Terrorism in the West:
Al-Qaeda's Role in "Homegrown" Terror

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Brown Journal of World Affairs: You have described al-Qaeda as a multi-dimensional entity, with one of those dimensions being the "al-Qaeda network" of radicals with no immediate connection to the group, and another being the "al-Qaeda locals" with material and tactical ties to the group. Do the so-called homegrown terrorist plots that have come to light in the past year comprise an element of al-Qaeda, and if so, are they the work of the al-Qaeda network or of the al-Qaeda locals?

Bruce Hoffman: In Europe most of the plots and actual attacks you're discussing are the work of al-Qaeda locals. In Canada and the United States, the situation is more complicated. The massive plot targeting Toronto that was broken up last May, which involved 18 Canadians and Americans, conforms to the al-Qaeda network model. Of course, this model is also applicable in Europe, for example in the case of individuals like Mohammad Bouyeri, who murdered the Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh in Amsterdam in November 2004. Members of the network are inspired and motivated by al-Qaeda, but have no direct links of any sort: they have never trained in al-Qaeda camps, and they are not following any discernable or identifiable al-Qaeda command and control structure.

But almost all the major incidents in Europe are tied to al-Qaeda more directly. Kamel Bourgass, the so-called "ricin plotter" who was arrested by the British police in January 2003, was undoubtedly an al-Qaeda operative. He was an Algerian national who had trained in al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and was dispatched back to the United Kingdom.

Al-Qaeda also had more direct involvement in the bombings in Istanbul in November 2003. The *Washington Post* recently described the group's role, including $10,000 of seed money provided by Osama bin Laden. The bombers were radical Muslim Turks who sought al-Qaeda sponsorship. Bin Laden gave them the funding and assigned Mohammad Atef, who was then the al-Qaeda military operations chief, to help plan the attack. Atef led the attackers, who originally targeted a Turkish business association, to focus on the U.S. consulate instead. But the U.S. consulate had been moved to a remote location, so then they chose the British consulate, HSBC bank, and two synagogues. The financier for the rest of the operation was a Syrian national who was a senior lieutenant of al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi's organization—thus again underscoring how this was not a homegrown attack by radicalized Muslims acting entirely on their own, but something more conspiratorial with professional terrorists from al-Qaeda and Zarqawi's group involved.

The plot that the British authorities broke up in April 2004, for which they used the codename Operation Crevice, involved six British Muslims of Pakistani descent. Originally it was believed that they were planning to attack London infrastructure: the Underground and electricity switching stations. In the end the group and their leader, Omar Kyam, were only indicted on plotting to attack a shopping mall or a nightclub, but you don't stockpile 1,300 pounds of ammonium nitrate to blow up a nightclub. I think the evidence the British could introduce easily in court was limited by the need to avoid compromising British intelligence sources and methods. But Omar Kyam is believed to have trained at al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, and according to some sources, bin Laden himself reportedly directly blessed this operation.

Then you have the 7/7/05 bombings in London. The investigation by the House of Commons Parliamentary Committee on Intelligence and Security—of course, that was an open source report, so they were very careful in their language—said indisputably that Mohammad Sidique Khan, the ringleader, had made two trips to Pakistan in 2003, and then again between November 2004 and February 2005. He and a fellow bomber received training at Pakistani jihadi camps, and it is now strongly believed that they received training at al-Qaeda camps in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan. The report concluded that until the attack they were in regular contact with other radical elements both in the United Kingdom and abroad that doubtlessly facilitated the attack. The ringleader of the group behind the 7/21 attempted bomb-

ings, who was also involved in 7/7, is an Ethiopian émigré named Mukhtar Ibrahim. He was also known to have gone to Pakistan to train.

And then you have the plot from this past summer to simultaneously crash ten planes en route from London to the United States into U.S. cities. First, that is a textbook al-Qaeda plot from 1994 and 1995 involving Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, the 9/11 attacks' mastermind, and his nephew, Ramzi Ahmed Yusef, the mastermind of the first World Trade Center attack. Second, the case was broken when Pakistani authorities arrested Rashid Rauf, a British Muslim of Pakistani origin who is believed to be a close associate of Abu Faraj al Libbi, who at one time was the number three leader of al-Qaeda, now detained by the United States.

Journal: But when a clear blueprint for the attack has been publicly available since the plot you just mentioned—Oplan Bojinka in 1995—isn't it possible for a radicalized group without direct strategic or tactical ties to "al-Qaeda central" to carry out an attack of that scale?

Hoffman: Well to get the idea for the attack, yes, because it was publicized. But it would not be possible for average al-Qaeda network members to fabricate the necessary explosives from ordinary, commercially-available, easily-procured materials. Contrary to media depictions and popular belief, and despite the ready availability of the necessary materials, you have to know what you're doing to produce explosives. The hydrogen peroxide that is used in HMTD [hexamethylene triperoxide diamine], which was the main explosive ingredient in the 7/7 bombings is a good example. Recipes for this explosive are readily available; I have easily found them online. But even though the recipes are sound, there are other obstacles. The hydrogen peroxide used is not just the drugstore kind you use to bleach your hair. In order to obtain the right concentration, either you need access to industrial quantities of the right formula or you have to know how to strengthen it. The 2006 translatlantic aircraft attack would have also involved another explosive generator, TATP [triacetone triperoxide], altogether. These two types of explosives are enormously complex to make if they are to be really effective and they are also very dangerous to handle: you have to know what you are doing. Even Ramzi Ahmed Yusef, who in the dry run for the Bojinka plot blew a hole in an airliner en route to Japan, did not handle these explosives properly. When he was making the mother load supply to use in Bojinka, he inadvertently started a fire and burned himself.

Journal: That was how the plot was discovered and prevented.

Hoffman: Right. This is one reason the 7/7 attacks succeeded and the 7/21 attacks did

not. At least two of the 7/7 bombers, Shehzad Tanweer and Mohammad Sidique Khan, actually went to Pakistan where they received hands-on instruction. Even though one of the 7/21 plotters also had trained there, he apparently was not as skilled.

It is conceivable that 18 college kids in London this summer might have planned to simultaneously attack ten airliners and crash them into U.S. targets. But historically, simultaneous attacks of that magnitude have been extremely rare.

In Washington we often debate the metrics of success in the War on Terrorism, and we have yet to come up with a satisfactory answer. It is very clear that the jihadis and al-Qaeda came up with that answer a long time ago: it is simultaneity, the ability to carry out more than one attack at a time. So this summer's plot tracks so closely to al-Qaeda's modus operandi that I would be surprised if we don't find out that there is al-Qaeda involvement. Because of British laws and concerns about pre-trial prejudice—prejudicing a trial because of pre-trial release of information from the media for example—very little is released publicly.

Journal: So how much do radicals of the al-Qaeda network matter before they are activated by strategic or tactical instruction from al-Qaeda?

Hoffman: The threat posed by the network is far smaller than that of traditional al-Qaeda. They are less knowledgeable amateurs, but they pose a unique problem. Because they are not part of actual terrorist groups, members of the network are much more difficult to identify and track. They have no terrorist record, no modus operandi, and no connections to known terrorists.

But the more important concern is that the process of radicalization is being harnessed by al-Qaeda agents, primarily in Europe, that seek to exploit radical converts for terrorist purposes. Yet this is exactly how al-Qaeda has operated for at least the past decade or more. The 1993 World Trade Center bombing, though not an al-Qaeda operation, certainly involved al-Qaeda elements. Ramzi Ahmed Yusef and Abu Rahman Yasin were the two professional terrorists who came to New York and recruited locals who then helped them and even carried out the actual attacks. Ramzi Ahmed Yusef and Abu Rahman Yasin were on the plane out of there the same day. Al-Qaeda professionals also developed a group of radical locals to perpetrate the 1998 East Africa embassy bombings. The London bombings followed the same pattern: an al-Qaeda operative, Mohammed Sidique Khan, recruited Shehzad Tanweer and then the other two bombers, Hassib Hussain and Germaine Lindsay. So I think the real threat we face is al-Qaeda sleeper agents—al-Qaeda locals who are already in place and taking advantage of this radicalization to recruit the radicals for terrorist attacks.

In these so-called homegrown attacks we have consistently seen evidence of not

just radicals, or self-selected individuals who are frustrated or angry, but of people with some previous contact with al-Qaeda.

Mohammad Sidique Khan exemplifies this pattern. British authorities have known for some years that more than 3,000 British Muslims had left the United Kingdom in the late 1990s to train in al-Qaeda camps. Mohammad Sidique Khan likely gives us some indication of what happened in those camps. According to the Parliamentary reports, in the days after the attack, when Khan's face was on every British newspaper's front page, a reliable informant told the British internal security service, MI5, that he recognized Khan as a fellow trainee in an Afghan al-Qaeda camp in 1999 or 2000. Senior Spanish government officials have told me that after the British told them about the 3,000 British Muslims who trained in al Qaeda camps before 9/11, the Spanish did their own count and found upwards of 1,000 Spanish Muslims who left Spain before 9/11 to train in al-Qaeda camps, and then returned to Spain.

Journal: You and others have described the tactical success of 9/11 as an empowering image for jihadis. But what explains the appeal of the jihadi message, as it is preached by either al-Qaeda operatives or Internet radicals, in assimilating Western youth? What are the galvanizing discontentments that lead to radicalization?

Hoffman: The answer is clear in the martyrdom tapes of Mohammed Sidique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer. Both say that they don't see themselves as we see them. They see themselves not as terrorists, but as soldiers defending Islam from aggression. They evoke a war on Islam waged by the West, and championed by the United States and United Kingdom. The significant point they both make is that they don't see themselves as British, or even British Muslims. They consider themselves members of the *ummah*, the worldwide Muslim community.

9/11 has indeed empowered bin Laden's message that one person, through a spectacular act of violence, can change the course of history. This is a timeless terrorist conceit that bin Laden has very successfully harnessed, promising would-be recruits not only heaven, but also the chance to achieve something historically significant like the 19 hijackers did on 9/11. Despite the indisputably malevolent nature of their act, the 19 hijackers did indeed change the course of history; of that there is no doubt. And that is precisely the kind of hubris that bin Laden seeks to instill in his followers. The prospects and potentialities of asymmetric violence—using limited acts of violence such as terrorism to have a disproportionate impact on society—is also alluring to frustrated youth of any background.

Of course, the Iraq War has also furthered radicalization in the West. It is not my conclusion alone: the publicly released Key Judgment section of the National Intelligence

Estimate of last September said that Iraq has had an enormous radicalizing effect.

Journal: Some scholars have said that the United States is insulated against radicalization because of its better integration of religious and ethnic minorities. But if the jihadi message focuses on a state of siege against the *ummah* rather than domestic alienation and discrimination, is this recruitment tactic as effective here as it is in Europe?

Hoffman: Better integration did not matter in the case of the 7/7 bombers. Khan and Shehzad Tanweer both had university degrees, Tanweer drove a red Mercedes, and his father was one of the wealthiest people in their otherwise poor community. His recruitment certainly had more to do with the *ummah* under siege. Of course, Europe also has a stronger precedent for domestic terrorism. European terrorists have killed heads of state and waged long, bloody terrorist campaigns far worse than those witnessed in the United States.

Journal: Al-Qaeda is alarmingly resurgent in North Waziristan and elsewhere. What do you expect to be the dynamic in Islamist recruitment and radicalization as al-Qaeda central strengthens itself?

Hoffman: Irrespective of al-Qaeda central's strength, there are likely very few al-Qaeda locals or al-Qaeda central agents in the United States, simply because there was less traffic between here and the al-Qaeda camps during the 1990s—at least that we know of. For instance, no U.S. intelligence or law enforcement official has ever claimed that upwards of 3,000 Americans trained in al-Qaeda camps before 9/11 as their British counterparts have. Americans who have become involved with al-Qaeda, unlike British citizens, are few and far between. The alleged dirty bomber Jose Padilla, Ayman Farris, who targeted the Brooklyn Bridge—we only face a small number of people that will allow al-Qaeda to gain traction in the United States. I suspect there are cells in the United States, but I don't think there is a robust infrastructure. If there were, why would al-Qaeda take the trouble of inserting a London cell into the United States to redo pre–9/11 surveillance and come back again to carry out the attack?

Journal: Another major line of questioning that appears in this issue of the *Journal* is how to handle the amount of terrorist propaganda on the Internet, and how specifically to treat jihadi websites. There is a debate between shutting them down, or monitoring and manipulating them. Does the United States have the resources to do the latter? What is the right approach?

Hoffman: We can shut websites down, but wherever we do, others will emerge to take their place. It may also be useful to harass them and frustrate their efforts, but that is not an adequate solution. Interestingly, there are private initiatives to monitor and undermine radical websites. For example the SITE Institute [the Search for International Terrorist Entities], MEMRI [Middle East Media Research Institute], and Evan Kohlmann all provide information that would not otherwise be readily accessible to governments and law enforcement.

Terrorist reliance on the Internet enables us to understand jihadis, but only if a sincere effort is made to analyze their mindset and ideology. It is very concerning, though, that just a few years ago we regarded the Internet as an engine of education and enlightenment. Instead terrorists have exploited the Internet as an effective means of peddling their message, including the most coarse and base conspiracy theories—ones that are completely devoid of truth but, because of their ubiquity and repetition on the net, have assumed a veracity divorced from reality. Professor Gabriel Weimann of the University of Haifa, probably the world's leading authority on terrorist use of the Internet, says that at last count there are 5,200 terrorist or insurgent websites operating. The number has grown exponentially since 9/11, and has jumped by more than a thousand in the last two years or so. More alarming, conventional counterterrorism efforts have not addressed the problem.

Journal: In this issue of the *Journal,* Frank Cilluffo of the Homeland Security Institute at George Washington University advocates the government trying to participate in jihadi web groups, manipulating what is being said and sowing mistrust among the members. What do you think about the possibilities for that?

Hoffman: Information operations are extremely difficult; they have to be done clandestinely, and this strategy might border on influencing not only potential terrorist web sites, but also legitimate news media. If we are to engage in these activities, we need to start with a far better knowledge than currently exists of both our enemy and the target audiences whom we need to reach with our messages. At the beginning of the Vietnam War, for instance, the Pentagon undertook a massive effort to understand the morale and motivation of the NVA and the Viet Cong. They allowed us to understand how enemy recruitment, group cohesion, and leadership developed.

Similarly, during the 1980s, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty surveyed over 200,000 people with intimate knowledge of countries behind the Iron Curtain to develop a profile of their citizens and effective means to communicate with them. We really have not even tried a similar effort to allow us to counter the terrorist message in the West. At present the only comparable efforts in the United States are undertaken by

specific agencies that have the proper jurisdiction, but they are neither well-sponsored nor centrally organized.

Journal: What other policy prescriptions should Western countries consider to undermine the threat of domestic radicals carrying out attacks?

Hoffman: Over the past five years we have devoted the majority of our preparedness resources to building up the federal government's capacity to respond to both terrorism and natural disasters. Over the next five years we need to devote equal attention to enhancing local disaster response capacity. Local law enforcement officers who come from a community that may be vulnerable to terrorist penetration and concealment may be more likely to have the necessary linguistic skills to handle the investigation. The New York City Police Department, for example, has 267 certified linguists in Arabic, Farsi, Hindu, Dari, and Pashto. Fewer than 1 percent of FBI agents, so around 33 agents, have any proficiency in Arabic, so local law enforcement is a tremendous resource. Community policing is also generally more effective with respect to basic investigations in any neighborhood. A local police officer known to a community is more likely to be trusted than an anonymous federal officer whom no one in the community knows. So we should devote more resources to training local law enforcement to assist in preventing terrorism and building strong community relations. This training should entail proper respect for civil liberties, and proper understanding of the intelligence cycle and the contribution that local law enforcement can make in counterterrorism. The British have effectively learned this lesson, and we should as well.

Journal: You have described the logic of suicide bombing as "self-reinforcing." That is, people are more likely to commit attacks after being exposed to them personally or through the media. As the visibility of this terrorist tactic has increased in the past several years, should we expect terrorists in the West to rely on it more?

Hoffman: Actually, it is possible that our adversaries are moving away from suicide bombing as a primary tactic. Think of Iraq: despite the attention on suicide bombings, the main insurgent weapons are IED's [improvised explosive devices], remote-control mortars, and indirect fire from rockets. Even this past summer in south Lebanon, Hezbollah did not use suicide bombers. There were 4,000 missiles fired at northern Israel. But suicide bombing remains appealing because it typically claims more lives than conventional attacks. Also, for many suicide bombers martyrdom is an important motivation. Yet terrorism is always evolving, and we should not fixate on any single tactic. For example, the 3/11 Madrid attacks were not suicide bombings. The attack-

ers were willing to die; when they were surrounded in Leganés in early April 2004 they committed suicide to avoid capture. Yet they prioritized the ability to carry out a sustained terrorist campaign. We should not think that suicide attacks will necessarily be the main or even most consequential attack that could be launched on the United States in the future.