



## Briefing Cycle: Strategic Global Issues 2009-11-06



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### UNITED STATES

**Issue:** The US security and intelligence community is signaling increasing concern around smaller-scale terrorist plots, acknowledging that the level of threat may surpass that associated with larger 9-11 style operations. This reassessment is being driven largely by a number of recent cases. Most prominent among these are the cases of David Coleman Headley, who was well-connected to militants in Europe and Afghanistan, as well as Najibullah Zazi, a Denver-based limousine driver from Afghanistan, who was accused of plotting to set off explosive devices in New York City.

Another case involves a group of Somali-American teenagers in Minneapolis who traveled to Somali and joined the al Shabab insurgency. This latter case is particularly interesting from a Canadian perspective, given the numbers of foreign fighters who are turning up in Somalia and possible impacts on the large Somali community in Canada.

**Comment:** Until recently, the United States has based its assessment of the terrorist threat on the “9/11 paradigm”: large scale, mass casualty attacks by foreign-based actors. Despite repeated alarms, however, there has been no follow-on to 9/11. This, in turn, suggests that the events of that day may not have been so much the harbinger of a new paradigm as they were a means for al Qaeda to establish its credibility as a global actor.

The new US assessment recognizes the reality of the threat from small scale terrorist operations and, more importantly, seems to acknowledge domestic radicalization leading to terrorist action as a genuine threat to the US homeland.

This is an important development. Despite the dissenting views of terrorism experts like Marc Sageman, who has characterized the domestic threat as paramount, US authorities have tended to discount domestic radicalization of young Muslims as a non-issue in the United States.

This dismissal is based on an assumption that US Muslims are well-integrated into American society and largely disinterested in homeland issues. The “homegrown” plots that have been uncovered to date do not fit the “9/11 paradigm”: they have been small scale and the plotters young and seemingly unsophisticated. Therefore, they have not been deemed serious threats.

To some degree, this assessment has been influenced by larger policy and ideological issues. The United States is the focus of Islamist extremist rage the world over. However, the simplistic portrayal of US Muslims as “good Americans,” happily availing themselves of all of the liberties and privileges of American life, effectively dismisses this rage as a factor in the United States itself.

This in turn lends credence to a “they hate us for who we are, not for what we do” interpretation of global Islamist extremism. It also lends credence to a military, hard power response to the problem, rather than the investigation- and prosecution-based law enforcement response advocated by Sageman and others.



Just as importantly, the assumption that radicalization is not a problem in the United States, permits the phenomenon to be cast as a “foreign” problem that ultimately threatens US homeland security. Canada has been very much part of this narrative. In the past, for example, official US documentation has characterized Canadian Pakistani communities as isolated and ghettoized. US assessments have also drawn parallels between domestic Islamist extremism in Canada and the United Kingdom.

The official acknowledgement of domestic radicalization, while certainly driven by current events, may signal a fresh approach to terrorism on the part of the new US administration. From a US perspective, it is an approach that will demand a new understanding of terrorism, and of the challenges associated with detecting and stopping “homegrown” terrorist conspiracies.

As above, the “hard power” response to counterterrorism is not tenable in a homeland environment. Local law enforcement will ultimately have to be much more actively engaged. And smaller scale plots have implications for deployment of police resources. They are harder to detect than major conspiracies, they involve fewer people, and take less time to move from conception to action.

The RCMP has a great deal of experience with domestic radicalization and the Canadian security intelligence community has produced a tremendous amount of analysis of the problem. Therefore, there is an opportunity here to engage further with US counterparts, and to provide leadership around understanding and addressing domestic Islamist terrorism.



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