Dangers of Domestic Terrorism in the United States

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At the present time, domestic terrorist activity in the United States is relatively infrequent. The most important threats domestically appear to be from right-wing extremists, radical environmentalists and animal rights groups, and militant jihadi extremists. Violence from a variety of other groups is also possible. While domestic terrorism from any source was limited since the attacks of 9/11, increased surveillance and concern over security after the attacks has probably led to all types of groups restricting the activities that they might have considered attempting. In addition, it is possible that the attack of 9/11 may have had the additional psychological impact of deterring domestic groups from using terrorist tactics for fear of being linked with al Qaeda.

The greatest domestic threat remains extreme right-wing groups. There are a multitude of such organizations such as various splinter groups from the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), the Aryan Nations, and some militia groups -- and their hatred and fear of ethnic and religious minorities and foreign cultures has not abated (Michael, 2003). It is likely that members of some of these organizations have participated in backlash attacks against Arab-American, Muslims, and members of other “foreign” groups in the aftermath of 9/11. Such activities and hate crimes may, for the moment, be the limit of their activities, but such activities are also indicative of the continuing threat. The generalized suspicion that has fallen on foreign immigrants and residents may even have given these groups some hope that a portion of their desired policy changes may occur without continuing to resort to violence. The recent debates over limiting immigration to the United States and controlling borders may have provided some additional hope to the groups that ‘foreign’ elements would be excluded.

While there have been limited activities by the right, the situation may not continue indefinitely. Eventually, it will become clear that the racially pure society, cleansed of foreign
ideas and influences that the extremists hope to create, will not be achieved. The election of President Obama, no doubt, has been seen by at least some elements of the extreme right as an indication that national policies are going in the wrong direction and that violence may again be “necessary.” The diffuse nature of the groups on the extreme right and their penchant for lone wolf and leaderless resistance styles of operations (Michael, 2003, p. 115; Smith, 2000) means that such groups will be difficult to infiltrate and guard against on a consistent basis, even though some potentially serious attacks have been stopped by authorities in the past (Pitcavage, 2001).

Radical environmental groups such as the Earth Liberation Front and rights extremists such as the Animal Liberation Front are the so-called “eco-terrorists.” They also pose a continued threat. These groups in the United States have generally limited their attacks to property, although some observers fear that there is a danger of eventual escalation to violence against people if the property attacks fail as has already occurred with some animal rights and ecology groups in Europe (Ackerman, 2003). These groups have been effective in the past with their property attacks, and these activities have led companies to change their practices. The attacks have directly caused millions of dollars in damages, and they have also led the targeted companies to either expend funds for greater security in order to avoid damages in the future or to forgo the use of animals in ways that the animal rights groups oppose in order to avoid these security costs (Lutz & Lutz, 2006). Given the past successes, these groups are likely to continue the same types of activities. The activists in these groups have also utilized the leaderless resistance style of activity in their campaigns (Joose, 2007).

There was a great fear that there would be domestic violence by individuals who identified with al Qaeda and global militant jihad (Kushner with Davis, 2004), but this fear has not been borne out by later events. The domestic Arab and Islamic communities in the United States have not been hotbeds of religious extremism, and there have been only a few instances of extremists identifying with the global jihad. A group in Buffalo (the Lackawana Six) had apparently decided against any action before their arrest. The group in Liberty City, Florida that was infiltrated by the FBI probably would never have been able to launch any kind of serious operation on their own. There were groups in northern Virginia and New Jersey, however, that were apparently more serious about planning attacks, but they seem to have been the exceptions (Silber & Bhatt, 2007). As has been suggested elsewhere, the greatest danger from militant jihadi groups is more likely to come from the more radicalized, and thus more inclined to violence, sections of Islamic communities in West Europe than from American Muslims.

The groups in Western Europe have been less well integrated into society and face more discrimination (Leiken, 2005). These individuals or groups remain a danger to the United States since, as European passport holders, they can easily travel to the United States.

There have been other groups that have been violent in the past and could continue to be so in the future. Anti-abortion groups have successfully relied on property damage to clinics in the past to disrupt abortions. More extreme members of these groups, however, have opted for intimidation, assaults, and even murder (Juergensmeyer, 2000, p. 21-4). These operations have reduced the availability of abortions (Laqueur, 1999, p. 229) and, as long as abortions remain legal, such actions may continue. The Jewish Defense League and similar groups were once active in terrorist operations against Soviet interests and those that disagreed with their aims (George & Wilcox, 1996, p. 306-12), but now they appear to be dormant. Puerto Rican nationalists have also periodically launched bombing campaigns on the mainland and on the
island an effort to achieve independence. Another series of such attacks by these nationalists is quite possible, especially as the effects of 9/11 fade into the past and the groups are less fearful of being compared to al Qaeda or being considered allies of that organization. Other groups active in the past have included émigré groups unhappy with policies in their homelands (Lutz & Lutz, 2007, p.104-5, 125-6), and it is also possible that similar émigré organizations could reappear. It is always possible, of course, that currently new or unforeseen groups with new agendas and complaints could appear and elect to use terrorism in order to achieve their goals.

References