American jihadi terrorism: A comparison of homicides and unsuccessful plots

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Introduction

The attacks of September 11, 2001 made the threat of militant jihadi terrorism in the United States palpable for many Americans. Since the "9-11 attacks," terrorism prevention has become the top priority for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the evolving homeland security enterprise.[1] Several deadly terrorist attacks inspired by the swelling global jihadi movement have occurred in the U.S. since 2001, but many other plots have been thwarted through law enforcement intervention.[2] Foiled plots are viewed as victories by the FBI and other counterterrorism officials, but important questions still remain regarding the underlying nature of these plots and how they are investigated. Convicting individuals on terrorism charges for non-violent crimes and involvement in underdeveloped terrorism plots has raised concerns. Civil rights advocacy groups, for instance, have questioned whether some plots have been largely manufactured by law enforcement during sting operations.[3] We suggest that underlying this concern is the empirical question of how unsuccessful attacks and their plotters compare to successful terrorist homicides and their perpetrators.

To advance our understanding of the nature of thwarted terrorist plots, it is necessary to know how they compare to successful, lethal attacks, and how law enforcement uncover jihadi terrorist activities in the U.S. In the past, terrorism research has been limited by the unavailability of official data sources that are much more common in criminological studies.[4] To offset such limitations, terrorism researchers have used publicly available data (e.g., media articles and court

documents) to collect detailed information about plots, often conducting case studies to illuminate terrorist plot dynamics.[5] Few studies to date, however, have provided direct quantitative comparisons of offender-, incident-, and target-level attributes of unsuccessful and successful jihadi plots targeting the U.S.[6]

Extending prior research, we comparatively examine several dimensions of unsuccessful violent plots (i.e., failed attacks and attacks foiled by the police)[7] and successful attacks leading to one or more deaths perpetrated by jihadi terrorists in the U.S. between 1990 and 2014. We define militant jihadi terrorists as those who adhere to all or part of the following set of beliefs:

> "They believe that only acceptance of Islam promotes human dignity. Islamic extremists reject the traditional Muslim respect for ''People of the Book'' (i.e., Christians and Jews). They believe that ''Jihad'' (i.e., to struggle in God's path like the Prophet Muhammad) is a defining belief in Islam and includes the ''lesser Jihad'' that endorses violence against ''corrupt'' others. Islamic extremists believe that their faith is oppressed in nominally Muslim Middle-Eastern/Asian corrupt governments and in nations (e.g., Russia/Chechnya) that occupy Islamic populations. The U.S. is seen as supporting the humiliation of Islam, and exploiting the region's resources. They believe that America's hedonistic culture (e.g., gay rights, feminism, etc.) negatively affects Muslim values. Islamic extremists believe that the American people are responsible for their government's actions and that there is a religious obligation to combat this assault. They believe that Islamic law—Sharia—provides the blueprint for a modern Muslim society and should be forcibly implemented."[8]

Our study's data come from the U.S. Extremist Crime Database (ECDB), an open-source database that includes information on extremist and terrorist crimes. The remainder of our study is guided by the following general research question: *How do offender-, incident-, and target-specific attributes of jihadi terrorist plots compare across successful and unsuccessful incident categories?*

Review of the Literature and Prior Research

This section provides an overview of the jihadi violence that has threatened America, both before and after the 9-11 terrorist attacks, and the ushering in of the homeland security era.

Our goal is not to provide a complete account of jihadi terrorism either in the U.S. or worldwide, but instead to highlight major trends in violent plots against the U.S. We end this section with a review of key empirical findings from prior studies examining the nature of jihadi violence.

Jihadi Violence Prior to the 9-11 Attacks

The threat of jihadi terrorism in the U.S. was mounting in the decade prior to the 9-11 terrorist attacks.[9] In 1990, Jewish Defense League leader Meir Kahane was assassinated in what is considered one of the first jihadi homicides on U.S. soil. After delivering a speech to his supporters, the Israeli American born rabbi was fatally shot outside of his New York City hotel by an Egyptian-born American named El Sayyid Nosair. The assassin disdained Kahane's political views and the moral corruptness of American culture more generally. A few years later, a deadlier jihadi homicide occurred when a truck bomb was detonated underneath New York City's World Trade Center, blowing a massive hole in the skyscraper and killing six people. The 1993 attack was considered only partially successful, as the mastermind of the attack Ramzi Yousef and his co-conspirators planned for the tower to collapse into its adjacent "twin" tower, to topple them both and kill thousands.[10] Other jihadi plots against the U.S. during the 1990s were unsuccessful by any definition due to law enforcement intervention. In fact, terrorist assassin Nosair was also involved in what is known as the 1993 New York City landmarks plot to bomb multiple tunnels, the United Nations Headquarters, the FBI Headquarters, and other various targets around the city.[11] In this case, the FBI collected ample intelligence that was ultimately used to convict several of the conspirators.

It was during the early 1990s that Saudi businessman Osama bin Laden emerged from the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989) as a victorious leader of the volunteer army, or mujahedeen,

who had rid the Muslim Afghan territories of communist invaders.[12] In 1991, bin Laden became enraged when U.S. troops were invited to Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf War to help fend off a potential invasion by Iraq forces. He considered the presence of Western troops (i.e., infidels) on Saudi Arabia's holiest of grounds humiliating, especially when his own offer to lead volunteer forces against the Iraq invasion was rebuffed. Bin Laden became obsessed with creating a pan-Islamic Caliphate, ridding the Middle East of corrupt Muslim leaders who were operating too closely with Western leaders. To bin Laden, America had become the most hated of enemies. Over the next several years, bin Laden continued to strengthen his global terrorist network of financiers, strategic and operational managers, and foot soldiers to support his international terrorist network known as Al Qaeda. On August 7, 1998, Al Qaeda directed a very clear message to the U.S. by attacking their embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania with nearly simultaneous bombings. The truck bombings killed over 200 and injured thousands more. Later that year, bin Laden sent a final and futile warning demanding an end to the U.S. occupation of the Middle East. Unsatisfied with the government's response, he issued a Fatwa, or legal opinion in Islamic law, ordering Muslims to murder Americans and their allies everywhere.[13] Despite bin Laden's warnings, it was not until September 11, 2001 that most Americans first learned of Osama bin Laden and his group. On that morning, nineteen hijackers armed with box cutters boarded four planes and used them as missiles, ultimately hitting the North Tower and South Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, and an open field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. In total, nearly 3,000 people were killed and hundreds more were injured. In contrast to the 1993 WTC attack, Al Qaeda considered the 9-11 attacks exceedingly successful. In 2004, a report was published by members of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (2004) outlining many

of the failures that kept the government from connecting the dots prior to the attacks.[14] The so-called 9/11 Commission Report concluded that the FBI failed to thwart the 9-11 plot in large part because the agency did not effectively communicate intelligence within its own organization, with other American law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and with their foreign counterparts. Much of the blame centered on the FBI's narrow focus on investigations following successful terrorist incidents and subsequent terrorism prosecutions before 9-11, as opposed to proactively collecting domestic intelligence and intervening in active terrorist plots.[15]

The Homeland Security Era

The government took action to close many of the perceived gaps in domestic intelligence even before the 9-11 Commission Report was published. Ushering in a new era of homeland security, the U.S. Congress passed the 2002 Homeland Security Act to create the Cabinet-level Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and integrate all of America's homeland security efforts. This represented the largest reorganization of the federal government since consolidating all military branches into the Department of Defense following World War II.[16] In addition, Congress quickly passed the 2001 Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act (or USA Patriot Act) just days after the 9-11 attacks.[17] The Patriot Act gave new powers for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to share raw information, conduct surveillance on personal communications, access personal records, conduct secretive searches, and expand what activities are considered terroristic in nature. Equipped with these new tools, a revised set of Attorney General Guidelines established that preventing terrorism was to become the FBI's top priority.[18] The FBI was reinvented as a proactive federal law enforcement agency charged with preventing future acts of terrorism.[19] The new guidelines removed barriers to opening terrorism inquiries and loosened the reigns on

procedures for maintaining domestic terrorism investigations. Since the 9-11 attacks, the evolving homeland security enterprise has sought the improvement of intelligence sharing capacities among federal, state, local, and tribal law enforcement agencies.[20] The ultimate goal is to establish a national network of fusion centers and anti-terrorism taskforces across states and major urban areas for sharing and transforming raw information into actionable intelligence.

Jihadi Violence Following the 9-11 Attacks

Despite fundamental changes to the homeland security enterprise, several successful jihadi terrorist homicides have occurred on U.S. soil since the 9-11 attacks.[21] Most have been "lone wolf" attacks, or attacks perpetrated by individuals or small cells operating outside of a formal command and control structure.[22] For instance, in 2002, the so-called "Beltway Snipers" John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo went on a multi-state shooting spree during what they perceived as a continuation of the violent jihad started on the morning of the 9-11 terrorist attacks. Set on training children to terrorize U.S. cities, Muhammad was eventually found guilty of killing in pursuant to the direction or order of terrorism in an ensuing Virginia murder trial.[23] Other high-profile homicides were directly supported or inspired by American-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, the now deceased operational leader of al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP). In 2009, a U.S. Army psychiatrist named Nidal Hasan went on a shooting rampage at Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas, killing 13 people. Communicating with al-Awlaki over email, Hasan became increasingly angry over the deaths of Muslims in the Middle East and his own impending deployment to Afghanistan. Perpetrators of another high-profile 2013 homicide, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, were also influenced by al-Awlaki through his online sermons. The young immigrant brothers planted two pressure cooker bombs at the finish line of the Boston Marathon, murdering three and injuring more than 200.

In addition to successful jihadi terrorist attacks, there have been a number of unsuccessful terrorist plots that for one reason or another have failed to come to fruition. Recently, an increasing number of potential terrorists thwarted by law enforcement have been American-Muslims who have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a media savvy al Qaeda splinter group led by Iraqi Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. American-Muslims who are inspired by ISIS to carry out terrorist attacks in the U.S. remain a top concern of homeland security officials.[24] The primary way that plots have been thwarted is through contrived introductions of FBI informants and undercover agents to persons suspected of being (or becoming) radicalized. To counter the threat of violent homegrown extremists, the FBI has conducted sting operations, making contact with suspects, and offering them assistance and guidance in planning and preparing for terrorist attacks.[25] Based on information gathered from human intelligence sources, the government has successfully prosecuted a substantial number of individuals charged with various federal terrorism offenses, including providing material support to terrorists.

Previous Empirical Findings

Several things are known about violent jihadi violence from previous empirical research. In particular, we know that jihadi terrorists operating in the U.S. are usually male and in their mid to late 20s.[26] Considering both successful and unsuccessful plots, Kurzman and his colleagues[27] found that radical Islamic terrorists in the U.S. tend to be Arab Americans (24%), though many were also found to be South Asians (16%), Whites (16%), Blacks (15%), and African immigrants (13%).[28] They also found that about half of unsuccessful terrorists were born in the U.S., and 10 percent were in the country illegally.

Based on the work of Strom and his colleagues,[29] we also know that only a fraction of jihadi plots have been successfully executed, with law enforcement thwarting approximately 80 percent of planned attacks against the U.S. between 1999 and 2009. When considering successful and unsuccessful plots together, most have involved conventional weapons, such as bombs and firearms, rather than chemical, biological, and other less common weapon types. Other studies[30] have suggested that terrorists' successes rest largely on factors shaping their opportunities, such as gaining access to targets, training, and operational proficiency, while some have suggested that the structural makeup of jihadi terrorist operations may shape attack outcomes. For instance, Strom et al.[31] found that lone wolf terrorists associated with the global jihadi movement have been relatively more successful than their group-based counterparts.

Other studies have focused more attention on understanding the nature of U.S. counterterrorism investigations. Tracking temporal patterns of terrorism investigations, Kaplan found that the average length of time jihadi terrorists plot their attacks before being intercepted by law enforcement (or successfully executing their attack) is approximately 9 months.[32] This study also found that approximately 95 percent of all terrorist plots last somewhere between 33 to 750 days before an arrest is made, an attack is attempted, or an attack is successfully executed. As for how jihadi plots usually fail, Dahl[33] has found that most thwarted plots involve some form of law enforcement intervention. He concluded that preventing future terrorism against the U.S. was less about connecting the dots and more about conducting good police work. Seeming to support his claim, other research has found that nearly 20 percent of terrorist plots have been foiled by investigations of routine crimes, while public tips or informants have stopped another 40 percent of plots.[34]

Despite what we have learned from prior studies, existing gaps in research on jihadi violence in the U.S. allow for several contributions to be made. First, few academic studies have examined jihadi plots and successful attacks that have occurred in the last several years. Due to its evolving nature and the relative infrequency of this type of violence, it is important to continuously examine how recent terrorist plots and attacks compare to those of prior years and decades. Second, several reports have relied on an analysis of case studies and descriptive information on homegrown jihadi violence, but to date there have been few direct empirical comparisons of plots and successful fatal attack attributes before and after 9-11. Third, and relatedly, we still know little about some of the fundamental attributes of individuals, incident circumstances, and targets of jihadi violence in the U.S. For instance, our understanding of how social factors, such as marital status, educational attainment, and prior criminal history relate to this form of violence is limited. Researchers have begun to examine the weapon use and target selection of terrorists, but there is more to learn about other important factors shaping the nature of jihadi plots and successful attacks. We need to know more about how plots with specifically designated targets compare to those plots that fail to evolve to that stage.

The purpose of this study is to extend our current understanding of offender- and incident-level attributes associated with both successful and unsuccessful homegrown jihadi violence. In the next section, we describe the data, case inclusion criteria, and variables included in our comparative analysis**.**

Data and Method

Data for this study are extracted from the U.S. Extremist Crime Database (ECDB),[35] an open-source, relational incident-, offender-, and target-level database that tracks violent criminal activities of extremists operating in and targeting the U.S.[36] Common sources of information

include advocacy group reports, journalistic accounts, court documents, correctional system reports, and scholarly publications, along with other web-based sources. Included in our current analysis are violent incidents perpetrated by supporters of al Qaeda, ISIS, and associated Salafist terrorist organizations who committed, attempted to commit, or planned to commit ideologically-motivated acts of violence inside the U.S. between 1990 and 2014.[37]

Case Inclusion Criteria

The unit of analysis for this study is the jihadi violent incident.[38] For an incident to be included in our study, it had to pass a two-pronged set of inclusion criteria. The first prong requires that offenders be indicted for committing a homicide, attempted homicide, or plotting to commit a violent crime inside the U.S. during the study's time frame.[39] Unsuccessful attempts to commit terrorist violence may consist of either failed or foiled plots. Failed plots include attempted homicides, violent incidents set into motion and stopped either by the perpetrator or by law enforcement *during* the final stages of the planned act, whereas foiled plots are stopped either through perpetrator desistance or law enforcement action *prior to* the final stages of the planned act.[40] Unsuccessful plots are comprised of two categories defined by an intended target's level of specificity. *Specific unsuccessful plots* are planned acts in which one or more specific persons or targets are selected and named. The named victim or target must have identifiable spatial and temporal attributes for it to be considered a specific plot. Further, one or more offenders must engage in an overt action toward the execution of a specific plot.[41] In contrast, *general unsuccessful plots* consist of planned acts in which one or more general types of victims or targets (e.g., persons of Jewish descent) are named, but there is no evidence that a specific victim or target was selected. In addition, some spatial and temporal characteristics, even if vaguely mentioned, for the planned violent act must be known.[42] Again, one or more perpetrators

must engage in an overt action toward the execution of some aspect of the plot (e.g., purchasing weapons) for it to be included in the study. The second prong of our inclusion criteria is attitudinal, and requires that one or more of the involved perpetrators subscribe to elements of an extremist belief system endorsed by supporters of the global jihadi movement.[43]

Variable Descriptions

Two sets of characteristics associated with jihadi homicides and unsuccessful plots are extracted directly from the ECDB. We begin, first, by describing a set of offender characteristics, including the demographic features of jihadi terrorist offenders as well as other relevant background characteristics. The first demographic variable, gender, measures if the offender was (1) *male* or (0) *female*. Second, we include offender *age measured* as a continuous variable. The next variable measures the race, ethnicity, and pan ethnicity of offenders as belonging to four possible groups, including (1) *White*, (2) *Black*, (3) *Arab*, or (4) *other*.[44] The fourth demographic variable measures offender marital status as (1) *married*, (2) *divorced/separated*, or (3) *single*.[45] The last group of demographic characteristics measures offender education level as having (1) *less than a high school diploma*, (2) a *high school diploma/GED,* (3) *some college or vocational school,* or (4) a *college degree.* Also included in this study is a variable capturing offender criminal history, which is measured as (1) *evidence of prior arrests* or (0) *no evidence of prior arrests*. Additionally, we include a measure of offender citizenship status coded as being (1) a *U.S. citizen* or (0) a *non-U.S. citizen*.

The second set of independent variables included in this study at the incident-level captures various incident characteristics in addition to the targets or human victims involved in jihadi homicides and unsuccessful plots. The first variable is a continuous measure of the *number*

of offenders involved in the homicide or unsuccessful plot. Additionally, we include a dichotomous variable that captures whether at least one offender involved in the homicide or unsuccessful plot traveled overseas to participate in a foreign conflict or engaged in terrorist trainings, measured as (1) *evidence of one or more offender traveling overseas* or (0) *no evidence of overseas travel*. Next, we examine target/victim type, measured as (1) *citizens,* (2) *business/commercial,* (3) *political/government,* (4) *military,* (5) *law enforcement,* (6) *transportation,* (7) *social minority,* or (8) *other.* The fourth variable captures the weapon type used in the homicide or unsuccessful plot, which is measured as (1) *bomb,* (2) *gun,* (3) *airplane or other vehicle,* (4) *knife/sharp object* or (5) *other unconventional weapon* (e.g., chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons*)*. Lastly, we include a variable for the region where the homicide or unsuccessful plot occurred, measured as (1) *North,* (2) *South,* (3) *West*, or (4) *Midwest.*

Analytic Strategy

The analysis unfolds in three stages. We begin by presenting a timeline of jihadi terrorist homicides and unsuccessful plots from 1990-2014 to situate the current analysis in an historical context. In the next two stages, we examine two separate levels of descriptive comparisons involving violent jihadi incidents. First, we present descriptive results for offender characteristics separately for homicides and unsuccessful plots. In this phase of the analysis, we extract 186 unique, ideologically motivated jihadi offenders who were arrested for committing a homicide, attempted homicide, or plotting to commit a violent crime inside the U.S. (see ECDB inclusion criteria above). Also presented are bivariate statistical tests (Chi-square analysis and *t*-test of means) that compare the characteristics of unsuccessful jihadi plot offenders to homicide offenders.

In the final stage, we examine the features of violent jihadi incidents only (n=271). We provide comparative statistics on several incident, target, weapon, and geographic characteristics across jihadi homicides and unsuccessful plots, as well as specific and general unsuccessful plot categories.[46] Additionally, we present the results from bivariate statistical tests (Chi-square analysis) comparing unsuccessful plots to homicides.

Results

Homicides and unsuccessful plots perpetrated by jihadi terrorists have occurred consistently in the U.S. over the last twenty-five years (see Figure 1). Since 2000, there has been at least one violent incident every year, and an average of nearly 11 violent incidents per year, reaching a peak of 42 incidents in 2010 (all of which were unsuccessful plots). Before the 9-11 attacks, an average of less than two violent jihadi terrorist incidents occurred per year, while in contrast an average of approximately 18 violent incidents took place yearly between 2001 and 2014. The least amount of violence occurred between 1995 and 2000. Just two homicides and four unsuccessful plots occurred during this time period. Six years later, however, the most prolific span of jihadi violence took place from 2006 to 2010, when five homicides and 109 unsuccessful plots transpired.[47]

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As shown in Figure 1, the U.S. has seen an increase in homicides, but an even greater increase in unsuccessful plots over the past twenty-five years. Indeed, unsuccessful terrorist plots have greatly outnumbered homicides, with the last five years experiencing a dramatic increase in the rate of unsuccessful to successful terrorist incidents.

Between 1990 and 2014, New York City and the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area experienced the largest volume of jihadi violence. In fact, New York City alone saw 20 violent

jihadi terrorist incidents involving 61 unique targets, while 13 homicides and unsuccessful plots involving 27 targets occurred in or around the Washington D.C. area. We also found jihadi terrorist incidents to be widely dispersed across the U.S, with homicides and unsuccessful plots occurring in states that include New York, Florida, Michigan, Illinois, Washington, and California.

Jihadi Homicides and Unsuccessful Plots Offender Characteristics

Table 1 presents descriptive findings for several offender characteristics of jihadi homicides and unsuccessful plots. Our results indicate that males have committed every lethal jihadi attack in the U.S. between 1990 and 2014. Furthermore, homicide offenders are on average around 27 years old and proportionately more likely to be Arab and White. Most homicide offenders are married (58%) and many have at least some college training (46%).[48] Additionally, nearly 20 percent of homicide offenders have a known prior arrest history and only approximately 28 percent are U.S. citizens.

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Table 1 also presents the results of the bivariate statistical tests (Chi-square analysis and t-tests) used to examine differences in offender characteristics between homicides and unsuccessful plots. However, it is important to note that due to the limited sample size bivariate statistical tests are excluded for some variables with less than five valid cases per cell (see notes in Table 1). Comparatively, unsuccessful plot offenders share both similarities and differences with jihadi terrorists responsible for lethal attacks. Similar to homicide offenders, unsuccessful plot offenders are typically male, though statistically significantly more likely to be slightly older (31 years old) than homicide offenders. We also found that unsuccessful plotters are

proportionately more likely to be Black and single compared to homicide offenders. With regard to education, our findings also show that plotters are relatively less educated than homicide offenders. Notably, unsuccessful offenders have significantly more prior arrests on average (38%) than homicide offenders (20%). Moreover, unsuccessful plot offenders are significantly more likely to be U.S. citizens compared to homicide offenders (52% compared to 28%).

Jihadi Homicides and Unsuccessful Plots Incident Characteristics

Table 2 presents characteristics of jihadi homicide incidents, targets/victims, weapons used, and geographic locations. We also provide separate columns in the table for homicides excluding the Beltway Sniper cases because of their heavy influence on the statistical findings. Additionally, we include two separate columns that examine statistics for specific and general unsuccessful plots characteristics. Our first variable of interest is number of offenders for which we found that approximately 64 percent of all homicides involve multiple offenders, compared to nearly 50 percent of unsuccessful plots. Our incident findings also show that approximately 64 percent of jihadi homicides involved one or more offenders who traveled overseas to participate in a foreign conflict or terrorist training.[49] As for target characteristics, our results indicate that jihadi homicides primarily target citizens (77%). Often referred to as "soft targets," common examples include private individuals, as well as public spaces that are open, accessible, and populated by the general public, such as theme parks, shopping malls, movie theatres, and various public gatherings. Also noteworthy, other targets include law enforcement (13%) and military installations (8%). The most common weapon used in jihadi homicides is a firearm, while very few incidents involve the use of bombs.[50] In regard to location, nearly 50 percent of homicides occurred in the southern region of the U.S.[51]

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Previously alluded to, our descriptive findings vary when the Beltway Sniper spree killings are removed from the analysis. In particular, the proportion of homicides involving multiple offenders and overseas travelers drops to approximately 42 percent and 38 percent of all jihadi homicides, respectively. As for other jihadi homicide characteristics, there are fewer disparities in findings when the Beltway Sniper cases are removed from the analysis. One notable difference, however, is in homicide location, as the majority of jihadi homicides are committed in the northern region of the country (rather than southern region) when these cases are excluded. Because of the apparent differences in homicide finding when Beltway Sniper incidents are included in our analysis, we focus the next section on the results of the bivariate statistical tests used to compare unsuccessful jihadi plots to successful homicides excluding these cases. Given the especially unique attributes of this spree killing, this approach makes for the most meaningful comparisons.

As shown in Table 2, we found that the proportion of unsuccessful plots involving more than one offender was around 50 percent, while slightly higher than for homicides (approximately 42%). On the other hand, only around 23 percent of unsuccessful plots involved one or more offenders who traveled overseas, much less than for jihadi homicides. However, differences for these variables failed to reach statistical significance. Findings for foreign travelers also varied by the type of unsuccessful plot. While 26 percent of plots involving general targets were orchestrated by offenders who traveled overseas, less than 16 percent of specific plots involved one or more offenders who traveled abroad.[52]

Our findings demonstrate major differences in the selection of targets, weapons, and attack locations across fatal attacks and unsuccessful plots. Though again, due to the limited sample size, bivariate statistical tests are excluded for these variables. Table 2 shows that while

over 62 percent of terrorist homicides targeted citizens, this was the case for less than 20 percent of plots. Another major difference across fatal and unsuccessful incidents is in the use, or intended use, of weapons. Those who were unsuccessful in executing their attack were most likely to select bombs as their weapon of choice (67%), especially for those plots with specified targets. In contrast, only 8 percent of deadly attacks were executed with bombs. As for where violent plots have occurred during the last twenty-five years, unsuccessful plots have been spread more evenly across the country in comparison to homicides. While the Midwest region of the country has been spared from deadly jihadi terrorist attacks to date, approximately 17 percent of unsuccessful plots have originated from this region.

Discussion

Despite the rarity of attacks in the U.S., the threat of jihadi terrorism remains a real and ongoing threat to U.S. homeland security. Countering this violent threat will undoubtedly be the FBI's top priority for years to come. An unfortunate reminder of the threat posed by jihadi terrorists came when an American Muslim man and his Pakistani-born wife swore allegiance to ISIS on social media before embarking on a shooting rampage, killing 14 and seriously wounding 22 others, in San Bernardino, California.[53] We also know that many Americans have joined or attempted to join others from around the world in pledging allegiance to, and sometimes traveling to join, militant jihadi groups such as ISIS.[54] Judging from the anecdotal evidence of recent attacks, becoming radicalized and communicating with foreign jihadists over the Internet will likely continue. Also a grave concern, some fear that the American government's involvement in foreign conflicts across the Middle East will continue to trigger "lone wolf" attacks in the U.S.[55] This fear recently came to life in 2014 when 29-year-old American Ali Muhammad Brown went on a cross-country murder spree in retaliation for the

actions of the U.S. government in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. A New Jersey native with a number of serious prior crimes, Brown claimed that the killing of four male victims in three homicide incidents was justified because the U.S. military routinely kills innocent people in the Middle East.[56]

While studying successful attacks can tell us about the nature of militant jihadi terrorism, consider again that one of the key purposes of this study was to examine how unsuccessful terrorism plots compared to successful terrorist homicides. Specifically, we set out to learn if law enforcement and intelligence officials were thwarting violent jihadists who were demonstrably as capable of executing lethal attacks against the U.S. as those who were able to fully execute their deadly plans. Before reviewing the key findings of our study, let us assume for a moment that we found no differences between lethal attacks and thwarted plots other than their ultimate successfulness. Two implications would necessarily follow. First, the increasing threat of jihadi terrorism against the U.S. in the 21st century would be astounding. Indeed, the number of "near misses" for New York City, Washington D.C., and the nation more generally would be extremely troubling. Second, if failed plotters and successful attackers were truly cut from the same cloth, then we would conclude that law enforcement has been successful in keeping society's most dangerous at bay.

Importantly, though, our comparison of failed plotters to those who have been more successful at executing attacks in the U.S. suggests a more complex story. For instance, we found terrorist plotters in the U.S. to be proportionately more likely to be U.S. citizens who have no prior history of traveling overseas to train or fight in foreign conflicts. Plotters also plan to terrorize several different types of targets and are disproportionately interested in using bombs in their attacks compared to homicide offenders who rely more on firearms. Further, plotters who

only have a general idea of possible targets are unique in some important ways. For example, general target plots have been disproportionately more common in the last few years compared to earlier time periods. Perpetrators of less developed plots are also proportionately the most likely to be young, White, U.S. citizens who lack overseas training and fighting experiences, and who often intend to generally target the U.S. military in some capacity. One explanation for these incongruities is in possible underlying differences between jihadi plotters and successful homicide offenders. Plotters may be enthusiastic supporters of the global jihadi movement, but they might lack the knowledge, skills and sophistication needed to stage and execute a successful terrorist attack in the U.S. It is also possible that unsuccessful plotters simply lack the opportunities and resources that would be required to pull off attacks at the scale to which they desire.

At the same time, it is possible that some of the differences we found between unsuccessful and successful jihadists might be due to changes in law enforcement responses to terrorism. As discussed, preventing terrorism became the FBI's top priority after the 9/11 attacks.[57] Several important changes in protocols and federal legislation granted law enforcement and intelligence officials' new tools for investigating terrorism in the U.S. The passage of the USA Patriot Act and the revisions to the U.S. Attorney General Guidelines in 2002 and 2008 gave FBI agents increased discretion in investigating leads, making inquiries, and monitoring terrorist suspects' communications for longer periods of time. Importantly, after 9-11, it became unnecessary for individuals to commit violence or even intend to commit violence to be officially considered terrorists.

Because of changes in investigatory protocol and the law, jihadi terrorism has been approached qualitatively differently in the 21st century. Investigatory changes have likely

resulted in differences in the types of incidents and persons investigated for terrorism by widening the net on the types of actors and activities officially labeled as terrorism-related. Equipped with new tools for investigation, the FBI has relied heavily on the use of confidential informants (CIs) and undercover agents (UAs) to thwart terrorism plots, sometimes before there was a clear and imminent threat of violence to the public.[58] More specifically, our data show that federal law enforcement, usually the FBI, was involved in investigating over 90 percent of all successful and unsuccessful jihadi incidents, while state and local law enforcement were involved in substantially fewer investigations. Forty-two percent of the unsuccessful plots examined in this study relied on federal undercover agents. In addition, we found that even more unsuccessful plot cases involved the use of confidential informants, over 64 percent.

As one example, consider the 2014 investigation arrest of Nicholas Teausant, a 20-year-old White male community college student, who was suspected of plotting to bomb the Los Angeles subway system on or around New Years Eve.[59] A heavy social media user,[60] Teausant caught the attention of federal officials after posting messages on an *Instagram* account expressing his wish to join Allah's army. He had made friends over the Internet that encouraged him in his jihad, one of which being an informant for the FBI. Eventually, plans to target the Los Angeles subway were called off when Teausant was spooked by the arrest of another unrelated terrorist plotter who had unknowingly befriended an FBI informant over *Facebook*. Teausant was later arrested when attempting to enter Canada, which is where he intended to depart from on his way to join Allah's army in Syria. He now faces 15 years in prison for charges of attempting to provide material support or resources to a foreign terrorist organization. During his adjudication, the young, socially alienated man with no established ties to terrorist groups claimed that he had no recollection of the subway plot and that if it were not for the

encouragement of the FBI informant he would not have sought to travel overseas. Nonetheless, the government was able to easily establish a predisposition to commit terrorism based on the defendant's social media posts, while entrapment defenses have to date been futile in terrorism-related cases. The virtue of using government informants to encourage and further terrorist plots remains debatable, but heterogeneity in the nature of jihadi terrorism is not. In the end, we are less certain of whether or not terrorists thwarted by law enforcement and intelligence officials are the same breed of terrorists who successfully execute attacks against the U.S. Based on several of the findings from the current study, there are reasons to doubt that this is the case.

The challenge for law enforcement personnel and other officials is to continue to work to increase the number of failed plots and decrease the number of successful plots. There are several potential avenues that might be pursued. First, tips and leads provided from citizens and informants are critical to preventing terrorism acts. The goal has to be to focus on continuing to encourage widespread cooperation between federal, state, and local law enforcement agencies and, importantly, inform citizens about the need to provide information when they come across suspicious circumstances all the while continuing to build trust in Muslim American communities. Local police agencies maintain a wealth of knowledge about their community and come across facts and circumstances in their daily operations, whether it is on a traffic stop or when responding to a call for service. In cooperation with the FBI, it would make sense for local police to more proactively engage with the families and communities that often become the focus of terrorist probes. Principles of community policing are well established in most communities now, and there continues to be a real need for bridge building with Muslim American communities. Moreover, local agencies routinely interact with mental health providers, school officials, business leaders, clergy members, and others who might have information useful for

evaluating risk and investigatory decision-making. Second, studies like this one should help law enforcement begin to understand what works and what is promising from an investigation standpoint. The study is limited in that it only provides preliminary insights and there remains a significant need to better understand the nuances of terrorism investigations. Relatedly, such studies will help policymakers and law enforcement officials better establish priorities. Law enforcement resources are inherently limited and many terrorism investigations are time consuming and require considerable personnel resources. Thus, more study of these issues with additional data might lead to the development of the types of risk assessment tools that analysts can use to prioritize targets. Comparative analysis of data on certain attributes, including offenders' prior overseas travel, citizenship, age, and choices of weapons and targets, can help to establish priorities and assess the radicalization of targets using human intelligence and cyber-intelligence, saving considerable time and effort and ensuring that top threats are managed.

Our study is of course not without limitations. As we only examined jihadi plots and attacks that occurred at least in part on U.S. soil, research on terrorist violence will benefit greatly from cross-national comparisons across both Western and non-Western nations. Knowledge about jihadi terrorism can also be advanced in the future by comparatively examining these incidents with other forms of non-violent terrorism and terrorism committed by other types of domestic extremists. The uniqueness of militant jihadi violence will become clearer when we better understand how this form of violence is similar and different to, for instance, financial terrorism and terrorist homicides perpetrated by domestic far-right extremists. How jihadists who intend to travel overseas compared to those who seek to attack targets within the U.S. is also a worthy topic of research. Finally, the number of jihadi homicides included in

our analysis limits our study. Due to the relatively low number of homicides, cases involving multiple victims had a disproportionate influence on our findings that needed to be addressed.

Conclusion

Since 9/11, an exorbitant amount of resources has been directed toward preempting the next act of jihadi terrorism. Though a number of deadly incidents have occurred on U.S. soil, many more have been thwarted by law enforcement. Again, critical to understanding if terrorist killers and failed plotters are cut from the same cloth, we need to know more about how successful homicides and unsuccessful plots compare. Our findings showed that thwarted plots are unique from homicides in several ways, including the intended weapons and the targets that were chosen by terrorists. We interpreted these findings in part by pointing to possible differences in the levels of sophistication and available resources for plotters, as well as important differences in how terrorism has been investigated after revisions were made to the Attorney General Guidelines and the passage of the USA Patriot Act. While our study contributes to an empirical foundation for understanding jihadi terrorism and counterterrorism activities, it is our hope that future research will further advance knowledge about the nuanced threat of unsuccessful terrorist plots against the U.S.

Notes

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[21] Unsuccessful jihadi plots also occurred prior to the 9-11 attacks. For example, Ahmed Ressam planned to bomb the Los Angeles Airport in what has been dubbed the Millennium Plot. Ressam was arrested in December of 1999 as he entered the U.S. from Canada.

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[32] Edward H. Kaplan, "Estimating the Duration of Jihadi Terror Plots in the United States," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 35, no.12 (2012): 880-894.

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[35] The ECDB has received funding from the Department of Homeland security through the National Consortium for the START Center and the National Institute of Justice. In the past, the ECDB has been shown to be a valid source of data on extremist crime (See Steven Chermak, Joshua D. Freilich, William S. Parkin, and James P. Lynch, "American Terrorism and Extremist Crime Data Sources and Selectivity Bias: An Investigation Focusing on Homicide Events Committed by Far-right Extremists," *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 28, no. 1 (2012): 191-218; Freilich et al., "Introducing the United States Extremist Crime Database (ECDB)," p.380.

[36] The ECDB's incident identification and coding is a multistage process (See Joshua D. Freilich et al., "Introducing the United States Extremist Crime Database."). To begin, open-source publications (e.g., the FBI's Terrorism in the United States annual reports, the Global Terrorism Database, and Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Report) and online newspaper articles are used to identify extremist crimes. Key indicators of al Qaeda and affiliated movements were applied systematically to all violent incidents included in the current study. Information is then gathered from more than 30 open-source search engines and databases to collect all publically available information on each crime. Coders then scour all related materials to verify that the incident met the inclusion criteria, conduct additional, targeted open-source searches, and code a series of established incident-, offender-, and victim-level variables, as well as variables capturing the reliability of the open-source documentation. For a more in-depth discussion of methodology, see Freilich et al., "Introducing the United States Extremist Crime Database (ECDB)" and William S. Parkin and Joshua D. Freilich, "Routine Activities and Right-Wing Extremists: An Empirical Comparison of the Victims of Ideologically and Non-Ideologically Motivated Homicides Committed by American Far-Rightists," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27, no.1 (2015): 182-203.

[37] We chose not to include terrorist cases occurring after 2014 because it was unlikely that open-source materials that are normally produced prior and during criminal trials (e.g., indictments and other court documents) would be publicly available.

[38] Incidents are defined both temporally and geospatially. Spree incidents or a series of related incidents committed by the same individual or set of individuals which attack or plan to attack victims or non-human targets that are separated by several hours or more and different geographic locations are considered separate incidents.

[39] Violent crimes must be committed by one or more offender operating in the U.S. to be included in our study.

[40] More than 92 percent of all unsuccessful plots were foiled by law enforcement intervention, while approximately 8 percent of the remaining unsuccessful plots failed on their own with no police interdiction. Examples include the failed 2005 bombing of the University of Oklahoma, the 2009 failed bombing of Northwest Airlines Flight 253, and the 2002 suicide plane crash into the Bank of America Building in Tampa, FL.

[41] Many plots included in this study involved multiple targets. For a plot to be included in this study, evidence of overt action was necessary for only one of the targets. In this category, we also include acts in our study that were charged as attempted homicides and suicide missions that resulted in no deaths other than those of the offenders.

[42] Naming a state or region of the U.S. in which the target is located (or the entire country) satisfies the ECDB's spatial requirements, while a very general time frame for attacking the target, even if it covers several years, satisfies the temporal requirements.

[43] These violent extremists were linked to a variety of groups such as al-Qaeda, al-Fuqra, al-Gamaa al-Islamiya, Pakistani Taliban, al-Shabaab, and others.

[44] Only a single incident involved an offender of known Hispanic ethnicity. The offender race for this case has been coded as "other."

[45] This variable also includes whether the offender was widowed or in a non-marital relationship at the time of the homicide or unsuccessful plot.

[46] It is important to note that several of the plots examined included a large number of targets. We decided to include all cases in our analysis as they present the fewest problems methodologically, and allows us to include the most observations in our analysis.

[47] This spike in violence can be explained by a series of exceptional unsuccessful plots. For instance, one foiled plot involved an offender formulating a "hit list" of over 20 unique targets, which constituted 20 percent of the increase in violence during this time period. Other notable examples of unsuccessful plots include the 2009 failed bombing of Northwest Airlines Flight 253, the 2009 foiled bombing of the Fountain Place Office Tower in Dallas, TX, and the 2010 failed Times Square bombing in New York. Examples of fatal violence include the 2009 shooting of 12 soldiers in Fort Hood, TX and the 2009 shooting of Army soldiers outside a recruiting center in Little Rock, AR.

[48] In an additional analysis, we binary-coded race/pan-ethnicity (Arab =1, all other = 0), marital status (married =1, all other relationship statuses = 0) and education level (at least some college = 1, no college = 0). We found no significant differences for race/pan-ethnicity and marital status, while homicide offenders were significantly ($p \le .05$) more likely to have attended college than unsuccessful plotters.

[49] Our findings are likely a conservative representation of the actual number of jihadists who traveled overseas. We suspect that many foreign fighters and trainers are arrested for "material

support" crimes, and their involvement in terrorism has not materialized to the point of selecting a general or specific U.S. target to attack, which falls short of meeting the inclusion criteria for this study. It is important to also reiterate that this variable is not a count of the number of overseas travelers, rather it is an incident-level dummy variable capturing whether or not one or more offenders involved in the violent incident traveled overseas to train or fight in a foreign conflict. Unfortunately, we were usually unable to obtain more detailed information in the open source data.

[50] In an additional analysis, we binary-coded target type (1 = citizens, 0 = all other) and weapon type (1 = bomb, 0 = all other), finding that homicides were significantly ($p \leq .001$) more likely to target citizens with weapons other than bombs.

[51] In an additional analysis, we binary-coded region (South = 1, all other regions = 0) and found no significant differences between categories.

[52] Interestingly, over 75 percent unsuccessful plotters who traveled overseas were arrested after 9-11. However, only approximately 2 percent have been arrested in the last 5 years.

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Tables

Table 1. Jihadi Terrorist Offender Characteristics (n=186)

	All Violence (n=186)	All Homicides (n=52)	Unsuccessful Plots[a] (n=134)
	% or Mean	% or Mean	% or Mean
Male	97.80	100.00	97.00
Age	30.31 (avg.)	27.76 (avg.)	31.26 (avg.)*
Race/Pan ethnicity			
White	16.90	22.20	14.90
Black	22.30	15.60	24.80
Arab	56.60	62.20	56.60
Other	4.20	---	5.80
Marital Status			
Married	49.50	58.30	46.80
Divorced/Separated	13.60	16.70	12.70
Single	36.90	25.00	40.50

Education			
< High School	11.20	11.50	11.10
High School Diploma	20.20	3.80	27.00
Some College	38.20	46.20	34.90
College Degree	30.30	38.50	27.00
Prior Arrests	33.30	20.40	38.10*
U.S. Citizen	45.40	28.00	51.90**

*$p \leq .05$ **$p \leq .01$ ***$p \leq .001$

[a] To statistically compare Unsuccessful Plots to All Homicides, t-test of means is used for continuous variables (e.g., age) while Chi-square (X^2) analysis is used for all remaining categorical variables. Statistical analysis was not conducted for variables with less than 5 valid cases per cell, including Race/Pan ethnicity, Marital Status, and Education.

Table 2. Jihadi Terrorist Incident Characteristics (n=271)

	All Violence (n=271)	All Homicides (n=39)	Homicides Excluding D.C. Sniper (n=24)	Unsuccessful Plots[a] (n=232)	Specific Unsuccessful Plots (n=162)	General Unsuccessful Plots (n=70)
	% or Mean	% or Mean	% or Mean	% or Mean	% or Mean	% or Mean
Multiple Offenders	51.70	64.10	41.70	49.6	50.0	48.6
1 or More Offenders Travelled Overseas	29.20	63.90	38.10	22.60	26.00	15.90
Target Type						
Citizens	28.10	76.90	62.50	19.90	14.30	32.90
Business/Commercial	10.40	---	---	12.10	13.00	10.00
Political/Government	11.10	---	---	13.00	16.80	4.30
Military	15.20	7.70	12.50	16.50	14.30	21.40
Law Enforcement	9.60	12.80	20.80	9.10	10.60	5.70
Transportation	10.00	---	---	11.70	15.50	2.90
Social Minority	6.70	2.60	4.20	7.40	5.00	12.90
Other	8.90	---	---	10.40	10.60	10.00

Weapon Type

Bomb	57.80	5.10	8.30	67.30	72.30	56.50
Gun	31.30	71.80	54.20	24.00	17.60	37.10
Airplane/Vehicle	4.30	12.80	20.80	2.80	3.40	1.40
Knife/Sharp Object	5.10	10.30	16.70	4.10	4.70	2.90
Other	1.60	---	---	1.80	2.00	1.40

Region

North	32.50	25.60	41.70	33.80	35.10	29.50
South	37.20	48.70	20.80	34.90	33.80	38.60
West	15.80	25.60	37.50	13.80	14.60	11.40
Midwest	14.50	---	---	17.40	16.60	20.50

*p ≤ .05 **p ≤ .01 ***p ≤ .001

[a] Statistical comparisons (Chi-square (X^2) analysis) are only conducted between Unsuccessful Plots and Homicides Excluding D.C. Sniper categories. Statistical analysis was not conducted for variables with less than 5 valid cases per cell, including Target Type, Weapon Type, and Region. All remaining variables in Table 2 are not statistically significant at the bivariate level.