

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

DECEMBER 12, 2009

Arrests Raise Fears of American Jihad

By EVAN PEREZ

U.S. counterterrorism officials say 2009 has turned into the year of homegrown jihad, with the unmasking of the most serious suspected terror plots involving Americans in about five years.

U.S. investigators are still trying to determine what drew five young Americans to travel last month to Pakistan, where local authorities allege they had sought to join extremist groups that have attacked U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan. U.S. investigators have interviewed some of the men, but haven't verified the information Pakistani officials have released on the case.

The surge in alleged terror cases has raised concerns among counterterrorism officials. Some officials say young men have been swayed by the escalating war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as intensifying Internet recruiting of Westerners by extremist groups.

At a Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee hearing last month, experts on terrorism cited the recent cases as evidence that the threat of radicalization, long an issue in Europe, has become a major concern in the U.S.

In September, terrorism investigators trailed Najibullah Zazi, a 24-year-old Afghan-born U.S. resident, as he made his way from Denver to New York City in what they later alleged was an aborted plot to carry out attacks using

explosives made from beauty supplies.

A month later, investigators arrested David Headley, a U.S.-born son of a Pakistani father and American mother, and charged him with plotting with al Qaeda-linked Pakistani militants to attack a newspaper in Denmark that printed satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. In recent weeks, investigators alleged that Mr. Headley told them he helped a Pakistani group, Lashkar-i-Taiba, scout locations for the deadly 2008 Mumbai terror attack.

Last month, U.S. Army Maj. Nidal Hasan was arrested and charged with killing 13 people in a shooting spree at Fort Hood Army base in Texas. Prior to the attack, Maj. Hasan was in touch with an extremist Muslim cleric in Yemen, Anwar al-Awlaki, investigators say.

Also last month, the U.S. unveiled charges against several men who allegedly recruited about 20 young men of Somali descent to join an Islamist insurgent group, al Shabaab, which is fighting Somalia's U.S.-backed government.

All of the men who have been charged have pleaded not guilty.

A common thread in these and other cases, terrorism officials say, is that they involve immigrants and second-generation Americans, who traditionally have been viewed as more

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resistant to extremist ideology. Many cases uncovered in past years have involved American converts to Islam, and officials say religious converts often are more zealous in their beliefs.

"We're not just talking about converts anymore," said Juan Zarate, senior adviser to the Center for Strategic and International Studies and a former White House national-security official under President George W. Bush. "To have first- and second-generation immigrants who are born into Islam falling prey to extremist ideology, that's more worrisome."

The spate of U.S. cases has emerged as alleged plots appear to have declined in Europe and elsewhere, some officials say. The cases also come as the Obama administration attempts to repackage many counterterrorism policies enacted under Mr. Bush, but hasn't yet ended the wars that began during Mr. Bush's tenure.

"Despite the change of administrations, you still have the perception of war in Muslim lands, as the extremists see it," Mr. Zarate said. "It's like moths to fire. Individuals seduced by these extremist messages are motivated by these conflicts."

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Printed in The Wall Street Journal, page A6