

TESTIMONY

Reassessing the Evolving al Qaeda Threat to the Homeland

Peter Bergen

New America Foundation Senior Fellow

CNN National Security Analyst

NYU Center on Law and Security Research Fellow

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Chairwoman Harman, committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My testimony aims to address the evolving threat from al Qaeda to the homeland, to include the threat from al Qaeda itself, groups affiliated or allied to al Qaeda, and those “homegrown” militants influenced by al Qaeda ideas who have no connections to any formal jihadist group. This testimony does not aim to be exhaustive but to cover the most serious cases of recent years and to provide some overall threat assessment.

Najibullah Zazi, a lanky Afghan-American man in his mid-twenties, walked into the Beauty Supply Warehouse in Aurora, Colorado, a suburb of Denver, on July 25, 2009, in a visit that was captured on a store video camera. Wearing a baseball cap and pushing a shopping cart down the aisles of the store, Zazi appeared to be just another suburban guy, although not too many suburban guys buy six bottles of Clairoxide hair bleach as Zazi did on this shopping trip. He then returned to the same store a month later where he purchased another dozen bottles of ‘Ms. K Liquid,’ which is also a peroxide-based hair bleach. Aware that these were hardly the typical purchases of a heavily-bearded, dark-haired young man, Zazi--who had lived in the States since the age of fourteen--kibitzed easily with the counter staff joking that he had to buy such large quantities of hair products because he “had a lot of girl friends.”¹

In fact Zazi, a sometime coffee cart operator on Wall Street, was planning to launch what could have been the deadliest terrorist attack in the United States since 9/11 using the seemingly innocuous hair bleach to assemble hydrogen peroxide-based bombs, a signature of al Qaeda plots in the past several years. During early September 2009, at the Homewood Studio Suites in Aurora Zazi mixed and cooked batches of the noxious chemicals in the kitchenette of his motel room. On the night of September 6, as Zazi labored over the stove he made a number of frantic calls to someone who he asked for advice on how to perfect the bombs. Two days later Zazi was on his way to New York in a rented car. By now President Obama was receiving daily briefings about Zazi, sometimes as many as three or four a day.²

Zazi was spotted in downtown Manhattan on Wall Street on the eighth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks just a few blocks from the gaping hole where the World Trade Center had once stood. By then he was under heavy FBI surveillance and eight days later, after a series of voluntary discussions with Bureau agents, Zazi was arrested. Likely directed at various targets in and around Manhattan, America’s leading authority on terrorism, Bruce Hoffman, described Zazi’s plan as “Mumbai-on-the-Hudson.”³

Zazi appears to have been the first genuine al Qaeda recruit discovered living in the United States in years. Zazi had travelled to Pakistan in late August 2008 where by his own admission he was given training on explosives from al Qaeda members in the Pakistani tribal regions along the Afghan border. On Zazi’s laptop computer the FBI discovered he had stored pages of handwritten notes about the manufacture and initiation of explosives and the components of various detonators and fusing systems, technical know-how he had picked up at one of al Qaeda’s training facilities in the tribal regions sometime between the late summer of 2008 and January 2009, when he finally returned

to the United States. The notations included references to TATP, the explosive used in the London 7/7 bombings.⁴

The Zazi case was a reminder of al Qaeda's ability to attract recruits living in America who are "clean skins" without previous criminal records or known terrorist associations and who are intimately familiar with the West. Similarly, Bryant Neal Vinas, a twenty-something Hispanic-American convert to Islam from Queens, New York traveled to Pakistan's tribal areas in the summer of 2008, where he attended al Qaeda training courses on explosives and handling weapons such as Rocket Propelled Grenades, lessons that he put to good use when he participated in a rocket attack on an American base in Afghanistan in September 2008.⁵ Vinas was captured in Pakistan the same month and was turned over to the FBI.¹ He told his interrogators that he had provided al Qaeda members details about the Long Island Rail Road commuter train system, which the terror group had some kind of at least notional plan to attack.⁶

Surprisingly, even almost a decade after 9/11 a number of Americans bent on jihad managed to travel to al Qaeda's headquarters in the tribal regions of Pakistan. In addition to Zazi and Vinas, David Headley, an American of Pakistani descent living in Chicago -- who had legally changed his name from Daood Gilani in 2006 to avoid suspicion when he traveled abroad -- also allegedly had significant dealings with terrorists based in Pakistan's tribal areas.⁷

Sometime in 2008 Headley hatched a plan to attack the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* which three years earlier had published cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that were deemed to be offensive by many Muslims. In a message to a Pakistan-based Yahoo group on October 29, 2008 Headley wrote, "Call me old fashioned but I feel disposed towards violence for the offending parties."

The cartoons of the Prophet have been a particular obsession of al Qaeda. In March 2008 bin Laden publicly denounced the publication of the cartoons as a "catastrophe" for which punishment would soon be meted out. Three months later, an al Qaeda suicide attacker bombed the Danish Embassy in Islamabad, killing six. For al Qaeda and allied groups the Danish cartoon controversy has assumed some of the same importance that Salman Rushdie's fictional writings about the Prophet had for Khomeini's Iran two decades earlier.

In January 2009 Headley traveled to Copenhagen, where he reconnoitered the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper on the pretext that he ran an immigration business that was looking to place some advertising in the paper. In coded correspondence with militants in Pakistan Headley referred to his plot to take revenge for the offensive cartoons as the "Mickey

¹ The fact that seven years after 9/11 a kid from Long Island managed to waltz into an al Qaeda training camp, a feat that no American spy had done, despite the some 40 billion dollars that the United States spends a year on its intelligence agencies, says a great deal about how the US intelligence community actually works.

Mouse project.” On one of his email accounts Headley listed a set of procedures for the project that included, “Route Design,” “Counter Surveillance” and “Security.”

Following his trip to Denmark Headley met with Ilyas Kashmiri in the Pakistani tribal regions to brief him on his findings. Kashmiri is one of the most prominent militant leaders in Pakistan and runs a terrorist organization, Harakat-ul Jihad Islami, closely tied to al Qaeda. Headley returned to Chicago in mid-June 2009 and was arrested there three months later as he was preparing to leave for Pakistan again. He told investigators that he was planning to kill the *Jyllands-Posten*’s cultural editor Flemming Rose who had first commissioned the cartoons as well as the cartoonist Kurt Westergaard who had drawn the one he found most offensive; the Prophet Mohammed with a bomb concealed in his turban.

Headley said that he also cased a synagogue near the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper headquarters at the direction of a member of Lashkar-e-Taiba in Pakistan, the same group that had carried out the Mumbai attacks that killed some 165 people in late November 2008. The Lashkar-e-Taiba militant Headley was in contact with mistakenly believed that the newspaper’s cultural editor was Jewish. When he was arrested Headley had a book entitled “How to Pray Like a Jew” in his luggage and a memory stick containing a video of a close-up shot of the entrance to the *Jyllands-Posten* newspaper in Copenhagen.

Indian authorities are presently examining if Headley also had any role in LeT’s 2008 massacre in Mumbai. Reportedly Indian investigators have found that Headley visited a number of the Mumbai locations that were attacked including the Chabad Jewish Center, which was a particular target of LeT’s gunmen and would help further explain why Headley had the book about Jewish prayer rituals in his luggage at the time of his arrest.⁸

For many years after 9/11 the United States government had largely worried about terrorists coming into the country. David Headley is an American *exporting* the jihad overseas. But he is far from only the only one. According to an as yet unpublished count by New York University’s Center on Law & Security, 25 American citizens or residents have been charged with travelling to an overseas training camp or war zone since 9/11: Two who trained with the Taliban, seven who trained with al Qaeda; ten who trained with the Pakistani terrorist group Lashkar-e-Taiba; four with the Somali al Qaeda affiliate, *Al Shabab*, and three who have trained with some unspecified jihadist outfit in Pakistan. (The actual number of Americans who have travelled overseas for jihad since 9/11 is significantly more than 25 as not everyone who does so ends up being charged or convicted of a crime.)

In September 2009 the Somali Islamist insurgent group *Al Shabab* formally pledged allegiance to bin Laden following a two-year period in which it had recruited Somali-Americans and other US Muslims to fight in the war in Somalia. Six months earlier bin Laden had given his own imprimatur to the Somali jihad in an audiotape released titled “Fight On, Champions of Somalia.”⁹ Many of *Al Shabab*’s recruits from the States hailed from Minnesota where the largest number of the some 200,000 Somali-Americans in the United States is concentrated.

In 2006 with American encouragement and support Ethiopia, a predominantly Christian country, invaded Somalia, an overwhelmingly Muslim nation, to overthrow the Islamist government there known as the Islamic Courts Union (ICU). While far from ideal the ICU was the first government in two decades to have brought some measure of stability to the failed Somali state but its rumored links to al Qaeda-like groups had put it in the Bush administration's crosshairs.

Perhaps two dozen Somali-Americans, motivated by a combination of nationalist pride and religious zeal, traveled to Somalia in 2007 and 2008 to fight the Ethiopian occupation. Most of them associated themselves with *Al Shabab*—"the youth" in Arabic—the insurgent group that would later proclaim itself to be an al Qaeda affiliate.

Al Shabab managed to plant al Qaeda-like ideas into the heads of even its American recruits. Shirwa Ahmed grew up in Portland and Minneapolis. After graduating high school in 2003 he worked pushing airline passengers in wheel chairs at Minneapolis Airport and delivered packages for a medical supplies company. FBI director Robert Mueller said that some time during this period Ahmed was "radicalized in his hometown in Minnesota." The exact mechanisms of that radicalization are still murky but in late 2007 Ahmed travelled to Somalia. A year later, on October 29, 2008 Ahmed drove a car loaded with explosives towards a government compound in Puntland, northern Somalia blowing himself up and killing as many as thirty. He was the first American suicide attacker anywhere. It's possible that 18 year old Omar Mohamud of Seattle was the second. On September 17, 2009 two stolen United Nations vehicles loaded with bombs blew up at Mogadishu airport killing more than a dozen peacekeepers of the African Union. The FBI is investigating if Mohamud was one of the bombers.¹⁰

Al Shabab prominently featured its American recruits in its propaganda operations, releasing two videos in 2009 starring Abu Mansoor al Amriki ("the father of Mansoor, the American") who is in fact Omar Hammani, a 25 year old from Alabama who was raised as a Baptist before converting to Islam while he was at high school. In the video Amriki delivered an eloquent rejoinder to President Obama's speech in Cairo a month earlier in which he had extended an olive branch to the Muslim world. Mansoor addressed himself to Obama in a flat American accent: "How dare you send greetings to the Muslim world while thousands of Muslims are being detained in your facilities. And how dare you send greetings to the Muslim world while you are bombing our brothers and sisters in Afghanistan. And how dare you send greetings to Muslims while you are supporting Israel, the most vicious and evil nation of the modern era." Another Al Shabab video from 2009 showed al Amriki preparing an ambush against Ethiopian forces and featured English rap lyrics intercut with scenes of his rag-tag band traipsing through the African bush.¹¹

The chances of getting killed in the Somalia were quite high for the couple of dozen or so Americans who volunteered to fight there; in addition to the two men who conducted suicide operations, six other Somali-Americans aged between 18 and 30 were killed in Somalia between 2007 and 2009 as well as Ruben Shumpert, an African-American

convert to Islam from Seattle.¹² Given the high death rate of the Americans fighting in Somalia and also the considerable attention that this group has received from the FBI it is quite unlikely that American veterans of the Somali war pose much of a threat to the United States itself. It is however plausible now that Al Shabab has declared itself to be an al Qaeda affiliate that the group might recruit US citizens to engage in anti-American operations overseas.

The fact that American citizens had engaged in suicide operations in Somalia raises the possibility that suicide operations could start taking place in the United States itself; to discount this possibility would be to ignore the lessons of the British experience. On April 30, 2003, two Britons of Pakistani descent walked into Mike's Place, a jazz club near the American Embassy in Tel Aviv, the Israeli capital. Once inside one of the men succeeded in detonating a bomb, killing himself and three bystanders, while the other man fled the scene.¹³ Similarly, Birmingham-born Mohammed Bilal blew himself up outside an army barracks in Indian-held Kashmir in December 2000, killing six Indian soldiers and three Kashmiri students, becoming the first British suicide bomber.¹⁴ Despite these suicide attacks the British security services had concluded after 9/11 that suicide bombings would not be much of a concern in the U.K. itself. Then came the four suicide attackers in London on July 7, 2005, which ended that complacent attitude.

The case of Major Nidal Malik Hasan, a Palestinian-American medical officer and a rigidly observant Muslim who made no secret of his opposition to America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and went on a shooting spree at the giant army base at Fort Hood, Texas on November 5, 2009 killing 13 and wounding many more, seems to have been an attempted suicide operation in which Hassan planned a jihadist "death-by-cop." In the year before his killing spree Major Hasan had made Web postings about suicide operations and the theological justification for the deaths of innocents and was in touch via email with a cleric in Yemen who is an al Qaeda apologist.¹⁵

Early on the morning of the massacre, the deadliest ever on a US military base, Major Hasan was filmed at a convenience store buying his regular snack dressed in white flowing robes. The color white is often associated with martyrdom in Islam, as the dead are wrapped in white winding sheets.¹⁶

In the previous days Major Hasan had given away many of his possessions to his neighbors in the decrepit apartment block they shared, saying that he was leaving for an overseas deployment. Neighbor Lenna Brown recalled, "I asked him where are you going, and he said Afghanistan." Asked how he felt about that, Major Hasan paused before answering: "I am going to do God's work." He gave Brown a Koran before he left for what he believed to be his last day on earth.¹⁷

As he opened fire in a room full of fellow soldiers who were filling out paperwork for their deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq, Hasan shouted at the top of his lungs *Allah Akbar!* God is Great!, the battle cry of Muslim warriors down the centuries.¹⁸

Major Hasan is a social misfit who never married, largely avoided women (except, apparently, strippers)¹⁹ and had few friends, while the psychiatric counseling he gave to wounded veterans when he worked at Walter Reed Medical Army Center in Washington DC might have contributed to a sense of impending doom about his own deployment to Afghanistan. But while Hasan was undoubtedly something of an oddball, in what he assumed to be his final days he seems to have conceived of himself as a holy warrior intent on martyrdom. Hasan survived being shot by a police officer and was put in intensive care in a hospital in San Antonio, Texas. After he woke up he found himself not in Paradise but paralyzed from the waist down and being interrogated by investigators to whom he has so far divulged nothing about the motivations for his rampage.

For Americans fired up by jihadist ideology, US soldiers fighting two wars in Muslim countries were particularly inviting targets. Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, an African-American convert to Islam, shot up a US military recruiting station in Little Rock, Arkansas a few months before Hasan's murderous spree, killing an American soldier and wounding another. Despite the fact that the FBI had had him under surveillance following a mysterious trip that he had recently taken to Yemen, Muhammad was able to acquire guns and attack the recruiting station in broad daylight. When Muhammad was arrested in his vehicle police found a rifle with a laser sight, a revolver, ammunition and the makings of Molotov cocktails.²⁰ (The middle name that Muhammad assumed after his conversion to Islam, Mujahid or "holy warrior," should have been a red flag, as this is a far from a common name among Muslims.)

A group of some half dozen American citizens and residents of the small town of Willow Creek, North Carolina led by a charismatic convert to Islam, Daniel Boyd, who had fought in the jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviets, are also alleged to have had some kind of plan to attack American soldiers. Starting in 2008 Boyd purchased eight rifles and a revolver and members of his group did paramilitary training on two occasions in the summer of 2009. According to federal prosecutors, members of Boyd's cell conceived of themselves as potential participants in overseas jihads from Israel to Pakistan. And Boyd obtained maps of Quantico Marine Base in Virginia, which he cased for a possible attack on June 12, 2009. He also allegedly possessed armor-piercing ammunition saying it was "to attack Americans" and said that one of his weapons would be used "for the base," an apparent reference to the Quantico facility.²¹

Similarly, in 2007 a group of observant Muslims, a mix of Albanians, a Turk and a Palestinian, living in southern New Jersey angered by the Iraq War told a government informant they had a plan to kill soldiers stationed at the Ft. Dix Army Base. One of the group made an amateur mistake when he went to a Circuit City store and asked for a video to be transferred to DVD. On the DVD a number of young men were shown shooting assault weapons and shouting *Allah Akbar!* during a January 2006 training session.²² An alarmed clerk at the Circuit City store alerted his superiors and quickly the FBI became involved in the case and an informant was inserted inside the group.

One of the plotters, Serdar Tatar, knew the base well because he made deliveries there from his family's pizza parlor, Super Mario's Pizza. The Fort Dix plotters assembled a

number of rifles and pistols and regularly conducted firearms training in the Pocono mountains of Pennsylvania and also went on paintball trips together, a common form of bonding for jihadist militants. The plotters also looked into purchasing an array of automatic weapons.²³ And on August 11 2006 the ringleader, Mohamad Shnewer, conducted surveillance of the Ft. Dix base telling the government informant: “This is exactly what we are looking for. You hit four, five, six Humvees and light the whole place [up] and retreat completely without any losses.”²⁴

Another group that planned to attack US military installations was led by Kevin Lamar James, an African-American convert to Islam who formed a group dedicated to holy war while he was jailed in California’s Folsom prison during the late ‘90s. James, who viewed his outfit as ‘al Qaeda in California,’ cooked up a plan to recruit five people, in particular those without criminal records, to help him with his plans. One of his recruits had a job at Los Angeles Airport (LAX), which James thought could be useful. In a list he made of potential targets James listed LAX, the Israeli consulate in Los Angeles, a US Army base in Manhattan Beach and “Army recruiting centers throughout the country.”²⁵

James’ crew planned to attack a US military recruiting station in L.A. on the fourth anniversary of 9/11 as well as a synagogue a month later during Yom Kippur, the most solemn of Jewish holidays. They financed their activities by sticking up gas stations and their plans only came to light during the course of a routine investigation of a gas station robbery by police in Torrance, California who found documents that laid out their plans for jihadist mayhem.

The constellation of terrorism cases that surfaced during the second Bush term and during Obama’s first year in office suggests that a small minority of Americans Muslims are not immune to the al Qaeda ideological virus. And quite a number of those terrorism cases were more *operational* than *aspirational*, unlike many of the domestic terror cases that had preceded them following 9/11. The jihadists in these cases were not just *talking* about violent acts to a government informant but had actually traveled to an al Qaeda training camp; had fought in an overseas jihad; had purchased guns or explosives; were casing targets, and in a couple of the cases, had actually killed Americans.

The cases in the past few years have also presented an interesting mix of purely ‘homegrown’ militants who are essentially lone wolves like Major Hasan and Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, who nonetheless both were able to pull off deadly attacks against US military targets; ‘self-starting’ radicals with no connections to al Qaeda but inspired by its ideas, like the Torrance cell who posed a serious threat to Jewish and military targets in the United States and whose plans for mass mayhem were, crucially, not driven forward by an informant; homegrown militants opting to fight in an overseas jihad with an al Qaeda affiliate as the Somali-Americans recruits to Al Shabab have done; militants like David Headley who is alleged to have played an important operational role for the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is acting today with an increasingly al Qaeda-like agenda, and finally those like Zazi and Vinas who managed to plug directly into al Qaeda central.

According to the forthcoming study by New York University's Center on Law & Security since 9/11 the government has charged or convicted at least 20 Americans and foreigners who have direct connections to al Qaeda and were conspiring with the group to carry out some type of attack; a further nine have attended one of al Qaeda's training camps but did not have an operational terrorist plan, and a further two dozen "homegrown" militants aspired to help al Qaeda in some other way but were either ensnared by a government informant or simply failed to connect with the group because of their own incompetence.

This raises the question of what kind of exact threat to the homeland is posed by this cohort of militants who run the gamut from incompetent 'homegrown' to American citizens who have been trained by al Qaeda itself?

If the government's allegations are correct and Zazi had managed to carry out his plans, he could have killed scores of Americans as his plan looks similar to that of the al Qaeda-directed bombers in London who killed 52 commuters on July 7, 2005 with the same kind of hydrogen peroxide-based bombs that Zazi was assembling in his Denver motel room. But the Zazi case also represents the outer limit of al Qaeda's capabilities in the United States today.

Some have suggested that the reason that al Qaeda has not attacked the United States again is because the group is waiting to match or top the 9/11 attacks. Michael Scheuer, the former head of CIA's Bin Laden unit, has said that, "They're not interested in an attack that is the same size as the last one."²⁶ This proposition cannot be readily tested, as the absence of a 9/11-scale attack on the United States is, in this view, supposedly just more evidence for the assertion that al Qaeda is planning something on the scale of 9/11 or larger. In fact, the Zazi case forcefully demonstrates that al Qaeda is not waiting to launch "the big one" but is content to get any kind of terrorist operation going in the United States, even a relatively small-bore attack.

Indeed, it is my assessment that the al Qaeda organization today no longer poses a direct national security threat to the United States itself, but rather poses a second-order threat in which the worst case scenario would be an al Qaeda-trained or -inspired terrorist managing to pull off an attack on the scale of something in between the 1993 Trade Center attack, which killed six, and the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995, which killed 168. While this, of course, would be tragic, it would not constitute a mass casualty attack sufficiently large in scale to reorient American national security policy completely as the 9/11 attacks did.

An important element in al Qaeda's much degraded capability to launch a mass casualty attack on the American homeland is the pressure it is under in Pakistan; including ramped-up US drone attacks in the Pakistani tribal regions where the group is headquartered; far better intelligence on the militants based in those tribal areas, and increasingly negative Pakistani public and governmental attitudes towards militant jihadist groups based in Pakistan.

There are, however, three important caveats on the success of the drone operations: First, the Afghan-American Najibullah Zazi was still able to receive training on explosives from al Qaeda in the tribal regions of Pakistan during the fall of 2009 *after* the drone program had been dramatically ramped up there. Second, militant organizations like al Qaeda are not like an organized crime family, which can be put out of business if most or all of the members of the family are captured or killed. Al Qaeda has sustained and can continue to sustain enormous blows that would put other organizations out of business because the members of the group firmly believe that they are doing God's work and tactical setbacks do not matter in the short run. Third, it is highly unlikely that the drone program will be expanded outside of the tribal regions into other areas of Pakistan because of intense Pakistani opposition to such a move. Understanding that fact, some militants have undoubtedly moved into safer parts of Pakistan.

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The threat posed by al Qaeda to American interests and allies overseas continues to be somewhat high. Despite all the pressure placed on al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan since 9/11, training has continued in Pakistan's tribal areas and is the common link between the terrorist group's "successes" and its near-misses since then; for instance, the deadliest terrorist attack in British history -- the four suicide bombings on London's transportation system on July 7, 2005 -- was directed by al Qaeda from the tribal regions.

The four bombs that detonated in London on what became known as 7/7 were all hydrogen peroxide-based devices. This has become something of a signature of plots that have a connection to Pakistani training camps. Two weeks after the 7/7 attacks on July 21, 2005 there was a second wave of hydrogen peroxide-based bombs set off in London, this one organized by a cell of Somali and Eritrean men who were first-generation immigrants to the U.K. Luckily the bombs were ineffective.

Hydrogen peroxide-based bombs would again be the signature of a cell of British Pakistanis who plotted to bring down seven passenger jets flying to the United States and Canada from the U.K. during the summer of 2006. The plotters distilled hydrogen peroxide to manufacture liquid explosives, which they assembled in an apartment-turned-bomb factory in East London. The case resulted in the immediate ban of all carry-on liquids and gels, and rules were later put in place to limit the amounts of these items that travelers could bring on planes.

The 'planes plot' conspirators were arrested in August 2006 and in subsequent congressional testimony Lieutenant General Michael Maples, the head of the US Defense Intelligence Agency, said the plot was "directed by al Qaeda leadership in Pakistan."²⁷

During the trial of the eight men accused in the 'planes plot' the prosecution argued that some 1,500 passengers would have died if all seven planes had been brought down. The plot, which was entering its final stages in the summer of 2006, seemed designed to "celebrate" the upcoming fifth anniversary of 9/11 by once again targeting commercial

aviation, another particular obsession of al Qaeda. Most of the victims of the attacks would have been Americans, Britons, and Canadians.

The seriousness of the intent of the plotters can be seen in the fact that six of them made “martyrdom” videotapes recovered by British investigators. At their trial prosecutors played the video made by the ringleader, 25-year-old Abdullah Ahmed Ali. Against a backdrop of a black flag adorned with flowing Arabic script and dressed in a Palestinian-style black-and-white checkered head scarf. Ali lectured into the camera, “Sheikh Osama warned you many times to leave our lands or you will be destroyed. Now the time has come for you to be destroyed.”²⁸

In September Ali and two of his co-conspirators were found guilty of planning to blow up the transatlantic airliners. Some of the key evidence against them was emails they had exchanged with their handler in Pakistan Rashid Rauf, a British citizen who has worked closely with al Qaeda, who ordered them “to get a move on” with their operation in an email he sent them on July 25, 2006.²⁹ Those emails were intercepted by American spy agencies which led to the arrests of Ali and his cell.

Pakistan’s tribal regions have continued to attract Westerners intent on inflicting jihadist mayhem against American targets, like the two Germans and a Turk residing in Germany who were planning to bomb the massive US Ramstein airbase there in 2007. Before their arrests, the men had obtained 1,600 pounds of industrial strength hydrogen peroxide, enough to make a number of large bombs.

Today the al Qaeda the organization continues to pose a substantial threat to US interests overseas and could still pull off an attack that would kill hundreds of Americans as was the plan during the ‘planes plot’ of 2006. No Western country is more threatened by al Qaeda than the United Kingdom, although a spate of arrests and successful prosecutions over the past four years have degraded the terrorist’s group’s capability in the UK.

Despite the relatively serious terror cases emerging in the United States in 2008 and 2009 America did not have a jihadist terrorism problem anywhere on the scale of Britain where an al Qaeda-directed cell had launched the deadliest terrorist attack in British history in 2005, and where four years later British intelligence had identified as many as 2,000 citizens or residents who posed a “serious” threat to security, many of whom were linked to al Qaeda, in a country with only a fifth of the population of the United States.³⁰

Why is the threat from al Qaeda lower in the United States than it is in the United Kingdom? There is little doubt that some of the measures the Bush administration and Congress took after 9/11 made Americans safer. First, the Patriot Act accomplished something quite important, which was to break down the legal “wall” that had been blocking the flow of information between the CIA and the FBI. Second, the creation of the National Counter Terrorism Center led to various government agencies sharing data and analyzing it under one roof. (Although it should be noted that the center was the brainchild of the 9/11 Commission -- whose establishment the Bush administration fought tooth-and-nail for more than a year.) Third, it became much harder for terrorists to

get into the country thanks to no-fly lists. Before 9/11 the total number of suspected terrorists banned from air travel totaled just 16 names; while six years later there were at least 44,000.³¹

The most dramatic instance of how the no-fly list prevented potential terrorists from arriving in the United States was the case of Raed al Banna – a 32 year old Jordanian English-speaking lawyer who was denied entry at Chicago's O'Hare airport on 14 June 2003 because border officials detected "multiple terrorist risk factors." A year and half later al Banna conducted a suicide bombing in Hilla, Iraq on 28 February 2005 that killed 132 people—his fingerprints were found on the severed hand chained to the steering wheel of his bomb-filled truck.³²

Finally, cooperation between U.S. and foreign intelligence agencies has been generally strong after September 11. For instance, al Qaeda's 2006 plot to bring down the seven American and Canadian airliners was disrupted by the joint work of U.S., British, and Pakistani intelligence services.

That said, a key reason the United States escaped a serious terrorist attack has little to do with either the Bush or Obama administrations. In sharp contrast to Muslim populations in European countries like Britain -- where al Qaeda has found recruits for multiple serious terrorist plots -- the American Muslim community has largely rejected the ideological virus of militant Islam. The 'American Dream' has generally worked well for Muslims in the United States, who are both better-educated and wealthier than the average American. More than a third of Muslim Americans have a graduate degree or better, compared to less than 10% of the population as a whole.³³

For European Muslims there is no analogous "British Dream," "French Dream," or, needless to say, "EU Dream." None of this is to say that the limited job opportunities and segregation that are the lot of many European Muslims are the *causes* of terrorism in Europe--only that such conditions may create favorable circumstances in which al Qaeda can recruit and feed into bin Laden's master narrative that the infidel West is at war with Muslims in some shape or form all around the world. And, in the absence of those conditions militant Islam has never gained much of an American foothold--largely sparing the United States from the scourge of homegrown terrorism. This is fundamentally a testament to American pluralism, not any action of the American government.

An important caveat: Some of the men drawn to jihad in America in recent years looked much like their largely disadvantaged and poorly integrated European Muslim counterparts. The Afghan-American al Qaeda recruit, Najibullah Zazi, a high school dropout, earned his living as an airport shuttle bus driver; the Somali-American community in the Cedar Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis where some of the young men who volunteered to fight in Somalia had lived, is largely ghettoized. Family incomes there average less than \$15,000 a year and the unemployment rate is 17%.³⁴ Bryant Neal Vinas, the kid from Long Island who volunteered for a suicide mission with al Qaeda, skipped college, washed out of the US Army after three weeks and later

became a truck driver, a job he quit for good in 2007.³⁵ The five men in the Fort Dix cell were all illegal immigrants who supported themselves with construction or delivery jobs.

Decades ago the anger and disappointments of some of these men might have been funneled into revolutionary anti-American movements like the Weather Underground or Black Panthers. Today, militant jihadism provides a similar outlet for the rage of young men with its false promises of a total explication of the world, which is grafted on to a profound hatred for the West, in particular, the United States.

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¹ This section draws on my piece in The New Republic, "The Front," October 19, 2009. <http://www.tnr.com/article/world/the-front>. Also USA v. Najibullah Zazi, Eastern District of New York, Indictment. http://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/1063.pdf and Michael Wilson, "From smiling coffee vendor to terror suspect," New York Times, September 25, 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/26/nyregion/26profile.html>.

² Anne Kornblut, "Obama team says Zazi case illustrates balanced approach to terror threat," Washington Post, October 6, 2009. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/10/05/AR2009100503989.html>

³ Interview with Bruce Hoffman, Washington, DC, September 2009

⁴ USA vs Najibullah Zazi, Eastern District of New York, 09-CR-663 Memorandum of law in support of the government's motion for a permanent order of detention (Via IntelWire).

⁵ USA vs Bryant Neal Vinas, Eastern District Court of New York 08-CR-823. <http://intelfiles.egoplex.com/2009-07-22-Bryant-Neal-Vinas-Court-Docs.pdf>. He pled guilty on January 28, 2009 to the charges against him.

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