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Jihadist Terrorist Plots in the United States

OVERVIEW

How plots come to fail or to be foiled is of great importance to the study of terrorism and to the development of counterterrorism policy. There can be no comprehensive picture of the threat without analyzing what adversaries planned to do as well as what they actually managed to accomplish. Examining failed and foiled plots is essential to understanding their intentions as well as their capabilities. This specific project, “Comparing Failed, Foiled, Completed and Successful Terrorist Attacks,” examines jihadist plots in the United States (121 plots) and selected allied countries (314 plots) occurring between 1993 and 2017.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

This brief summarizes research on 121 jihadist plots against the United States between 1993 and 2017. Each of the plots is coded as to whether it was completed, successful, failed or foiled. These variables are independent of one another and a single plot can be coded with any combination of these variables. It is therefore possible for some elements of a plot to be failed and other elements of the same plot foiled, completed or successful.

- **Completed:** These are plots in which the actions intended by the perpetrator were carried out to their final stage of implementation, whether or not they had their intended physical impact.
- **Successful:** These are plots that achieved the kinetic action that was planned, regardless of the outcome in number of deaths, the response to the attack or the long-term consequences.
- **Failed:** These are plots that were unsuccessful because of something the would-be perpetrators did, a factor internal to the plot – either they made a mechanical mistake or they had a change of intention.
- **Foiled:** These are plots that were unsuccessful because of some kind of intervention, whether from members of the public, friends or family, or by government authorities; in the United States this is usually FBI or local or state law enforcement, sometimes with the assistance of the intelligence agencies of foreign governments.

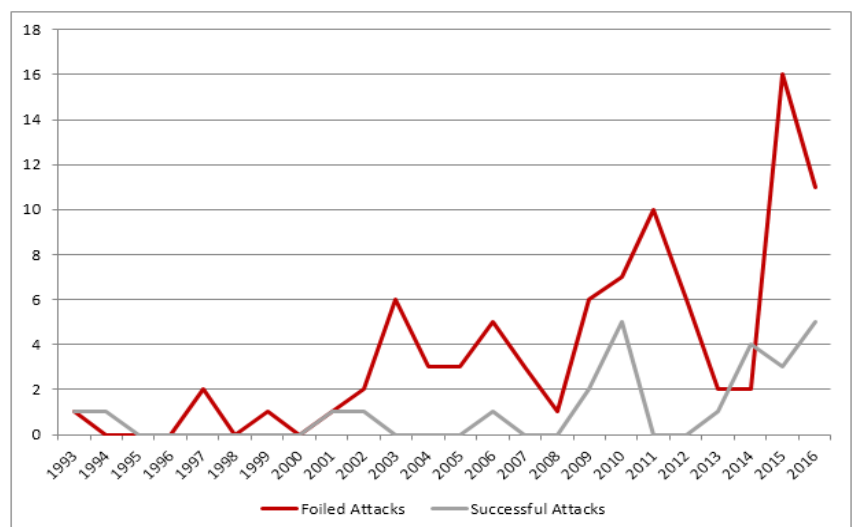
The analysis of research and data from the project can be used to curate a better understanding of the process of either foiling or completing a terrorist attack, and how intervention can increase the number of foiled attacks as compared to completed or successful attacks. This research brief outlines some of the key findings, focusing on trends and case studies from the data collected from the United States.

FINDINGS

FREQUENCY AND OUTCOMES

Since the February 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, there have been 121 jihadist-linked plots to use violence against the American homeland. Only 15 of these plots were completely successful, with an additional seven that were partially successful and partially foiled; one that was partially successful and partially failed; and two that contained elements of success, with further aspects of the attack that were both failed and foiled.

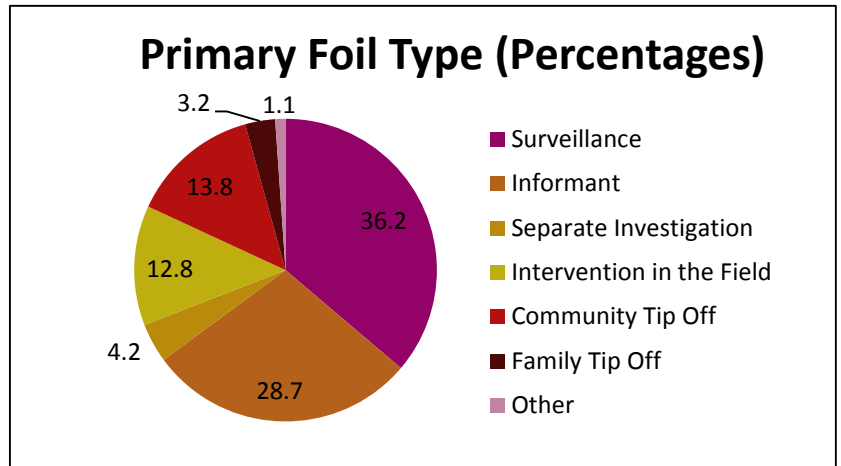
The number of attempted and successful plots has increased in recent years, both in the United States and in the other countries studied, with a steep increase after 2010.



Frequency of successful and foiled attacks by year (1993-2016).

However, most U.S. jihadist plots were completely or partially foiled (82%), and most of those foiled plots involve government surveillance and/or government informants who enter the plot at an early stage. Surveillance is also the most frequent route to disruption outside the United States. Despite the dominance of early government intervention, in 13 cases, community tip offs and in three cases, family tip offs, set the investigation in motion.

Of the 16 cases that involved a failure of plans, six failed completely, three had elements of success, and seven also involved interventions that foiled the plot.



STAGES OF DISCOVERY AND PROGRESS

This project defined and identified five distinct plot stages, for both discovery and implementation, with an additional stage in discovery to code those cases where the plot was not discovered until “after the fact,” that is, for example, when the plot was discovered only as a result of an arrest made for other reasons. These stages include the perpetrators’ initial communication of intent, attempts to acquire capabilities, practice and training for an attack, specification of target and method, and the final implementation stage (the “out the door” phase, such as placing a bomb at the target).¹

Most plots in the United States that are foiled are intercepted at a very early stage. Aside from the stings, relatively few cases had progressed very far before they were stopped, showing that the early detection of intent has proved successful for U.S. cases, albeit with associated criticism related to the possibility of entrapment.

- Of the 114 plots that had enough information to determine the stage of discovery, about a quarter (30) were discovered at the point at which they were being implemented, although not all of these turned out to be “successful.”
- A total of 61 plots were discovered at the stage of communication of intent, and of these 13 were halted there, with another 21 stopped as the would-be perpetrators sought to acquire capability for their attack.
 - Of the plots that were known about at the stage of communicating intent, 14 plots still ran until they had a plan laid out, likely in order to collect enough evidence for a prosecution, and a further 12 were stopped at the final point of implementation.
 - Most of these 12 cases involved undercover officers, who provided inert weapons and waited until the perpetrator detonated what they thought was a bomb, or collected what they thought were operational weapons.

Plot Progress	Stage of Discovery						Total
	Communication of Intent	Acquiring Capability	Practice & Training	Plan Laid Out	Implementation	After the Fact	
Communication of Intent	13	0	0	0	0	1	14
Acquiring Capability	21	9	0	0	0	0	30
Practice and training	1	0	1	0	0	0	2
Plan Laid Out	14	4	0	6	0	2	26
Implementation	12	0	0	0	30	0	42
Total	61	13	1	6	30	3	114

Cross tabulation of plot progress by stage of discovery. Actual number of cases is shown.

¹ The progression is not necessarily linear; sometimes targets and methods are selected before an attempt to acquire capabilities, for example.

PERPETRATORS

The data show that after an early period when al-Qaida was the major threat, the United States came to face a disaggregated “homegrown” threat from small groups or individuals who were not actual agents of the organizations the United States and the West were fighting in Afghanistan, the Middle East or Africa. However, it should be noted that the attackers or plotters may believe that they were members of such groups or may have been inspired by the group’s ideological appeals.

- Most U.S. perpetrators of jihadist plots are young men who are American citizens or residents – 81.7 percent of U.S. perpetrators were residents of the United States; few returned foreign fighters are among them.
- Most jihadist plots against the U.S. homeland do not involve large numbers of conspirators; two thirds of the attacks or planned attacks (66.7%) involved only one person and a further 16.7 percent involved only two people.
- True “lone wolves,” individuals who acted without direct outside guidance or face-to-face interaction with fellow conspirators or people they assumed to be like-minded followers of the jihadist cause, were rare (14% of plots), but they were more likely to be successful than perpetrators working in teams, with 63.2 percent of those classified as lone wolves, or possible lone wolves, having some success in accomplishing plots.
- Where religion was known, most perpetrators of jihadist plots in the United States were Muslims from birth (70.7%), but there was also a significant portion of Muslim converts (24%) and a small percentage (5.3%) who were not Muslim at all.
- Many of the individuals in this dataset explained their motive as opposition to the American use of military force against Muslims in civil conflicts abroad.

LOCATIONS, TARGETS AND MODES OF ATTACKS

Almost 30 percent of all U.S. jihadist plots were meant to, or did, occur in New York or its surrounding metropolitan area. Next most frequent was D.C. or Virginia, accounting for 16.8 percent of plots, followed by Florida, California, Texas and Illinois.

Almost half of the U.S. plots were carried out with or planned to involve explosives and almost a third of all plots were armed assaults. Comparing foiled and successful attacks in the United States showed more foiled bombings and more successful armed assaults. The majority of plots were directed at private citizens, whether in public spaces, using public transport or at businesses such as restaurants and bars. Military personnel and the police accounted for almost a third of actual or intended U.S. targets.

METHOD

The dataset used in this report was constructed from public sources on successful, as well as failed and foiled, jihadist attempts to use violence against the homelands of the United States and its Western allies since the first bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993. These sources include not only news outlets but also government documents including Department of Justice and FBI statements. For U.K. cases, Crown Prosecution documents were also consulted. It is acknowledged that any data derived from public sources may omit information known only to intelligence agencies; however, such are the constraints for research in the public domain.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The research has identified a number of areas for important future research. There appear to be some aspects of the U.S. attacks or plots and their perpetrators that make them distinctive from those happening in the allied countries examined. Future research is needed to better understand issues surrounding attack team membership, the numbers of U.S. converts identified and the role of thwarted attempts to travel to overseas conflicts in predicting future action at home.

Further comparative analysis is needed in order to understand whether the forms of attack and the targets selected are different to specific allied countries, rather than all other countries combined. The recent rise in vehicle attacks merits further research in its own right, as does the extent to which modes of attack are changing over time. In regard to early detection of terrorist plots, further research is needed into specific forms of surveillance, the role of tips offs, and the efficacy of general monitoring of suspicious online activity.

RESEARCH TEAM

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To provide feedback, or for any correspondence relating to this research, or for a copy of the full report on this topic, please email START at infostart@start.umd.edu.



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