By Scott Stewart

In the wake of the botched May 1 Times Square attack, some observers have begun to characterize Faisal Shahzad and the threat he posed as some sort of new or different approach to terrorism in the United States. Indeed, one media story on Sunday quoted terrorism experts who claimed that recent cases such as those involving Shahzad and Najibullah Zazi indicate that jihadists in the United States are "moving toward the "British model." This model was described in the story as that of a Muslim who immigrates to the United Kingdom for an education, builds a life there and, after being radicalized, travels to a terrorist training camp in Pakistan and then returns to the United Kingdom to launch an attack.

A close look at the history of jihadist plots in the United States and the operational models involved in orchestrating those plots suggests that this so-called British model is not confined to Great Britain. Indeed, a close look at people like Shahzad and Zazi through a historical prism reveals that they are clearly following a model of radicalization and action seen in the United States that predates jihadist attacks in the United Kingdom. In fact, in many U.K. terrorism cases, the perpetrators were the children of Muslim immigrants who were born in the United Kingdom, such as suicide bombers Mohammad Sidique Khan, Shehzad Tanweer and Hasib Hussain and cyberjihadist Younis Tsouli, and were not first-generation immigrants like Faisal Shahzad.

Now, this observation does not mean that we're trying to take a cheap shot at the press. The objective here is to cut through the clutter and clearly explain the phenomenon of grassroots jihadism, outline its extensive history in the United States, note the challenges its operatives pose to counterterrorism agencies and discuss the weaknesses of such operatives. It is also important to remember that the proliferation of grassroots operatives in recent years is something that was clearly expected as a logical result of the devolution of the jihadist movement, a phenomenon that STRATFOR has closely followed for many years.

A Long History of Plots

Not long after it began, when the jihadist movement was beginning to move beyond Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal, it quickly appeared in the United States. In July 1990, influential jihadist preacher Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman ("the Blind Sheikh") moved to New York and began speaking at mosques in Brooklyn and Jersey City. After a rival was murdered, Rahman assumed control of the al-Kifah Refugee Center, an entity informally known in U.S. security circles as the "Brooklyn jihad office," which recruited men to fight overseas and trained these aspiring jihadists at shooting ranges in New York, Pennsylvania and Connecticut before sending them to fight in Afghanistan and elsewhere. The center also raised money to help fund these jihadist struggles. However, for the Blind Sheikh, jihad wasn't an activity confined to Muslim lands. He issued fatwas authorizing attacks inside the United States and encouraged his followers to act locally. He didn't have to wait long.

In November 1990, one of the Blind Sheikh's followers, ElSayyid Nosair, gunned down Jewish political activist Meir Kahane in the ballroom of a Manhattan hotel. Nosair, an Egyptian with a engineering degree, had moved to the United States in 1981 in search of a better life. He married an American woman, had children and became an American citizen in 1989. Several other men associated with the Brooklyn jihad office would go on to conduct the 1993 bombing attack on the World Trade Center. The following men had profiles similar to Nosair's, i.e., they first came to the United States, established themselves and then became radicalized:

* Nosair's cousin, Ibrahim Elgabrowny, was born in Egypt, married an American woman and was in the process of being naturalized at the time of the first World Trade Center bombing.

* Nidal Ayyad was a Palestinian born in Kuwait who immigrated to the United States in 1985 to study chemical engineering at Rutgers. Shortly after he graduated from Rutgers in 1991, he began working for AlliedSignal and became an American citizen.

* Mahmud Abouhalima was an Egyptian citizen who entered the United States on a tourist visa in 1985 and overstayed. He applied for amnesty and was granted permanent resident status in 1986. Abouhalima traveled to Afghanistan in 1988 to receive military training.

* Ahmed Ajaj was a Palestinian who entered the United States on a political asylum claim. He left the country under a false identity and traveled to Afghanistan where he received advanced training in bombmaking. He traveled back to the United States with Abdul Basit (also known as Ramzi Yousef) to provide leadership and bombmaking skill to the cell of men associated with the Blind Sheikh who would go on to bomb the World Trade Center. Ajaj was arrested as he tried to enter the United States using an altered Swedish passport.

The following are some of the other notable jihadists involved in the long history of plots against the United States who have profiles similar to those of Zazi and Shahzad — and this list is by no means exhaustive:

* Sgt. Ali Mohammed, an Egyptian who immigrated to the United States in 1984 and received his citizenship after marrying an American woman. Mohammed enlisted in the U.S. Army and served as an instructor in Arabic culture at the Special Warfare Center at Fort Bragg, N.C. While serving in the U.S. Army, Mohammed traveled to Afghanistan where he reportedly fought the Soviets and trained jihadists. Mohammed also reportedly helped conduct surveillance of the U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi that were bombed in August 1998, and he pleaded guilty to his involvement in that plot in October 2000.

* Wadih el Hage, a Lebanese who immigrated to the United States in 1978 to study urban planning. El Hage married an American woman and became a naturalized citizen in 1989. He also traveled to Afghanistan for extended periods to participate in the jihad there, then in 1992 went to Sudan to work with Osama bin Laden. In 1994 el Hage moved to Nairobi, Kenya where he opened an Islamic charity (and al Qaeda branch office). El Hage was convicted in May of 2001 for participation in the East Africa embassy-bombings conspiracy.

* All six of the convicted Fort Dix plotters were foreign born. Agron Abdullahu, born in Turkey,

and Serdar Tatar, born in Jordan, were naturalized U.S. citizens. Mohamed Shnewer and the three Duka brothers — Dritan, Eljvir and Shain — were ethnic Albanians who apparently entered the United States illegally over the Texas-Mexico border. The men became radicalized while living in the United States and were convicted in December 2008 for plotting to attack U.S. military personnel at Fort Dix, N.J.

* Syed Haris Ahmed, a naturalized American citizen born in Pakistan. In 1996, his parents immigrated to the United States, where Ahmed became a student at the Georgia Institute of Technology, majoring in mechanical engineering. He reportedly traveled to Canada in March 2005 with a friend, Ehsanul Islam Sadequee, to meet with a group of other aspiring jihadists to plan attacks. Sadequee is a native-born American citizen whose parents came to the United States from Bangladesh. The two were convicted in 2009 for providing material support to terrorists. Ahmed received a 13-year prison sentence and Sadequee was sentenced to 17 years.

A Well-Established Pattern

Clearly, the pattern exhibited in recent cases by suspects such as Shahzad and Zazi is nothing new to the United States. It has been around since 1990, long before similar cases began to appear in the United Kingdom. Indeed, as we have discussed for several years now, an increase in the number of such operatives was to be anticipated as the jihadist movement devolved from a phenomenon based upon al Qaeda the group (which we call al Qaeda prime) toward one based on the wider jihadist movement. As al Qaeda prime was battered by efforts to destroy it, the group lost its place at the vanguard of jihadism on the physical battlefield. This change means that the primary jihadist threat to the West now emanates from regional jihadist groups and grassroots operatives and not al Qaeda prime.

Of course, while this devolution is a sign of success, it also presents challenges for counterterrorism practitioners. Grassroots operatives are nothing if not ambiguous. They are decentralized, can be insular, and they might not be meaningfully connected to the command, control and communication mechanism of any known militant groups or actors. This makes them exceedingly hard to identify, let alone pre-empt, before they carry out an attack. Government bureaucracies do not do well in dealing with ambiguity, and it is common to see grassroots operatives who had received some degree of government scrutiny at some point but were not identified as significant threats before they launched their attacks. This problem is even more pronounced if the grassroots operative is a lone wolf who does not seek any type of outside assistance or guidance.

But the security provided by this ambiguity comes at a price, and this is what we refer to as the grassroots paradox. The paradox is that decentralization helps conceal militant actors, but it also frequently results in a diminished attack capability. Traditionally, one of the biggest problems for small cells and lone-wolf operatives is acquiring the skills necessary to conduct a successful terrorist attack. Even though many websites and military manuals can provide instruction on such things as hand-to-hand combat and marksmanship, there is no substitute for hands-on experience in the real world. This is especially true when it comes to the more subtle skills required to conduct a complex terrorist attack, such as planning, surveillance and

bombmaking. Many grassroots operatives also tend to lack the ability to realistically assess their low level of terrorist tradecraft or understand the limitations their lack of tradecraft presents. Because of this, they frequently attempt to conduct ambitious attacks that are far beyond their limited capabilities. These factors help explain why so few lone wolves and small cells have been able to pull off spectacular, mass-casualty attacks.

In recent months we have seen a message from al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula urging grassroots jihadists to conduct simple attacks. This call was echoed by al Qaeda prime in a message from Adam Gadahn released on March 7. The message from Gadahn counseled jihadists against traveling to training camps in places like Pakistan or Yemen and advised them not to coordinate their attacks with others who could prove to be government agents or informants.

Now, neither Zazi nor Shahzad heeded this advice, and both reportedly attended some sort of training courses in Pakistan. But while these training courses may have taught them some basic concepts, the training clearly did not adequately prepare them to function as bombmakers upon their return to the United States. It is doubtful that self-trained operatives would be much more effective — there are subtle skills associated with bombmaking and preoperational surveillance that simply cannot be learned by watching YouTube or reading manuals. Nevertheless, while the threat posed by grassroots jihadists and lone wolves is less severe than that posed by highly trained militant operatives from the core al Qaeda group or its regional franchises, lesser-trained operatives can still kill people — remember Maj. Nidal Hasan and Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad.

And they also will most certainly continue to do so. Given the large number of grassroots plots that have emerged over the past two years, it is very likely that there are several individuals and groups working on attack plans in the United States and elsewhere at this very moment and some of these plots could prove more successful than Shahzad's ill-fated attempt. As in the failed Christmas Day airliner bombing, the only thing that kept Shahzad from succeeding was his own lack of ability, not any sort of counterterrorism operation.

This grim truth illustrates the pressing need for law enforcement and intelligence agencies in the West to focus on identifying potential attackers before they can launch their attacks. The good news for security personnel is that grassroots operatives, whether they are lone wolves or part of a small cell, often lack street skills and tend to be very haphazard while conducting preoperational surveillance. While these individuals are in many ways more difficult to identify before an attack than operatives who communicate with, or are somehow connected to, jihadist groups, their amateurish methods tend to make them more vulnerable to detection while conducting operational activities than more highly skilled operatives. Therefore, a continued, proactive focus on identifying the "how" of attack planning — such as looking for preoperational surveillance — is of vital importance. This increase in situational awareness should extend not only to protective intelligence and counterterrorism professionals but also to street cops and even civilians (like the street vendor who brought Shahzad's device to the attention of authorities). Sometimes, a grassroots threat can be most effectively countered by grassroots defenders.

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