

ISSUE BRIEF

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Terror Plot 62: Lone-Wolf Terrorist Attacks in the U.S. and Canada Call for Renewed Vigilance

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Recent attacks in Canada and New York City by homegrown, lone-wolf terrorists remind us again that “eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.” None of these attacks are thought to be directly connected to al-Qaeda or Islamic State (ISIS) operatives. Rather, all three were homegrown, lone-wolf terrorist attacks—perpetrated by individuals who acted on their own, rather than as part of a larger, formal terrorist group, after having been radicalized in the U.S. or Canada by Islamist extremist groups and ideology. A recent beheading in Oklahoma also deserves discussion but will not be added to the list at this point.

Since The Heritage Foundation began tracking Islamist terror attacks and plots after 9/11, the total number has risen to 62. The two attacks in Canada, one a hit-and-run in Quebec and the other a shooting at Canada’s War Memorial and Parliament in Ottawa, were both driven by extremist ideologies, and each resulted in the death of a Canadian soldier. Because these attacks were not on U.S. targets, they are not included in the Heritage list, but are worth mentioning because they fit the now-common pattern of homegrown, lone-wolf terrorism in the U.S.

Beheading in Moore, Oklahoma

On September 25, Alton Nolen returned to Vaughan Foods, outside Oklahoma City, after having been suspended from his job there earlier that day.¹ Upon entering the building, Nolen drew a knife and attacked and decapitated Vaughan Foods employee Colleen Huffard. He then attacked Traci Johnson, the woman who had initiated the complaint that led to Nolen’s suspension, stabbing and slashing her. Mark Vaughan, the company’s chief operating officer and a reserve deputy with the Oklahoma County Sheriff’s Department, shot Nolen with a rifle and stopped the attack.² Both Johnson and Nolen were taken to the hospital and survived.

Nolen’s conversion to Islam is thought to have taken place while he was incarcerated from 2011 to 2013 for drug crimes and assaulting a police officer. According to news reports and anonymous federal law enforcement officers, Nolen’s Facebook page was “provocative” and included photos of Osama bin Laden, prominent ISIS fighters, a beheading, and other Islamist themes.³

According to prosecutor Greg Mashburn, Nolen had “some sort of infatuation with beheadings.”⁴ His posts also reportedly attack the U.S. for being “wicked” for supporting Israel.⁵ Nolen’s problems at work reportedly were caused in part by his efforts to convert others to Islam and things he said during conversations about stoning. He was suspended for comments about race. According to Mashburn, Nolen “was saying Arabic terms in the attack.”⁶

In this case, revenge seems to be the primary motivation for Nolen’s attack, and federal officials and the local prosecutor, Mashburn, are treating this case as an incident of workplace violence rather

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than terrorism.⁷ While his extreme religious views and infatuation with beheadings provide indicators of terrorism, it is not clear that the attack was connected to those beliefs. For now, this incident will not be added to the Heritage list, but as Nolen's prosecution commences and more details become available, that may change.

Plot 62: Ax Attack on NYC Police Officers

On October 23, Zale Thompson attacked four New York City police officers in broad daylight with a hatchet, slashing one on the arm and hitting another in the head before being shot and killed by the other two officers. The officer hit in the head was critically injured but is currently recovering. A bystander was struck in back by a stray bullet fired by police officers, and there are some reports that she may be paralyzed.⁸ The New York City Police Department (NYPD) has called this "a terrorist attack."⁹

Zale Thompson was a recent convert to Islam who increasingly spent a great deal of time online reading, watching, and posting material regarding jihad and Islamist extremism. He frequented websites associated with al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other

terrorist groups and watched videos of violent acts including beheadings.¹⁰ He made various posts on social media sites advocating for jihad and guerrilla warfare against the U.S. Based on the NYPD investigation of his computer search history, Thompson's anti-Americanism and thoughts of terrorism had "more intensity in recent days,"¹¹ and he reportedly googled "jihad against police" and the recent attacks in Canada in the days before his attack. Some reports indicate that Thompson also sought to attack white individuals because he believed that whites needed to pay for their racism and oppression of blacks.¹²

Given that Thompson was directly inspired by the work of radical Islamism to strike at the U.S., there is no doubt that Thompson should be considered an Islamist terrorist, making him the 62nd terrorist plot or attack against the U.S. since 9/11.

Defending the Homeland

Of the past 62 terrorist attacks or plots against the U.S. homeland, 51 could be considered home-grown, with the recent attacks in Canada also fitting this description. Many of these attacks were lone-wolf attacks without formal connection to a terror-

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1. Abby Ohlheiser, "What We Know About Alton Nolen, Who Has Been Charged with Murder in the Oklahoma Beheading Case," *The Washington Post*, September 30, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2014/09/30/what-we-know-about-alton-nolen-who-has-been-charged-with-murder-in-the-oklahoma-beheading-case/> (accessed October 30, 2014).
 2. Ibid.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Sean Murphy, "Oklahoma Man Charged with Murder in Beheading," Associated Press, September 30, 2014, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/2ffc65b9329c43598a5ed3215c2aa779/oklahoma-man-charged-murder-beheading> (accessed October 30, 2014).
 5. Jamie Schram and Chris Perez, "Suspect in Oklahoma Beheading Tried Converting Co-Workers to Islam," *The New York Post*, September 26, 2014, <http://nypost.com/2014/09/26/woman-beheaded-by-co-worker-in-oklahoma/> (accessed October 30, 2014).
 6. Michael Martinez and Elliott C. McLaughlin, "Prosecutor to Seek Death Penalty in Oklahoma Beheading," CNN, October 2, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/02/justice/oklahoma-beheading-death-penalty/> (accessed October 30, 2014).
 7. Ohlheiser, "What We Know About Alton Nolen."
 8. Jan Ransom, Rocco Parascandola, and Corinne Lestch, "NYPD Cops Recovering from Injuries by Hatchet-Wielding Man," *The New York Daily News*, October 25, 2014, <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/nyc-crime/nypd-cops-recovering-injuries-hatchet-wielding-man-article-1.1987269> (accessed October 30, 2014).
 9. Shimon Prokupecz and Kevin Conlon, "NYPD: Hatchet Attack an Act of Terror," CNN, October 26, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/24/us/new-york-police-attacked/> (accessed October 29, 2014).
 10. "NYPD: Man Who Attacked Cops in Queens with Hatchet Was a 'Self Radicalized' Muslim Convert," CBS New York, October 24, 2014, <http://newyork.cbslocal.com/2014/10/24/nypd-officer-critical-but-stable-after-hatchet-attack-in-queens/> (accessed October 30, 2014).
 11. Selim Algar, Shawn Cohen, and Larry Celona, "Pro-ISIS Muslim Convert in NYPD Ax Attack Called for Jihad," *The New York Post*, October 24, 2014, <http://nypost.com/2014/10/24/man-who-struck-cop-with-ax-supported-isis/> (accessed October 30, 2014).
 12. Kevin Fasick, Amber Jamieson, and Laura Italiano, "Ax Attacker Wanted 'White People to Pay' for Slavery," *The New York Post*, October 25, 2014, <http://nypost.com/2014/10/25/pro-jihadi-ax-attacker-wanted-white-people-to-pay-for-slavery/> (accessed October 30, 2014).
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ist group. As a result, the Department of Homeland Security has increased security at federal buildings in major U.S. cities and called for local law enforcement officials around the nation to be prepared for more attacks.¹³

While this increased security is appropriate, the U.S. must do more. Specifically, Congress and the Administration should:

- **Maintain essential counterterrorism tools.** Support for important investigative tools is essential to maintaining the security of the U.S. and combating terrorist threats. Furthermore, legitimate government surveillance programs are also a vital component of U.S. national security, and should be allowed to continue. The need for effective counterterrorism operations, however, does not relieve the government of its obligation to follow the law and respect individual privacy and liberty. In the American system, the government must do both equally well.
- **Share FBI information more broadly with state and local law enforcement.** Despite the lessons of 9/11 and other terrorist plots, the culture of the FBI continues to resist sharing information with state and local law enforcement. This culture must change and change rapidly. As large-scale, complicated terrorist attacks become harder to execute, the lone-wolf scenario becomes more of a threat. America therefore has to leverage the experience, capabilities, authorities, and relationships found in local law enforcement to detect budding terrorists before they

strike. Either Congress should pass legislation to enable sharing, or the Administration should change internal FBI procedures.

- **Increase cooperation with Canada.** The U.S. and Canada are tied together by shared geography, a strong alliance, and a dedication to freedom, which means that both nations face nearly identical threats from terrorists. While the U.S. and Canada cooperate on a variety of issues including counterterrorism, both nations should redouble their efforts and commit to doing more regular joint risk assessments to create greater awareness of threats.

Remaining Vigilant

The threat of terrorism remains real. With ISIS maintaining a strong presence in Iraq and Syria and al-Qaeda groups remaining strong, individuals will continue to be inspired by radical Islamist ideologies. The U.S. must continue to strengthen and streamline its counterterrorism enterprise so that federal, state, and local law enforcement, together with civil society, can stop individuals before they radicalize and engage in terrorism. Ensuring a proactive approach is the best way to keep the U.S. safe while defending the liberty of its citizens.

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13. Associated Press, "US to Increase Security at Some Federal Buildings," October 28, 2014, http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/U/US_SECURITY_FEDERAL_BUILDINGS?SITE=AP&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT&CTIME=2014-10-28-17-31-02 (accessed October 30, 2014)