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Australian Home-Grown Terror

Sam Mullins and Adam Dolnik

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The recent Melbourne terror-raids highlight the trend in home-grown terrorism. Characteristics of the Melbourne cell seem to have much in common with cases in the West in recent years, although their plans show a degree of operational adaptation.

THE LATEST terror raids in Australia under 'Operation Health' are yet another example of 'home-grown' terrorism in the West. Although current details remain sparse, the cell arrested in Melbourne in the early hours of 4 August 2009 appears to have much in common with other Western-based Islamist groups.

Profiles of the home-grown terrorists

The profiles of the five men facing terrorism charges (Australian citizens of Somali and Lebanese heritage) conform with a general pattern indicating that the threat from Islamist terrorists to the West comes overwhelmingly from young males of varying ethnic, national or religious background who are often citizens of the countries they choose to attack.

The questionable international dimension of the Operation Health group shows further similarity to other home-grown plots. Once the decision to pursue violent jihad is made, leading members frequently attempt to make contact with organised terrorist groups overseas. Members of the Melbourne group are said to have travelled to Somalia and to have been in contact with al-Shabaab, a US-designated Foreign Terrorist Organisation with suspected links to al-Qaeda. The fact that some group members were unable to make this journey may be part of the reason why they chose to strike at home, possibly as the "second best" option to fighting in Somalia.

However, the nature of links to foreign terrorists remains speculative and should not necessarily be interpreted as overseas control. More typically, home-grown groups operate autonomously. The details thus far released adhere to the established pattern of a limited and at best advisory, rather than directive, capacity of foreign militants. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that the Australian group was actively seeking a fatwa or edict to confirm the legitimacy of the attacks. Had the group been controlled by an external Islamist organisation, it is likely that ruling would have been passed

down without the group having to look for it. Moreover, there have not so far been any overseas arrests in connection with the Melbourne raids.

Seeking 'religious' endorsement for terrorism is also a well-established practice among Islamist militants. A 2007 New York City Police Department report found that home-grown groups in the West typically involve a 'spiritual sanctioner' for this purpose, in addition to an operational leader.

Shift towards Hard Targets?

Although recent terrorist attacks in Western countries have mostly been against 'soft' targets such as public transportation, military bases have previously been targeted by Western-based Islamists in Belgium in 2001, in the US in 2005 and 2007, and in Germany, in 2007 (all of which were thwarted). Then in June this year, Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad (a.k.a. Carlos Bledsoe) opened fire outside an army-navy recruiting centre in the US, killing one soldier and wounding another.

Few details regarding motives in the current Australian case have been revealed. However the targets involved and the suspects' ideological background suggests a protest against the involvement of Australia's military overseas. The lawless situation in Somalia has made it a favoured destination of 'global' Islamist fighters from overseas, driven by a desire to strike at the US and its allies and angered at military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. As one of the current detainees, Wissam Mahmoud Fattal, declared in court: "You call us terrorists when you send troops to kill innocent people in Iraq and Afghanistan!"

A slight variation on the usual theme involves the terrorists' planned use of automatic weapons to carry out a killing spree before themselves being killed, known as a fidayeen operation. In the Western home-grown context, the al-Qaeda modus operandi of synchronised multiple suicide bombings has been more apparent. However, home-grown terrorists have also used more conventional tactics.

Mohamed Bouyeri murdered Theo Van Gogh using a handgun and a knife before engaging the police in a shootout in which he intended to die as a 'martyr'. Several Islamists in the US have been reported preparing to use guns. The group headed by Kevin James, disrupted in 2005, had amassed firearms and were planning to use them in attacks against synagogues and military bases. Similarly, the group behind the Fort Dix plot of 2007 had acquired guns for use in attacks.

Adapting Fidayeen Operations

The deadliest terrorist attack of the past year, the November, 2008 assault in Mumbai was also a fidayeen operation. The Mumbai raids demonstrated the efficacy of this kind of attack and may well prove a source of inspiration for home-grown terrorists for whom conventional weapons may be more easily obtained and used. Multiple suicide bomb attacks are not only more difficult to organise but may have also lost some of their shock-appeal. Suicidal shooting-sprees thus represent a degree of operational adaptation among home-grown terrorists and add a new dimension of terror in the West. Perhaps even more worryingly, this style of attack has already proven popular amongst disaffected youth drawn by a self-destructive desire for power and infamy in cases such as the non-Islamist Columbine massacre of 1999 or the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting spree. Fidayeen attacks may thus have the potential to attract an ever larger pool of recruits to the Islamist cause.

As further details of the Melbourne investigation come to light, the extent to which the group fits into patterns of contemporary home-grown terrorism will be revealed with more clarity. As things stand, it is nevertheless confirmation of a continuing and insidious threat to Australian security -- that is here to stay. Nor is this a problem that is confined to one or two communities.

Past cases have clearly demonstrated that anyone can become an Islamist terrorist, and Caucasian

converts continue to play an active role in violent jihad at home. Profiles are therefore of extremely limited utility, and security services must remain ever-vigilant.

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