Muslim-American Terrorism in 2013

CHARLES KURZMAN

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, CHAPEL HILL

FEBRUARY 5, 2014
Sixteen Muslim-Americans were indicted for or killed during violent terrorist plots in 2013, similar to the 2012 total of 14, bringing the total since 9/11 to 225, or less than 20 per year (see Figure 1). Six individuals plotted attacks in the United States (see Figure 2), the fewest since 2008.

Muslim-American terrorism plots in 2013 included the bombing at the Boston Marathon on April 15, which claimed four lives, plus one of the suspects, and injured more than 200 people, including more than a dozen people who suffered amputations. This incident involved the first U.S. fatalities from Muslim-American terrorism since the shooting at Fort Hood in Texas in 2009.

Meanwhile, the United States suffered approximately 14,000 murders in 2013. Since 9/11, Muslim-American terrorism has claimed 37 lives in the United States (Figure 3), out of more than 190,000 murders during this period.

The Boston Marathon bombing was one of 30 mass killings in 2013 with four or more fatalities, according to data compiled by USA Today. The deadliest incident, the shooting of the Washington Navy Yard on September 16, killed 12 people. Mass killings in 2013 led to 137 fatalities, more than three times the victims killed by Muslim-American terrorism in the United States since 9/11.

As in previous years’ editions of this report, cases of Muslim-American terrorism were identified through monitoring of news media, social media, government agency statements, and other researchers’ work on the subject.

Most of the cases of Muslim-American terrorism in 2013 involved individuals joining or attempting to join terrorist organizations overseas: one in Afghanistan, one in Pakistan, four in Yemen, and five in Syria. American officials have identified Syria as a particularly troubling breeding ground for terrorist attacks in the U.S. The director of the National

![Figure 1](https://kurzman.unc.edu/muslim-american-terrorism)
Counterterrorism Center, Matthew Olsen, told Congress that travel to Syria by Muslims from the U.S. and Europe “raises concerns that capable individuals with extremist contacts and battlefield experience could return to their home countries to commit violence.”

The scale of Muslim-American involvement with terrorist groups in Syria is still unclear. Five Muslim-Americans were publicly identified in 2013 as having joined Syrian rebel groups. Two were killed in Syria (Amiir Farouk Ibrahim and Nicole Mansfield), and three returned to the United States (Eric Hassoun, Sinh Vinh Ngo Nguyen, and Basit Javed Sheikh). Another individual (Abdella Tounisi) was arrested en route to Syria.

According to U.S. officials, these individuals are only a small portion of the total: “At least 70 Americans have either traveled to Syria, or tried to, since the civil war started three years ago.” It is not publicly known how many of these individuals succeeded in reaching Syria.

It is also unknown how many of these individuals were associated with rebel groups designated by the U.S. government as terrorist organizations, such as the Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and how many were associated with Syrian rebels that have battled these organizations, including groups that received U.S. support until December 2013. Nguyen and Sheikh, for example, were apparently associated with the Free Syrian Army, which the U.S. government does not consider a terrorist organization. They were not indicted for this activity but for actions after their return to the United States, when they planned with undercover FBI agents to go overseas again, this time to join al-Qa’ida affiliates.

Additional individuals who have joined or attempted to join terrorist organizations in Syria will be counted in future versions of this report when they are indicted or when they are known to have engaged in an act of terrorism.
With the tragic exception of the Boston Marathon bombing, the other four domestic terrorism plots by Muslim-Americans in 2013 posed little risk to public safety. In three of the cases (Erwin Antonio Rios, Matthew Aaron Llaneza, and Terry L. Loewen), undercover agents were involved in the plots from an early stage. Rios obtained an inoperable handgun from an undercover FBI employee he was introduced to by another undercover.

However, this sparse record of terrorist plots was overshadowed by the violence of the Boston Marathon bombing on April 15. Brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev allegedly constructed two explosive devices and detonated them near the finish line of the race, killing three spectators and injuring 264 more. After hiding for several days, the perpetrators then killed a campus police officer in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and tried to take his gun. Tamerlan was killed and Dzhokhar was wounded and arrested after a manhunt that shut down large portions of the Boston metropolitan area.

### Disrupted Plots

Of the violent plots that were disrupted, most (7 of 12 individuals) were discovered through the suspects’ own statements. Two of these involved statements to informants at mosques. Another two individuals (Shelton Thomas Bell and a minor whose name was not released) appear to have been brought to the attention of law enforcement authorities by fellow mosque-goers who were concerned about their extremist comments. Another individual bragged on Facebook about militant activities in Syria (Eric Harroun), and another two alerted law enforcement by contacting fake Syrian rebel web pages operated by the FBI (Basit Sheikh and Abdella Tounisi).

Since 9/11, 54 Muslim-American terrorism suspects and perpetrators were brought to the attention of law enforcement by members of the Muslim-American community, out of 188 individuals where the initial tip was made public. Another 52 individuals were discovered through U.S. government investigations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Plot</th>
<th>Fatalities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hesham Hadayet</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Shot Israeli airline personnel, Los Angeles, California</td>
<td>2 (plus himself)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Bishop</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Flew plane into office tower, Tampa, Florida</td>
<td>0 (plus himself)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee Boyd Malvo</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Ran over students with rented SUV, Chapel Hill, North Carolina</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naveed Haq</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Shot workers at Jewish center, Seattle, Washington</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sulejmen Talovich</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Shot people at shopping center, Salt Lake City, Utah</td>
<td>5 (plus himself)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tahmeed Ahmad</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Attacked military police at Homestead Air Reserve Base, Florida</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdulhakim Muhammad</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Shooting at military recruitment center, Little Rock, Arkansas</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nidal Hasan</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Fort Hood shooting, Texas</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faisal Shahzad</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Times Square car-bomb, New York City</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yonathan Melaku</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Shot at military buildings in northern Virginia</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdullahif Aldosary</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Allegedly detonated explosive at Social Security office in Arizona</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamerlan Tsarnaev</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Boston Marathon bombing</td>
<td>4 (plus T. Tsarnaev)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dzhokhar Tsarnaev</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fewer than 10 percent of the plots disrupted in recent years may have resulted from the National Security Agency surveillance programs that came to light through leaks last year. General Keith Alexander, director of the NSA, stated in June 2013 that the agency’s databases of e-mail and telephone records had helped to prevent “at least 10” potential terrorist events involving “homeland-based threats.” Alexander and FBI Deputy Director Sean Joyce identified four disrupted plots in their testimony to Congress, three of which involved support for terrorist groups overseas. An independent review panel that received classified briefings and documents from the NSA concluded that the collection of bulk telephone records had identified only one terrorism suspect, who was not involved in planning an attack. The panel concluded: “we are aware of no instance in which the [NSA’s telephone records] program directly contributed to the discovery of a previously unknown terrorist plot or the disruption of a terrorist attack,” and no cases in which the program “made a concrete difference in the outcome of a counterterrorism investigation.”

**Material Support for Terrorism**

After the Boston Marathon bombing, two Muslim students from Central Asia, friends of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, were arrested for throwing away evidence that linked Dzhokhar to the explosives. If these students are counted as Muslim-Americans, using the criteria of previous year’s reports – at least one year’s residence in the United States prior to involvement in terrorist activity – they brought the number of indictments for nonviolent support of terrorism in 2013 to seven, the second lowest annual figure since 9/11 (see Figure 4). These figures include forms of assistance, such as money or services, that may be classified as “material support for terrorism” but do not involve acts of violence.

The other five cases of support for terrorism involved relatively small amounts of money (see Figure 5), plus one case of computer assistance and one case that involved sending winter clothes to the Taliban.
After the Boston Marathon bombing, numerous commentators expressed concern that Muslim-American terrorism was on an upward trend. One terrorism expert pointed to a possible "rise in the number of individuals that are radicalizing in the United States."¹⁵ Security officials worried about the attack's "copycat appeal" and expressed surprise that "this didn't happen sooner."¹⁶ James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence, offered the assessment that "US-based extremists will likely continue to pose the most frequent threat to the US Homeland."¹⁷

Yet no copycat incidents occurred during the remaining eight months of 2013. The Boston Marathon bombing, like the handful of other terrorist attacks in the U.S. by Muslim-Americans in the dozen years since 9/11, remained an isolated, rare incident – deadly and frightening but not a trigger for an upsurge in violent radicalization.

About the author:

Notes:

1 Federal Bureau of Investigation, Crime in the United States, 2012, Table 1, “Crime in the United States by Volume and Rate per 100,000 Inhabitants, 1993-2012.” The estimate for 2013 is extrapolated from trends in preceding years.

2 USA Today, December 16, 2013.

3 In particular, I would like to acknowledge and thank the Homegrown Terrorism project of the New America Foundation; the “Terrorist Trial Report Card” of the Center on Law & Security at New York University; the research center of the Investigative Project on Terrorism; the terror trial database produced by Trevor Aaronson at Mother Jones magazine; the “Post-9/11 Terrorism Database” of the Muslim Public Affairs Council; and the extremism and terrorism project of the Anti-Defamation League.


5 A third American, using the pseudonym “Abu Dujana al-Amriki,” may also have died in Syria, but U.S. officials were not immediately able to identify the individual and suspected that the case may have been a hoax. ABC News, January 10, 2014.

6 New York Times, January 10, 2014. According to this report, “Most of the Americans who have traveled to Syria are still there.” According to another news report, however, U.S. officials said the number of Americans who had returned to the U.S. after fighting in Syria was “much higher” than 50. ABC News, January 10, 2014.


10 First Coast News (Jacksonville, Florida), July 19, 2013.


13 Keith Alexander, director of the National Security Agency, and Sean Joyce, deputy director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, testimony before the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. House of Representatives, June 18, 2013.


