



Terrorism Cases Involving Muslim-Americans, 2014

CHARLES KURZMAN

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA, CHAPEL HILL

FEBRUARY 9, 2015



Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security

DUKE - UNC - RTI

Twenty-five Muslim-Americans were associated with violent terrorism in 2014, bringing the total since 9/11 to 250, or less than 20 per year (Figure 1). A large majority of the cases involved travel (5 individuals) or attempted travel (14 individuals) to join designated terrorist organizations in Syria or (in one case) Yemen.

Only six of the 25 individuals plotted or engaged in violence in the United States in 2014 (Figure 2), matching the lowest total since 2008. (Three of these individuals are included provisionally, as the evidence is unclear at present whether their plots ought to be characterized as terrorism.)

Over the 13 years since 9/11, the U.S. government’s counterterrorism efforts have identified 109 Muslim-Americans plotting against targets in the United States. (Another 33 individuals had no publicly-known targets.) Two thirds of the domestic plots were disrupted early, with weapons or explosives provided by undercover agents or informants. Three quarters of plots involving explosives were disrupted early, compared with one third of plots with other weapons.

This is the sixth annual report on Muslim-American terrorism suspects and perpetrators published by the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security. These reports, and the data on which they are based, are available at <http://kurzman.unc.edu/muslim-american-terrorism>.

Twenty Muslim-Americans have carried out attacks on targets in the United States since 9/11 – nine involving firearms, seven involving explosives, two involving knives or hatchets, one each involving a car or small aircraft (Figure 3). In 2014, four terrorism-related incidents involving Muslim-Americans – two using firearms, one a knife, and one a hatchet – killed seven people in 2014, bringing the total number of fatalities in the United States from terrorism by Muslim-Americans since 9/11 to 50.¹

Meanwhile, the United States suffered approximately 14,000 murders in 2014 and more than 200,000 murders since 9/11.² While the murder rate has declined in recent years, mass shootings and “active shooter” incidents have increased.³ In 2014, there were 30 mass shootings with four or more fatalities

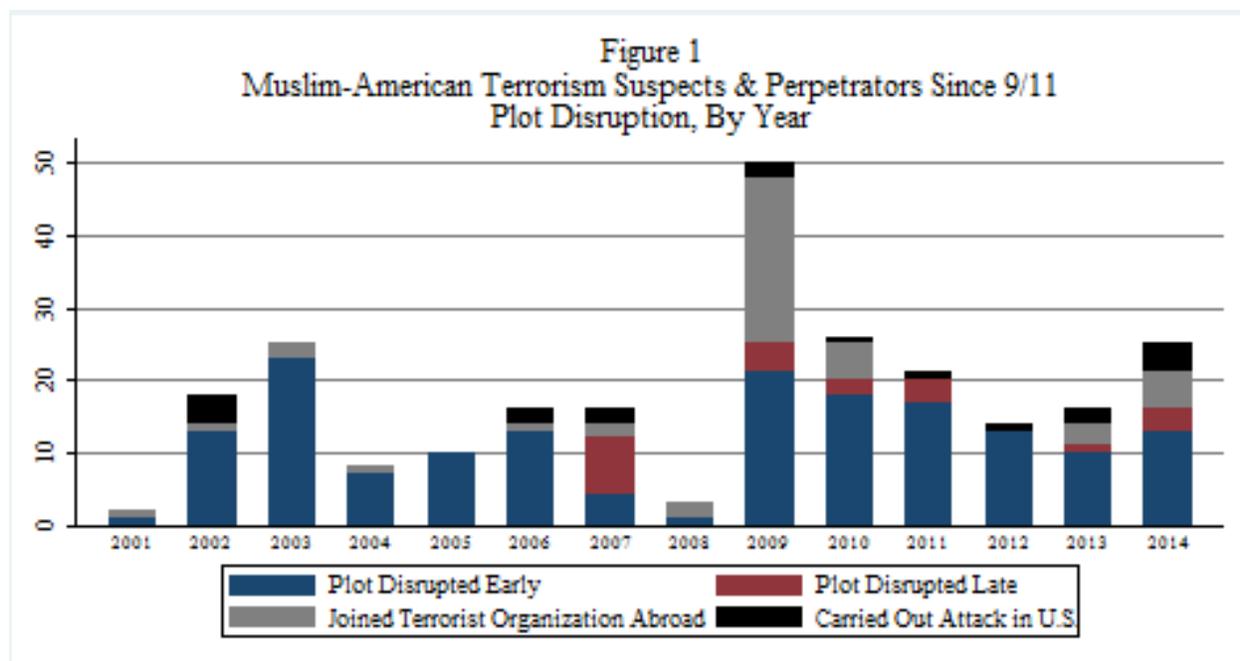
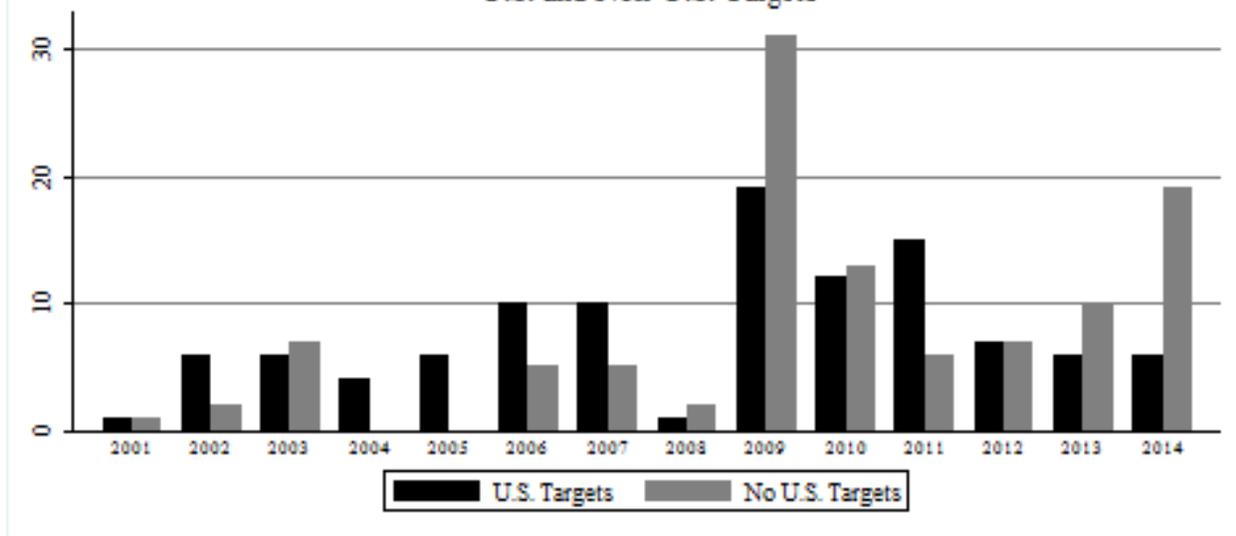


Figure 2
Muslim-American Terrorism Suspects & Perpetrators Since 9/11
U.S. and Non-U.S. Targets



in the United States, killing 136 people,⁴ more than twice as many victims as from Muslim-American terrorism in the United States in more than 13 years since 9/11.

As in previous years' editions of this report, cases of terrorism involving Muslim-Americans were identified through monitoring of news media, social media, government agency statements, and other researchers' work on the subject.⁵

U.S. Plots Remained Rare and Unsophisticated

U.S. government officials have continued to place a high priority on homegrown Islamic terrorism as a threat to public safety in the United States. In June 2014, for example, the Department of Homeland Security's Quadrennial Homeland Security Review noted that "the terrorist threat to the Nation has evolved, but it remains real and may even be harder to detect." Because of these new threats, the review proposed, homeland security programs "will, over the next four years, become even more important."⁶ The director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation,

James B. Comey, testified to Congress in 2014 that homegrown violent extremists "are increasingly savvy and willing to act alone," repeating the characterization that his predecessor, Robert S. Mueller III, had used since 2011.⁷

While small numbers of Muslim-Americans continue to be indicted for terrorism-related offenses, the publicly-known cases of domestic plots does not suggest large-scale growth in violent extremism or more sophisticated planning and execution than in recent years. The most deadly plot involved Ali Muhammad Brown, who shot and killed four random people on the street in Washington State and New Jersey in April and June, 2014, as "vengeance" for "Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, all these places where innocent lives are being taken every single day," as he told police officers after his arrest.⁸

Two other cases involved suspects in the early stages of designing terrorism plots: a wiretap on El Mehdi Semlali Fathi revealed his aspiration to bomb Harvard University and a courthouse in Hartford, Connecticut, but he was arrested for and pled guilty to immigration

Figure 2. Muslim-American Terrorism Suspects and Perpetrators, Violent Plots, 2014

Name	Location	Plot or alleged plot	Disrupted	Status of case
Nicholas Teasant	Lodi, CA	Attempting to join terrorist group in Syria	Early	Trial pending
Mohammad Hassan	Dearborn	Attempting to join terrorist group in Syria	Early	Trial pending
Avin Marsalis Brown	Raleigh, NC	Attempting to join terrorist group in Syria	Early	Pled guilty
Akbar Jihad Jordan	Raleigh, NC	Attempting to join terrorist group in Yemen	Early	Pled guilty
El Mehdi Semlali Fathi	Bridgeport, CT	Pled guilty to immigration fraud, not charged or tried for allegations of plot to bomb Harvard and courthouse in Hartford	Early	Pled guilty
Shannon Conley	Arvada, CO	Attempting to join terrorist group in Syria	Early	Pled guilty
Moner Abusalha	Vero Beach, FL	Joining terrorist group in Syria	No	Deceased
Abdullahi Yusuf	Minneapolis, MN	Attempting to join terrorist group in Syria	Early	Trial pending
Abdi Mohamud Nur	Minneapolis, MN	Joining terrorist group in Syria	No	Charged in absentia
Mufid A. Elfgeeh	Rochester, NY	Plot to kill U.S. military veterans	Early	Trial pending
Michael Todd Wolfe	Austin, TX	Attempting to join terrorist group in Syria	Early	Pled guilty
Adam Dandach	Orange County,	Attempting to join terrorist group in Syria	Early	Trial pending
Ali Muhammad Brown	Seattle, WA; West Orange, NJ	Four murders in Washington State and New Jersey in revenge for U.S. policy toward	No	Trial pending
Douglas McAuthur McCain	Minneapolis, MN;	Joining terrorist group in Syria	No	Deceased
Abdirahmaan Muhumed	San Diego, CA			
Yusra Ismail	Minneapolis, MN	Joining terrorist group in Syria	No	Charged in absentia
Alton Nolen	Oklahoma City, OK	Murder and attempted murder of former co-workers; terrorist motives unknown	No	Trial pending
Mohammed Hamzah Khan	Chicago, IL	Attempting to join terrorist group in Syria	Early	Trial pending
Unnamed minor sister of Mohammed Hamzah Khan				Not charged
Unnamed minor brother of Mohammed Hamzah Khan				
Unnamed minor	Denver, CO	Attempting to join terrorist group in Syria; arrested in Germany	Late	Unknown
Unnamed minor				
Unnamed minor				
Zale H. Thompson	New York, NY	Attacking policemen with a hatchet; terrorist motives unknown	No	Deceased
Ismaaiyl Abdullah Brinsley	Baltimore, MD; New York, NY	Attempted murder of former girlfriend; murder of two police officers	No	Trial pending

Early disruption is defined here as coming to the attention of authorities prior to the gathering of weapons or explosives.

fraud before constructing an explosive device; Mufid Elfgeeh purchased a weapon from an undercover FBI agent, allegedly intending to kill U.S. military veterans.

Three additional violent incidents are included in this report on a provisional basis, although the evidence is unclear at present whether

they constituted acts of terrorism: Alton Nolen, who stabbed two former co-workers in Moore, Oklahoma, after he was fired, beheading one of them; Zale Thompson, who injured two police officers with a hatchet and was shot dead; and Ismaaiyl Brinsley, who shot and wounded his former girlfriend in Baltimore, Maryland, took a bus to New York City, and

Figure 3. Muslim-American Terrorist Attacks in the United States Since 9/11

Name	Year	Plot	Fatalities
Hesham Hadayet	2002	Shot Israeli airline personnel, Los Angeles, California	2 (plus himself)
Charles Bishop	2002	Flew plane into office tower, Tampa, Florida	0 (plus himself)
John Allen Muhammad Lee Boyd Malvo	2002	"Beltway Snipers," metropolitan Washington, D.C. area	17
Mohammed Taheri-Azar	2006	Ran over students with rented SUV, Chapel Hill, North Carolina	0
Naveed Haq	2006	Shot workers at Jewish center, Seattle, Washington	1
Sulejmen Talovich	2007	Shot people at shopping center, Salt Lake City, Utah	5 (plus himself)
Tahmeed Ahmad	2007	Attacked military police at Homestead Air Reserve Base, Florida	0
Abdulhakim Muhammad	2009	Shooting at military recruitment center, Little Rock, Arkansas	1
Nidal Hasan	2009	Fort Hood shooting, Texas	13
Faisal Shahzad	2010	Times Square car-bomb, New York City	0
Yonathan Melaku	2011	Shot at military buildings in northern Virginia	0
Abdullatif Aldosary	2012	Allegedly detonated explosive at Social Security office in Arizona	0
Tamerlan Tsarnaev Dzhokhar Tsarnaev	2013	Boston Marathon bombing	4 (plus T. Tsarnaev)
Ali Muhammad Brown	2014	Shot people in Washington State and New Jersey	4
Alton Nolen	2014	Attacked former co-workers in Oklahoma with a knife, beheading one of them; terrorist motives unknown	1
Zale Thompson	2014	Attacked and injured 2 policemen in New York City with a hatchet; terrorist motives uncertain	0 (plus himself)
Ismaiyil Abdullah Brinsley	2014	Shot and wounded former girlfriend in Baltimore; shot and killed two police officers in New York City; terrorist motives unknown	2

shot and killed two police officers before killing himself. New York City Police Commissioner William Bratton called Thompson's violence a "terrorist attack," based on a review of Thompson's online statements and browser history.⁹ Brinsley appears to have been motivated by personal troubles – his former girlfriend talked him out of suicide before he shot her – and anger about police violence against African-Americans, not by sympathies with Islamic terrorism, although one online post nine months earlier may have expressed support for violent extremism. Evidence of Nolen's motives has not yet been made public.

These disturbing cases do not indicate widespread recruitment of Muslim-Americans by transnational terrorist organizations to engage in attacks in the United States, or sophisticated planning by the handful of individuals who have self-radicalized.

Recruitment to Terrorist Groups Overseas

The growth in terrorism cases involving Muslim-Americans is due entirely to individuals and small groups seeking to join two revolutionary groups based in Syria, the Nusra Front, which is affiliated with al-Qaeda, and its rival, the self-styled Islamic State (sometimes referred to by the acronyms IS, ISIL, and ISIS). Both groups have been designated as terrorist organizations by the United States government. Five individuals were identified in 2014 as reaching Syria and joining one of these groups: Moner Abusalha, Douglas McCain, and Abdirahmaan Muhumed, who died in clashes in Syria; and Abdi Mohamud Nur and Yusra Ismail, who are believed to be alive and were charged in absentia. An additional five individuals were identified in 2013 as having joined militant organizations in Syria. Fourteen Muslim-Americans were detained at airports in 2014, allegedly on their way to join militants in Syria (plus one on his way to Yemen), on top of two

in 2013 (plus four on their way to Yemen and one on his way to Pakistan).

In total, 26 Muslim-Americans have been publicly identified as joining or attempting to join militants in Syria over the past two years. These 26 individuals are a fraction of the Muslim-Americans suspected by the U.S. government of having traveled or attempted to travel to Syria, who officials estimate to number 100 or more.¹⁰ FBI Director James Comey told reporters in August 2014 that the actual figure may be many times more than 100: "When I give you the number of more than 100, I can't tell you with high confidence that's a hundred of 200, that's a hundred of 500, that's a hundred of a 1,000 or more, because it's so hard to track."¹¹

If dozens or hundreds more Muslim-Americans are fighting in the civil war in Syria, they are keeping such a low profile – no recruitment videos or online messages – that they have not come to the attention of the media and research organizations scouring the internet for evidence of their existence.

They have also not returned to the United States and engaged in violence. This has been a concern of U.S. officials since the Syrian conflict began to attract foreign fighters two years ago.¹² In late 2013, the director of the National 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."¹³ The murders at the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine office in early 2015, one of whose perpetrators claimed to have trained in Yemen with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, heightened concerns further.

Of the 250 Muslim-American terrorism suspects and perpetrators since 9/11

identified in this report, approximately 35 (14 percent) have returned to the United States after training with designated terrorist organizations abroad. Four fifths of these individuals had been with groups in Afghanistan or Pakistan, plus two each in Iraq, Somalia, and Syria, and one in the Dagestan region of the Russian Federation.

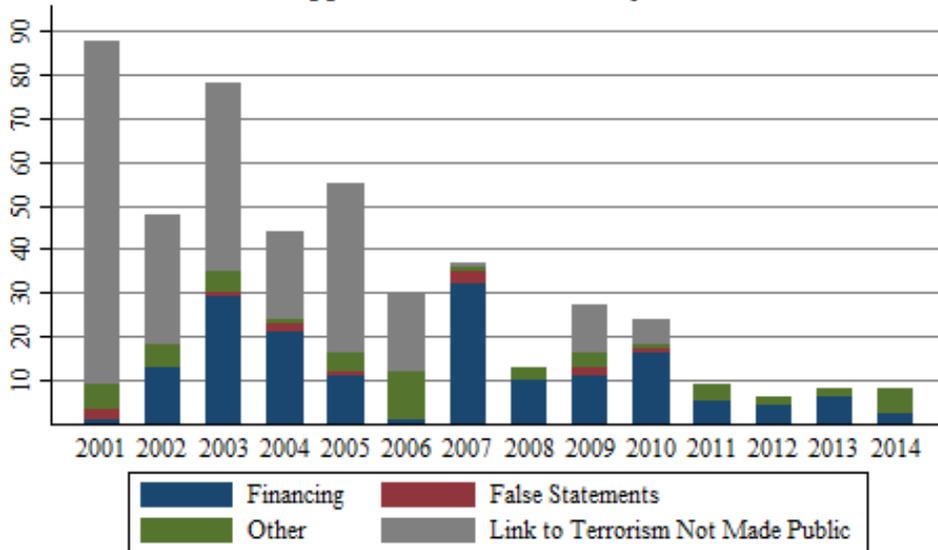
Most of the returnees were arrested for plots aimed at targets overseas. Only nine of 35 returnees engaged in plots aimed at targets in the United States, and only two of them succeeded in carrying out attacks: Tamerlan Tsarnov, who allegedly trained in Dagestan and bombed the Boston Marathon in 2013, and Faisal Shahzad, who trained with militants in Pakistan and attempted to detonate a car bomb in New York City's Times Square in 2010 (apparently his training was inadequate, because his bomb was improperly constructed and did not explode). The returnees' rate of "success" in carrying out plots in the U.S. (2 of 9) was not significantly higher than the rate among Muslim-American terrorism suspects and perpetrators who had not trained abroad (18 of 100).

The number of returnees has trended downward in recent years, from three per year before 2010 to less than two per year (8 total) since then. Despite the presence of Islamic insurgencies in a variety of locations over the past dozen years, there have been very few instances of Muslim-Americans returning to the United States from terrorist training camps.

Non-Violent Support for Terrorism

Cases of non-violent support for terrorism -- assistance such as money or services that does not involve acts of violence -- remained very low in 2014 (see Figure 5). Eight Muslim-Americans were indicted for such offenses in 2014: one who attempted to recruit an FBI

Figure 5
Muslim-American Terrorism Suspects and Perpetrators Since 9/11
Support for Terrorism, By Year

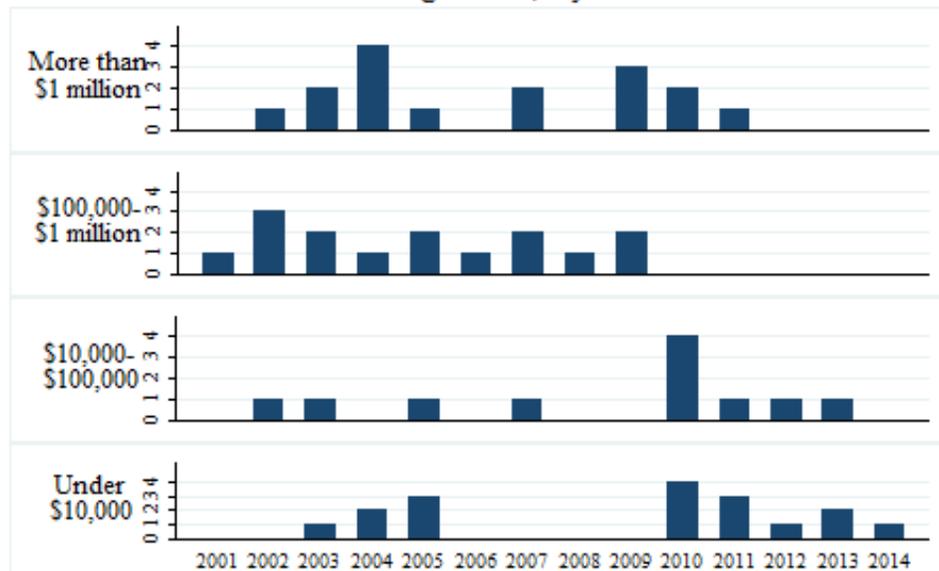


informant to join al-Shabaab in Syria in 2011, two who allegedly assisted people traveling to Syria, three who allegedly wired small amounts of money in support of al-Shabaab (see Figure 6), one who tweeted in support of the Islamic State (arrested on unrelated weapons possession charges), and one who lied about

his contact with the Tsarnaev brothers after the Boston Marathon bombing.

The virtual disappearance of these support cases suggests that Muslim-Americans have little contact with terrorist activities in the United States or overseas.

Figure 6
Muslim-American Terrorism Suspects and Perpetrators Since 9/11
Financing Cases, By Year



Local Law Enforcement Less Concerned About Muslim-American Terrorism Than Right-Wing Terrorism

In a survey conducted last year by David Schanzer, Charles Kurzman, and the Police Executive Research Forum, 382 police chiefs and sheriffs across the United States reported their perception of the threat of violent extremism in their jurisdictions. Only 3 percent rated Al-Qaeda inspired violent extremism as a severe threat, half the proportion that rated other forms of violent extremism as severe threats. Full results of this survey will be reported later this year.¹⁴

Another study by the START Center at the University of Maryland found that there has been more individual radicalization from the far right than among Muslims in the United States.¹⁵ Recent radicals on the right include Eric Matthew Frein, who allegedly shot two state troopers in Pennsylvania, killing one of them; Dennis R. Marx, who allegedly tried to take over a courthouse in Georgia with firearms and explosives; and Robert James Talbot, Jr., who allegedly plotted to rob banks, attack mosques, and kill police in Texas and federal officials in Washington, D.C., in order to “restore America Pre-Constitutionally” and “stop ... the Regime with action by bloodshed.”¹⁶

About the author:

Charles Kurzman is a professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a specialist on Islamic movements. His book, *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2011. He can be contacted through his website, <http://kurzman.unc.edu>.

Indeed, a Fox News Poll from 2011 found that more Americans are concerned about “a terrorist attack in the area where you live” by “non-Muslim Americans who are antigovernment fanatics” (49 percent) than from “radical Muslim-Americans” (32 percent).¹⁷

As public debate continues over terrorism, it is worth keeping these threats in perspective. Terrorists aim to instill fear disproportionate to their actual capabilities to generate violence, and to provoke social and policy overreactions that they can use in their recruitment efforts.

In the field of public health, the response to crises is calibrated to the level of threat, so as not to alarm the public unnecessarily, violate precious liberties, or waste resources on relatively low-level threats to public safety. Government officials, journalists, and the public would do well to follow this model when responding to terrorist threats as well.

Notes:

¹ The number of fatalities associated with the “Beltway Snipers,” John Allen Muhammad and Lee Boyd Malvo, is listed as 17 in this year’s report, up from 11 in previous years’ reports, to include additional victims who were killed in previous months in other parts of the country. The pair’s motives and association with Islamic extremism remain unclear. Sari Horwitz and Michael Ruane, *Sniper: The Hunt for the Killers Who Terrorized the Nation* (New York: Random House, 2003); Angie Cannon, *23 Days of Terror: The Compelling True Story of the Hunt and Capture of the Beltway Snipers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010);

² Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States, 2013*, Table 1, “Crime in the United States by Volume and Rate per 100,000 Inhabitants, 1993-2013.” The estimate for 2014 is extrapolated from trends in preceding years.

³ Amy P. Cohen, Deborah Azrael, and Matthew Miller, “Rate of Mass Shootings Has Tripled Since 2011, Harvard Research Shows,” *Mother Jones*, October 15, 2014; Federal Bureau of Investigation, “A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States Between 2000 and 2013,” September 16, 2013.

⁴ Mass Shooting Tracker, http://shootingtracker.com/wiki/Mass_Shootings_in_2014. According to this source’s preferred definition of four or more casualties (killed or wounded), the total for 2014 is 283 incidents with 349 fatalities and 1,026 people wounded. An alternative listing identifies 24 mass killings of four or more in 2014, with a total of 110 fatalities: USA Today, “Behind the Bloodshed: The Untold Story of America’s Mass Killings,” updated January 19, 2015, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/mass-killings/index.html>.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Department of Homeland Security, *Quadrennial Homeland Security Review*, June 18, 2014, p. 6.

⁷ James B. Comey, testimony before the House Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies, March 26, 2014; and testimony before House Homeland Security Committee, September 17, 2014. The phrase was used by Robert S. Mueller III in a speech to the Commonwealth Club of California on November 17, 2011; and in testimony before Congress on May 16, 2012, and June 19, 2013.

⁸ *The State of Washington v. Ali Muhammad Brown*, Superior Court of Washington for King County, Certification for Determination of Probable Cause, August 20, 2014.

⁹ Reuters, October 24, 2014.

¹⁰ *The New York Times*, May 31, 2014 (“about 100”); June 14, 2014 (“roughly 100”); August 29, 2014 (“more than 100”). See also Peter R. Neumann, “Foreign fighter total in Syria/Iraq now exceeds 20,000; surpasses Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s,” International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation, King’s College London, January 2015.

¹¹ CBS News, August 11, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/fbi-director-americans-fighting-in-syria-hard-to-track>.

¹² Brian Michael Jenkins, “When Jihadis Come Marching Home: The Terrorist Threat Posed by Westerners Returning from Syria and Iraq,” Rand, 2014.

¹³ Matthew Olsen, director of the National Counterterrorism Center, “The Homeland Threat Landscape and U.S. Response,” testimony before the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, November 13, 2013.

¹⁴ Preliminary results are reported in David Schanzer and Charles Kurzman, “Homegrown Terrorism Threat Was Overhyped,” *Newark Star-Ledger*, April 14, 2014

¹⁵ START Center, University of Maryland, “Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States: Preliminary Findings,” January 2015.

¹⁶ *United States of America v. Robert James Talbot, Jr.*, United States District Court for the Southern District of Texas, Criminal Complaint, March 27, 2014.

¹⁷ Fox News Poll conducted March 14-16, 2011.