}

Anwar al Awlaki Al-Awlaki was born in New Mexico in the United States in 1971 to parents from Yemen, while his father was doing graduate work at U.S. universities. His father, Nasser al-Awlaki, was a Fulbright Scholar. In 1978, when al-Awlaki was seven years old, he returned with his family to Yemen. He lived in Yemen for 11 years, and then returned to the U.S. state of Colorado to attend college. He earned a B.S. in Civil Engineering from Colorado State University (1994), where he was president of the Muslim Student Association.^{xxxix}

Radicalization

However, after high school, Khan began to adopt a more fundamentalist version of Islam and created a blog called "InshallahShaheed" or "A martyr, God willing" from his parents' basement in North Carolina. He subsequently started an online magazine which would presage his involvement with *Inspire* magazine. This was called *Jihadi Recollections* and also endorsed violent jihad against the West. After moving to Yemen in 2009 he became the editor of *Inspire*. In an article written by Khan and published

in *Inspire* titled "I am proud be a traitor to America", Khan outlined his grievances against the United States.^{xi}

Meanwhile, Awlaki worked as an imam in Denver and then San Diego during the 1990s. While his worldview during this period was Islamist in nature, he did not openly espouse violence against the United States. That said, he was interviewed at least four times by the FBI in relation to his links to some of the 9/11 hijackers who lived in San Diego. Subsequently, he moved to the Washington DC area and served as an imam in the Dar al Hijra mosque in Virginia between 2001 and 2002 before leaving the United States for the United Kingdom. As part of his lectures in December 2002 and January 2003 at the London Masjid al-Tawhid mosque, Awlaki began describing the rewards martyrs receive in paradise, and developing a following among ultraconservative young Muslims, suggesting a turn towards endorsing violence.^{xlii}

Al Qaeda links

In 2004, Awlaki returned to Yemen and was arrested in 2006 for supposedly participating in an Al Qaeda plot to kidnap a U.S. military official. After his release in late 2007, he went into hiding and likely linked up with AQAP at that point. In January of 2009 he released his essay, *44 Ways to Support Jihad* and by December 2009, Awlaki was on the Yemeni government's most-wanted list and most importantly, involved operationally with the launch of the AQAP Christmas Day Underwear Bomber Plot against Northwest flight 253 to Detroit as a full fledged member of the Yemeni Al Qaeda affiliate.

Meanwhile, after attending Central Piedmont Community College in North Carolina, Samir Khan left the country for Yemen in 2009. His parents, who had not agreed with Khan's views, had attempted an intervention with local religious authorities, but that did not work. After arriving in Yemen, Khan had become an important information arm and a member of Yemen's branch of Al Qaeda—AQAP. Khan began to publish the influential online magazine, *Inspire Magazine*. He proclaimed, in an early edition of the Qaeda magazine, "I am proud to be a traitor,"^{xliii}

Returning Servicemen Plot

Jose Pimentel, a native of the Dominican Republic and convert to Islam, was arrested and charged with plotting to detonate bombs in and around New York City in November 2011. He used instructions on how to build a bomb published by A-Qaeda's *Inspire magazine*.^{xliii} After a two and half year investigation, Pimentel was caught while assembling three bombs. In fact, holes had been drilled into pipes, sulfur had been scraped off matches, nails were ready to be used as shrapnel, and wires were used to fashion an ignition device. His targets included members of the Armed Forces who were returning from service in Iraq and Afghanistan.^{xliii}

Origins

Pimentel was born in the Dominican Republic and came to the United States at age eight and subsequently became an American citizen. After moving to Schenectady in 2004, New York, he converted to Islam and subsequently went by the name Muhammed Yusef. In December 2005, he was arrested for buying a computer with stolen credit card information he got while working at a Circuit City in Albany, New York.^{xliv}

Radicalization

Pimentel seems to have self-radicalized via the Internet. He spent much of his time on the Internet and maintained a radical website on Youtube called TrueIslam1. The website contains a link to the bomb-making article in *Inspire* magazine. Pimentel was also a follower of the Islamist group, Revolution Muslim, which maintained an extremist website. Pimentel corresponded with Jesse Morton, the founder of the website, who was sentenced in June 2012 to 11.5 years in prison for using the internet to solicit violence against individuals to include the writers of the popular TV-satire South Park. One year before he embarked on his plot, during an interview with police, Pimentel defended Osama bin Laden and Anwar al Awlaki as great lecturers and said the Times Square bomber and Major Nidal Hasan who shot dozens of people at Fort Hood in Texas were fighting for a cause, and should not be considered terrorists.^{xlv}

Al Qaeda links

Pimentel considered traveling to Yemen to participate in terrorist training and claimed to have emailed radical Yemeni-American cleric Anwar al Awlaki but received no response. As a result, his decision to construct explosive devices and begin a bombing campaign against returning U.S. soldiers happened in the context of Pimentel's desire to act on behalf of Al Qaeda, a volunteer for the cause.^{xlvi}

The Boston Marathon Attack

On April 15, 2013, two improvised explosive devices detonated at the Boston Massacre, killing three spectators and injuring more than 250 people. The marathon bombs were constructed largely according to instructions in *Inspire* magazine. In a subsequent event, later that week, an off duty MIT police officer was killed by the two men responsible for the terrorist attack—Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.

Origins

Born seven years apart in different republics of the former Soviet Union, the Tsarnaev brothers were of Chechen and Dagestani descent. They immigrated to the United States as refugees in 2002. Tamerlan was an aspiring boxer, while Dzhokhar was a student at University of Massachusetts Dartmouth who became a naturalized U.S. citizen on September 11, 2012, seven months before the bombings. "In 2009, Tamerlan won the New England Golden Gloves championship in the 201-pound division, which qualified him for the national tournament in Salt Lake City in May."^{xlvii}

Radicalization

After 2010, Tamerlan's religious identification grew stronger, he dropped out of community college, lost interest in boxing and also in music -- "he used to play piano and violin, classical music and rap." Dzhokhar reportedly also admitted to authorities that he and his brother were radicalized, at least in part, by watching Anwar al Awlaki lectures. The Russian investigative newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* reported that during a six-month trip that Tamerlan took to Russia, Tamerlan had sought to join the Muslim insurgency in Dagestan and had been "in contact with several rebels who were killed by Russian authorities in late spring of 2012 while he was staying in Makhachkala, the regional capital." If this account is accurate, Tamerlan arrived in Russia already radicalized to violence. While his activities in Russia are still being investigated, it appears that he did not join any fighting group and subsequently returned back to Boston. What is unknown is whether he received any paramilitary or bomb making training or not.^{xlviii}

Al Qaeda links

Though it is still unclear if Tamerlan linked up with any overseas groups associated with Al Qaeda in Russia, no group has taken responsibility for the attack in Boston. The likelihood is that Tamerlan and Dzhokhar were acting alone, inspired by Al Qaeda's ideology and literally *Inspire* magazine. In fact, as Dzhokhar was hiding in a boat in Watertown, he scribbled notes that suggested that the attack in Boston was "retribution U.S. military action in Afghanistan and Iraq, and called the Boston victims collateral damage in the way Muslims have been in the American-led wars." These grievances, if they were the motivating factors—a more linked to Al Qaeda's worldview than any particular Chechen or Dagestani local grievance.^{xlix}

Conclusions

In a sampling of Western countries, Canada, the UK, France and the United States, Al Qaeda type terrorism has not disappeared since 2010. In general, it has become more disconnected from Al Qaeda Core in Afghanistan/Pakistan and when a foreign group has been involved, it is more likely to be with an Al Qaeda affiliate or ally in North Africa, Yemen, or Somalia.

Since 2010, most of the cases involving Western countries, have involved citizens of those very countries who either have radicalized and then mobilized to violence in the West or individuals who traveled or attempted to travel abroad to a zone of conflict to fight there and may or may not have returned to the West to carry out their attack.

Either way, most of the men who have made up Al Qaeda's Volunteer Corps since 2010, have spent time in the West and both have Western origins and in some way have targeted Western targets.

This phenomenon continues to surprise media and Western audiences—many are still shocked when two Canadians turn up in Algeria leading an attack against an energy facility, working with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb or when two men who were generally raised in Boston, attack their neighbors at the Boston Marathon. However, for counterterrorism practitioners, this threat is not new and remains one of the most difficult to detect. Unfortunately, it does not seem like it will abate any time soon, regardless of the death of Osama bin Laden, leaving challenges from a security, law enforcement, intelligence, and civil liberties perspective that the radicalization to violence and threat that these Western volunteers present, balanced against the need to maintain civil liberties.

Notes

ⁱ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2013/04/04/algeria-canadians-al-qaeda-rcmp.html>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/28/world/middleeast/jeroen-oerlemans-john-cantile-two-journalists-freed-by-islamic-fighters-in-syria-after-weeklong-ordeal.html>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2012/oct/16/charged-kidnap-british-journalist-syria>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.eitb.com/fr/infos/societe/detail/854031/fusillades-operation-policiere-toulouse/>

^{iv} Almost 12 years after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the very definition of what Al Qaeda as an organization is and what type of threat it represents have evolved to a point where clarification and definition are required before even beginning the discussion. For the benefit of this article, a broad definition of “Al Qaeda”, referring to a loose global alliance of like-minded Sunni jihadist terrorist organizations that may share affinity, an alliance, operational coordination, and/or personnel/weapons and are intent on attacking Western interests both locally and abroad under the banner “Al Qaeda”, will serve as the definition of the group, rather than the more narrowly defined “Al Qaeda Core, whose presence was generally limited to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Yemen.

^v <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2313517/Canada-terror-plot-First-picture-Chiheb-Esseghaier-revealed-Toronto-Muslim-leader-tipped-authorities.html>

^{vi} <http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/04/24/na0425-sb-terror-2/>

<http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/04/22/canadian-terrorist-plot-was-planned-by-chiheb-esseghaier-raed-jaser/>

^{vii} <http://globalnews.ca/news/511849/prior-fraud-conviction-almost-led-to-deportation-of-one-via-rail-terror-suspect/>

^{viii} http://www.cleveland.com/world/index.ssf/2013/04/canadian_terror_suspect_had_ra.html

^{ix} <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2013/04/23/via-terror-plot-suspects-broader-network.html>

^x <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2010/08/27/f-terrorism-charges-august-2010.html>

^{xi} <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2010/0827/Canada-arrests-of-citizens-raise-concerns-of-homegrown-terrorism>

^{xii} <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2010/08/27/f-terrorism-charges-august-2010.html>

<http://www.actforcanada.ca/rcmp-say-homegrown-terror-suspects-preparing-to-build-ieds/>

^{xiii} <http://m.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/terror-plot-would-have-brought-afghan-war-home-to-canada/article1378378/?service=mobile>

^{xiv} <http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/on/news-nouvelles/2011/11-03-30-gta-rgt-inset-eisn-eng.htm>

^{xv} http://www.thestar.com/news/crime/2011/03/31/u_of_t_graduates_arrest_on_terror_charges_alarms_toronto_somalis.html

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