By Scott Stewart

One of the things we like to do in our Global Security and Intelligence Report from time to time is examine the convergence of a number of separate and unrelated developments and then analyze that convergence and craft a forecast. In recent months we have seen such a convergence occur.

The most recent development is the interview with the American-born Yemeni cleric Anwar al-Awlaki that was released to jihadist Internet chat rooms May 23 by al-Malahim Media, the public relations arm of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In the interview, al-Awlaki encouraged strikes against American civilians. He also has been tied to Maj. Nidal Hasan, who was charged in the November 2009 Fort Hood shooting, and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the perpetrator of the failed Christmas Day 2009 airline bombing. And al-Awlaki reportedly helped inspire Faisal Shahzad, who was arrested in connection with the attempted Times Square attack in May.

The second link in our chain is the failed Christmas Day and Times Square bombings themselves. They are the latest in a long string of failed or foiled bombing attacks directed against the United States that date back to before the 9/11 attacks and include the thwarted 1997 suicide bomb plot against a subway in New York, the thwarted December 1999 Millennium Bomb plot and numerous post-9/11 attacks such as Richard Reid's December 2001 shoe-bomb attempt, the August 2004 plot to bomb the New York subway system and the May 2009 plot to bomb two Jewish targets in the Bronx and shoot down a military aircraft. Indeed, jihadists have not conducted a successful bombing attack inside the United States since the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Getting a trained bombmaker into the United States has proved to be increasingly difficult for jihadist groups, and training a novice to make bombs has also been problematic as seen in the Shahzad and Najibullah Zazi cases.

The final link we'd like to consider are the calls in the past few months for jihadists to conduct simple attacks with readily available items. This call was first made by AQAP leader Nasir al-Wahayshi in October 2009 and then echoed by al Qaeda prime spokesman Adam Gadahn in March of 2010. In the Times Square case, Shahzad did use readily available items, but he lacked the ability to effectively fashion them into a viable explosive device.

When we look at all these links together, there is a very high probability that jihadists linked to, or inspired by, AQAP and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) — and perhaps even al Shabaab — will attempt to conduct simple attacks with firearms in the near future.

Threats and Motives

In the May 23 al-Malahim interview (his first with AQAP), al-Awlaki not only said he was proud of the actions of Hasan and Abdulmutallab, whom he referred to as his students, but also

encouraged other Muslims to follow the examples they set by their actions. When asked about the religious permissibility of an operation like Abdulmutallab's, which could have killed innocent civilians, al-Awlaki told the interviewer that the term "civilian" was not really applicable to Islamic jurisprudence and that he preferred to use the terms combatants and non-combatants. He then continued by noting that "non-combatants are people who do not take part in the war" but that, in his opinion, "the American people in its entirety takes part in the war, because they elected this administration, and they finance this war." In his final assessment, al-Awlaki said, "If the heroic mujahid brother Umar Farouk could have targeted hundreds of soldiers, that would have been wonderful. But we are talking about the realities of war," meaning that in his final analysis, attacks against civilians were permissible under Islamic law. Indeed, he later noted, "Our unsettled account with America, in women and children alone, has exceeded one million. Those who would have been killed in the plane are a drop in the ocean."

While this line of logic is nearly identical to that historically put forth by Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, the very significant difference is that al-Awlaki is a widely acknowledged Islamic scholar. He speaks with a religious authority that bin Laden and al-Zawahiri simply do not possess.

On May 2, the TTP released a video statement by Hakeemullah Mehsud in which Mehsud claimed credit for the failed Times Square attack. In the recording, which reportedly was taped in early April, Mehsud said that the time was approaching "when our fedayeen [suicide operatives] will attack the American states in their major cities." He also said, "Our fedayeen have penetrated the terrorist America. We will give extremely painful blows to the fanatic America."

While TTP leaders seem wont to brag and exaggerate (e.g., Baitullah Mehsud falsely claimed credit for the April 3, 2009, shooting at an immigration center in Binghamton, N.Y., which was actually committed by a mentally disturbed Vietnamese immigrant), there is ample reason to believe the claims made by the TTP regarding their contact with Shahzad. We can also deduce with some certainty that Mehsud and company have trained other men who have traveled (or returned) to the United States following that training. The same is likely true for AQAP, al Shabaab and other jihadist groups. In fact, the FBI is likely monitoring many such individuals inside the United States at this very moment — and in all likelihood is madly scrambling to find and investigate many others.

Fight Like You Train

There is an old military and law-enforcement training axiom that states, "You will fight like you train." This concept has led to the development of training programs designed to help soldiers and agents not only learn skills but also practice and reinforce those skills until they become second nature. This way, when the student graduates and comes under incredible pressure in the real world — like during an armed ambush — their training will take over and they will react even before their mind can catch up to the rapidly unfolding situation. The behaviors needed to survive have been ingrained into them. This concept has been a problem for the jihadists when it comes to terrorist attacks.

It is important to understand that most of the thousands of men who attend training camps set up by al Qaeda and other jihadist groups are taught the basic military skills required to fight in an insurgency. This means they are provided basic physical training to help condition them, given some hand-to-hand combat training and then taught how to operate basic military hardware like assault rifles, hand grenades and, in some cases, crew-served weapons like machine guns and mortars. Only a very few students are then selected to attend the more advanced training that will teach them the skills required to become a trained terrorist operative.

In many ways, this process parallels the way that special operations forces operators are selected from the larger military population and then sent on for extensive training to transform them into elite warriors. Many people wash out during this type of intense training and only a few will make it all the way through to graduation. The problem for the jihadists is finding someone with the time and will to undergo the intensive training required to become a terrorist operative, the ability to complete the training and — critically — the ability to travel abroad to conduct terrorist attacks against the far enemy. Clearly the jihadist groups are able to train men to fight as insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq, and they have shown the ability to train terrorist operatives who can operate in the fairly permissive environments of places like the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area. They also have some excellent bombmakers and terrorist planners in Iraq and Pakistan.

What the jihadists seem to be having a problem doing is finding people who can master the terrorist tradecraft and who have the ability to travel into hostile areas to ply their craft. There seems to be a clear division between the men who can travel and the men who can master the advanced training. The physical and intelligence onslaught launched against al Qaeda and other jihadist groups following the 9/11 attacks has also created operational security concerns that complicate the ability to find and train effective terrorist operatives.

Of course, we're not telling the jihadists anything they don't already know. This phenomenon is exactly why you have major jihadist figures like al-Wahayshi and Gadahn telling the operatives who can travel to or are already in the West to stop trying to conduct attacks that are beyond their capabilities. Gadahn and al-Awlaki have heaped praise on Maj. Hasan as an example to follow — and this brings us back to armed assaults.

In the United States it is very easy to obtain firearms and it is legal to go to a range or private property to train with them. Armed assaults are also clearly within the skill set of jihadists who have made it only through basic insurgent training. As we've mentioned several times in the past, these grassroots individuals are far more likely to strike the United States and Europe than professional terrorist operatives dispatched from the al Qaeda core group. Such attacks will also allow these grassroots operatives to fight like they have been trained. When you combine all these elements with the fact that the United States is an open society with a lot of very vulnerable soft targets, it is not difficult to forecast that we will see more armed jihadist assaults in the United States in the near future.

Armed Assaults

Armed assaults employing small arms are not a new concept in terrorism by any means. They have proved to be a tried-and-true tactic since the beginning of the modern era of terrorism and have been employed in many famous attacks conducted by a variety of actors. A few examples are the Black September operation against the Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics; the December 1975 seizure of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries headquarters in Vienna, led by Ilich Ramirez Sanchez, aka "Carlos the Jackal"; the December 1985 simultaneous attacks against the airports in Rome and Vienna by the Abu Nidal Organization; and the September 2004 school seizure in Beslan, North Ossetia, by Chechen militants. More recently, the November 2008 armed assault in Mumbai demonstrated how deadly and spectacular such attacks can be.

In some instances — such as the December 1996 seizure of the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima, Peru, by the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement — the objective of the armed assault is to take and intentionally hold hostages for a long period of time. In other instances, such as the May 1972 assault on Lod Airport by members of the Japanese Red Army, the armed assault is planned as a suicide attack designed simply to kill as many people as possible before the assailants themselves are killed or incapacitated. Often attacks fall somewhere in the middle. For example, even though Mumbai became a protracted operation, its planning and execution indicated it was intended as an attack in which the attackers would inflict maximum damage and not be taken alive. It was only due to the good fortune of the attackers and the ineptitude of the Indian security forces that the operation lasted as long as it did.

We discussed above the long string of failed and foiled bombing attacks directed against the United States. During that same time, there have been several armed assaults that have killed people, such as the attack against the El Al ticket counter at the Los Angeles International Airport by Hesham Mohamed Hadayet in July 2002, the shooting attacks by John Muhammed and Lee Boyd Malvo in the Washington area in September and October 2002 and the June 2009 attack in which Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad allegedly shot and killed a U.S. soldier and wounded another outside a Little Rock, Ark., recruiting center. The most successful of these attacks was the November 2009 Fort Hood shooting, which resulted in 13 deaths. These attacks not only resulted in deaths but also received extensive media coverage.

Armed assaults are effective and they can kill people. However, as we have noted before, due to the proficiency of U.S. police agencies and the training their officers have received in active shooter scenarios following school shootings and incidents of workplace violence, the impact of armed assaults will be mitigated in the United States, and Europe as well. In fact, it was an ordinary police officer responding to the scene and instituting an active shooter protocol who shot and wounded Maj. Hasan and brought an end to his attack in the Soldier Readiness Center at Fort Hood. The number of people in the American public who are armed can also serve as a mitigating factor, though many past attacks have been planned at locations where personal weapons are prohibited, like the Los Angeles International Airport, Fort Hood and Fort Dix.

Of course, a Mumbai-like situation involving multiple trained shooters who can operate like a fire team will cause problems for first responders, but the police communication system in the

United States and the availability of trained SWAT teams will allow authorities to quickly vector in sufficient resources to handle the threat in most locations — especially where such large coordinated attacks are most likely to happen, such as New York, Washington and Los Angeles. Therefore, even a major assault in the United States is unlikely to drag out for days as did the incident in Mumbai.

None of this is to say that the threats posed by suicide bombers against mass transit and aircraft will abruptly end. The jihadists have proven repeatedly that they have a fixation on both of these target sets and they will undoubtedly continue their attempts to attack them. Large bombings and airline attacks also carry with them a sense of drama that a shooting does not — especially in a country that has become somewhat accustomed to shooting incidents conducted by non-terrorist actors for other reasons. However, we believe we're seeing a significant shift in the mindset of jihadist ideologues and that this shift will translate into a growing trend toward armed assaults.

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