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Understanding Grassroots Terrorism

The March 22 terrorist attacks in Brussels are among the most recent in a string of events focusing attention on threats posed by grassroots terrorist cells.

This threat is not unique to European cities; it exists in all countries where groups with radical, violent ideologies exist. This includes the United States, where law enforcement is under incredible pressure to thwart every terrorist attack plot — an impossible expectation to meet.

In the U.S., the most likely type of attack to occur is one launched by a lone assailant — or “lone wolf” — or a small cell working under the leaderless resistance operational model. The shift to leaderless resistance began with the white supremacist movement in the 1980s, and it was soon adopted by animal rights activists, environmental activists and anarchist groups.

Jihadist Danger Levels

Grassroots jihadists who have direct contact and training with professional terrorists are usually more dangerous than those who act independently.

Other factors besides training, like luck and circumstance, can also come into play and make any of the types shown below more or less dangerous than their training would imply.

MOST DANGEROUS ←



- Professional terrorists
- Has advanced terrorist tradecraft (skills)
- Can plan and execute complex attacks
- Examples: Islamic State, al Qaeda franchises



- Grassroots operatives guided and directed by professional terrorists
- Examples: Richard Reid, World Trade Center bombing cell



- Grassroots operatives given terrorist tradecraft training
- Terrorist tradecraft includes: arms training, planning, bomb making, surveillance and security
- Examples: London 7/7 bombings, Shahzad, Zazi

→ LEAST DANGEROUS



- Grassroots operatives given small-arms training
- Examples: Little Rock shooter Carlos Bledsoe, Charlie Hebdo shooters



- Little or no direct guidance from professional terrorists
- Indirect guidance through websites and other media
- Example: Boston Marathon bombers



- Little or no training
- Example: Christopher Cornell planned to attack U.S. Capitol

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In recent years, both al Qaeda and the Islamic State have also encouraged jihadists to adopt this operational model as well.

Defining the Grassroots

Jihadist ideologues such as Abu Musab al-Suri have promoted the leaderless resistance model since 2003. Al

Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula began heavily promoting the concept in 2009, and the core of al Qaeda followed suit in 2010. For its part, the Islamic State began openly supporting leaderless resistance in September 2014.

Jihadists adopted the leaderless resistance model of operations because of the difficulty they have experienced in getting trained terrorist operatives into the West to

conduct attacks. In other words, the shift to leaderless resistance is an admission of weakness rather than a sign of strength. But while counterterrorism agencies and programs have proved adept at targeting known groups and individuals — as they were designed to do — they struggle with the ambiguity of leaderless resistance.

That said, the leaderless resistance model is not always strictly followed, and there is not always the strict separation between the various elements of the jihadist movement that the model calls for. Indeed, there are often links and overlaps between grassroots jihadists and other elements of the jihadist movement. There is a wide spectrum of involvement between grassroots operatives and the rest of the jihadist movement, and the danger posed by grassroots operatives tends to vary depending on their connections to other terrorist elements. Grassroots operatives who receive direction and equipment from professional terrorists, such as the 1993 World Trade Center bombing cell or Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, tend to pose a greater danger than amateurs operating alone.

The spectrum of levels of connection has been illustrated by recent events in France and Belgium. The operatives involved in the Nov. 13 attacks in Paris who were trained and directed by the Islamic State were able to conduct a far deadlier attack than the lone amateur who, merely inspired by the Islamic State, attempted to attack officers at a Paris police station with a meat cleaver Jan. 7 before being shot dead.

It is also important to keep in mind that grassroots operatives do not just operate as lone attackers. Though many choose to work alone, it is not uncommon for them to group together to form more dangerous grassroots cells. As illustrated by the November and March attacks in Paris and Brussels, members of a jihadist cell working together and conducting simultaneous attacks against different targets pose a far greater challenge for law enforcement than lone operatives.

Assessment

Of course, the threat from grassroots jihadists is nothing new. In the time since a grassroots jihadist assassinated Jewish Defense League founder Meir Kahane in midtown Manhattan in November 1990, such attacks have posed a constant, albeit low-level, threat.

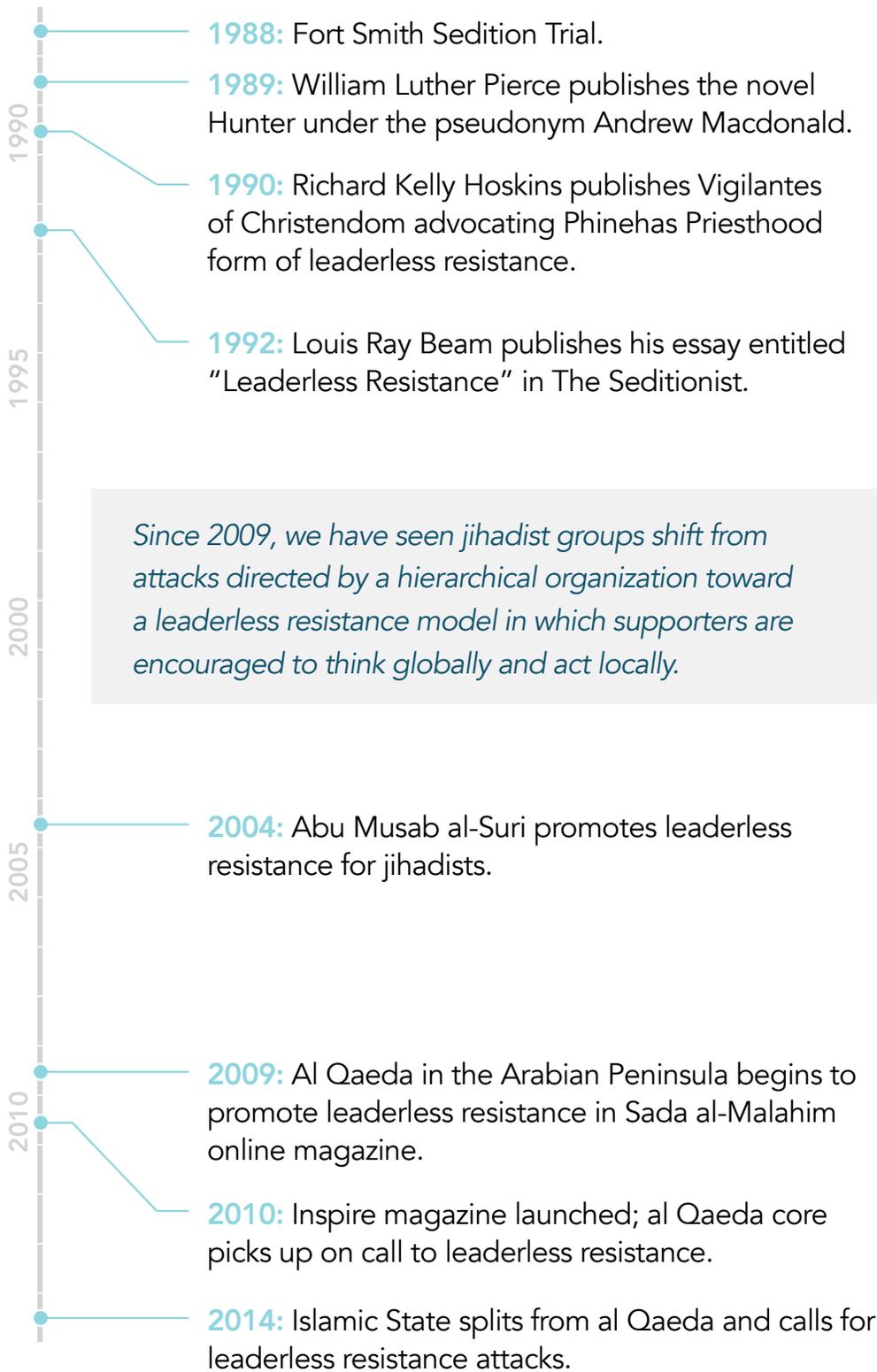
Grassroots jihadists have occasionally executed successful attacks, such as the November 2009 Fort Hood shooting and the April 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, and failed in others, such as Faisal Shahzad's planned Times Square bombing in May 2010. Authorities have also thwarted planned attacks such as the June 2006 Canada 17 plot or the September 2009 Najibullah Zazi case.

Following the Islamic State's call for grassroots attacks in late September 2014, an unprecedented spike in such attacks took place. The tempo of attacks and plots has since returned to a level similar to that witnessed in the past, but the complexion of the plots has changed. As Stratfor predicted in 2010, grassroots jihadists have shifted their tactics away from complicated bombing plots to simpler armed assaults that they are more capable of conducting without assistance.

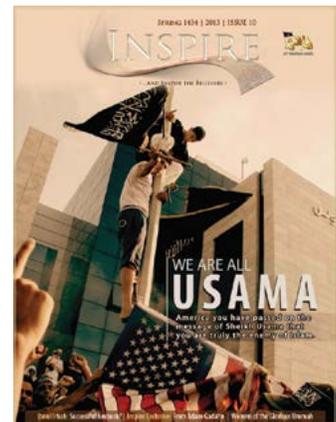
Most jihadists who attend training camps set up by al Qaeda, the Islamic State and other jihadist groups are taught the types of basic military skills required to fight in an insurgency. This means they are provided with basic physical conditioning, given some hand-to-hand combat lessons and then taught how to operate basic military hardware such as assault rifles, hand grenades and, in some cases, crew-served weapons such as machine guns and mortars. Very few students move on to the more advanced training required to become a skilled terrorist operative.

Because of this, most grassroots jihadists, even those who have traveled to fight with groups such as al Qaeda or the Islamic State, lack the sophisticated terrorist tradecraft

Terrorism Trends: Leaderless Resistance



Abu Musab al-Suri



Inspire magazine

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that professional operatives possess. Lacking such skills often causes grassroots jihadists to fail in overly ambitious attacks or to be ensnared in government sting operations after reaching out to more established groups for help.

Consequently, the move toward armed assaults using the type of basic military skills possessed by most of the attackers is a logical trend. It has also proved to be a deadly one, with armed assaults resulting in more casualties in the West than bombing operations in recent years.

Even in those operations that have utilized bombs and firearms, such as the Nov. 13 Paris attacks, far more casualties resulted from gunshot wounds than from explosions. We believe that this trend will continue well through 2016.

Stratfor has stated that the Islamic State will be under intense pressure in the coming year. This means two things: that grassroots jihadists are going to have a far more difficult time traveling to join the Islamic State, and that those foreign fighters who are currently in Iraq and Syria are going to increasingly find themselves in a hostile environment where they can be readily identified as foreigners. As a result, many of them will leave Syria and Iraq to return home. (This same dynamic will also apply to the al Qaeda Syrian franchise Jabhat al-Nusra and other jihadist groups in the region.)

Consequently, many of these fighters pose a risk of returning to their home countries to conduct attacks either individually or as part of grassroots cells.

That said, some factors will help constrain the threat returning jihadists pose. Perhaps the most significant of these is ideological: Many jihadists who believe it is proper to fight the Syrian government (which is oppressing Muslims) do not believe it is acceptable to conduct attacks in the West against noncombatants. Other foreign fighters have become disillusioned by

jihadist groups that frequently fight one another. At the same time, governments are closely monitoring the flow of their citizens leaving to fight with the Islamic State and are aware of the danger posed by returning combatants,

especially in the wake of the Paris attacks. Across the West, governments have redoubled their efforts to monitor returned fighters and to share intelligence with allies to disrupt plots.

Still, reports have surfaced that the Islamic State and al Qaeda are looking to recruit foreign fighters

to return home to carry out attacks. With tens of thousands of fighters currently in places like Syria, Iraq, Libya and Somalia, it will be impossible for their home governments to monitor them all. Undoubtedly some combatants will return home intending to conduct terrorist attacks, while other grassroots operatives will stay home and attack. But the threat they represent is not a totally new phenomenon: The grim truth is that there are undoubtedly jihadists in the United States, Europe and elsewhere planning attacks at this very moment — just as they have over the past two decades.

The Importance of Perspective

In the United States, domestic terrorism has always been a simmering problem, but most domestic terrorist attacks have been more like Ted Kaczynski's or Daniel Andreas' San Diego pipe bombs than Timothy McVeigh's truck bomb. The United States has basically not suffered the same level of war or terrorism as most countries in the world, and American citizens have come to believe that this peace is the rule rather than the exception. This leads many Americans to the unreasonable expectation that the government must prevent all terrorist attacks. This expectation is really quite interesting given the fact that the United States has long suffered from high levels of criminal violence and that non-political mass shooting incidents are fairly common.

The most likely type of attack to occur inside the United States is one launched by a lone assailant or a small cell working under the leaderless resistance model

Part of the problem driving these expectations is the press, which frequently serves to magnify terrorism.

In the big picture, the number of people killed by plain old gang warfare in the United States dwarfs the number killed by al Qaeda or the Islamic State — even accounting for the huge number of deaths on 9/11. Yet terrorist attacks continue to generate hysteria that far outweighs their real impact — which is exactly the effect terrorists want.

This hysteria, when combined with the unrealistic expectation that the government should prevent all terrorist attacks, creates a great deal of pressure on political figures -- and make no mistake, the directors of the FBI and the CIA are every bit as attuned to political pressure as elected officials.

The public and the media do not really care how many plots the government prevents; they only focus on the attackers the government missed. This reality has resulted in many FBI agents steering away from counterterrorism work. It is seen as entirely too risky and not as career enhancing as other types of investigation, such as white-collar crime or bank robberies. As a result, many counterterrorism squads are understaffed. But beyond that, this fear of missing something often leads to false warnings like the highly publicized July 4 warning last year. Even in the best of times, warnings are based on incomplete intelligence; if investigators had the whole picture they would

merely roll up those posing the threat. However, it is seen as much safer to cry wolf and issue a warning for a threat that never materializes than to ignore it and then be held politically accountable for it by the press, the public and the opposing party in Congress. The politics clearly go beyond ensuring accountability: Some politicians also seize upon acts of terrorism as a political tool with which to attack their opponents. This political opportunism also serves as a terror magnifier and an additional source of pressure thanks to the publicity and public outcry it creates.

There is also a danger that the political fallout over grassroots attacks will serve to pressure federal agencies to turn their attention from more significant threats. Attacks by grassroots jihadists operating under the leaderless resistance model may be the most likely threat facing the U.S. homeland, but the threat posed from professional terrorist cadres including from al Qaeda and the Islamic State is still the most serious. This is not to say that efforts should not be made to counter grassroots plotters, only that such efforts should remain secondary to efforts to counter more professional terrorists.

Americans have been largely sheltered from violence but that has changed a bit over the past generation. Terrorism is a fact of life for Americans, and it will continue to be so for the foreseeable future.

It is not an existential threat, but it will be a persistent and deadly one. ■

About the Author: **Scott Stewart**



Scott Stewart is Stratfor's vice president of tactical analysis, supervising the company's coverage of terrorism and security issues. Before joining Stratfor, he was a special agent with the U.S. State Department for 10 years and was involved in hundreds of terrorism investigations.

Mr. Stewart was the lead State Department investigator assigned to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and the follow-up New York City bomb plot. He also led a team of American agents assisting the Argentine investigation of the 1992 bombing of the Israeli

Embassy in Buenos Aires and was involved in investigations following a series of attacks and attempted attacks by the Iraqi intelligence service during the first Gulf War. Mr. Stewart was deputy regional security officer in Guatemala City and was responsible for embassy and diplomatic security at that post as well as in Belize City. As protective intelligence coordinator for Dell, he served as a member of Michael Dell's executive protective team. He has also

consulted on terrorism issues for the Texas Department of Public Safety.

He is regularly featured as a security expert in leading media outlets, including The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, CNN International, NPR, Reuters, USA Today, The Associated Press, World Magazine, Fox News, Discovery Channel and Time magazine.

To read more of Scott Stewart's analysis, click here: <https://www.stratfor.com/security-weekly>.

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