

SPECIAL ANALYSIS

Potential 9/11 Anniversary Threats

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Overview

As the 13th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks approaches, there are reportedly no known, credible plots against the U.S. homeland. Attacks against western interests overseas seem to be a more realistic threat at this time; however, the threat of homegrown terrorism remains. Below is an assessment of current terrorist threats to western interests at home and abroad.

Anniversary of the September 11, 2012 Benghazi Attack

September 11 now also serves as the anniversary of the 24-hour siege of the U.S. mission in Benghazi, Libya. U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other American nationals were killed in the 2012 attack. This past June, officials announced that U.S. forces captured a key suspect, militia leader Ahmed Abi Khatallah.

At this time, Libya is experiencing its worst violence since Muammar al-Gaddafi was toppled and killed in 2011. Following the takeover of the Tripoli International Airport in late August by the militant group known as Libyan Dawn, officials warned of the terrorist threat to western interests in the region as roughly a dozen commercial jets were stolen. In response, the Egyptian and Tunisian governments stopped flights emanating from other Libyan airports in Tripoli, Sirte and Misrata over concerns that the airports could be used for suicide missions. Of the missing aircrafts, several have the size and range to reach Europe and Africa. Military experts believe that the jets are being held by a group called the Masked Men Brigade, which is allegedly linked to al Qaeda and Ansar al-Sharia. There is speculation that the planes could be used as "super-high precision guided missiles," as they were in the 2001 attacks, or to bring a large number of armed terrorists to locations open to commercial airlines.



2012 Benghazi Attack
Image Credit: Reuters

The Islamic State

The Islamic State has emerged as one of the most powerful and brutal terrorist organizations in the world. Since the Islamic State gained momentum earlier this year, the group has mainly focused on capturing territory for its expanding caliphate, using both local militants and foreign fighters. They have also launched a significant social media campaign aimed at recruiting westerners to join the group. However, given the recent U.S. involvement in Iraq, it appears the group is now shifting its focus to include western targets both in the homeland and abroad. Within the past few weeks, the Islamic State has released two separate videos depicting the beheading of American journalist James Foley, followed by the beheading of American journalist Steven Sotloff. The Islamic State has vowed to continue beheading Americans if the U.S. does not end its airstrikes on the militant group. The most recent video released features a threat against British hostage David Haines. Although the Islamic State has yet to carry out a direct attack in the west, foreigners returning from fighting in Syria have already conducted attacks in Europe, including a French



Islamic State Fighters
Image Credit: Telegraph

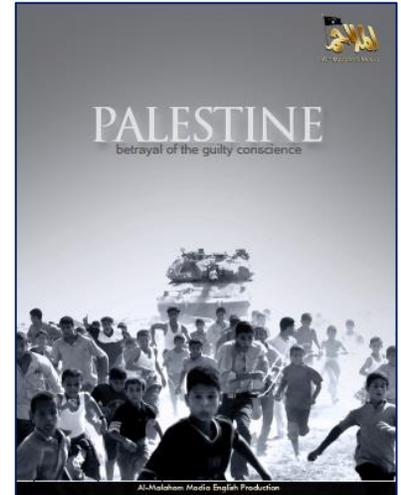


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national who opened fire at the Jewish Museum in Brussels, killing four people. If the U.S. continues airstrikes in Iraq, the Islamic State and its supporters could widen their operations to include the U.S. and other western targets.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's Propaganda

Yemen-based al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) is considered the most operationally active al Qaeda affiliate and was behind the most recent plots against the U.S. homeland in recent years. The group has not specifically threatened an attack surrounding the 9/11 anniversary; however, a recent propaganda release by the group may act as a motivational factor. The new publication, "Palestine," was released on August 22 and is similar to "Inspire" magazine. It is professionally produced, written in the English language and targeted toward Americans and Europeans. This release recycles articles on building pressure cooker bombs and car bombs, which were featured in the first and 12th editions of Inspire. Of particular concern is the updated list of suggested targets, which includes New York's Times Square, oil tankers and trains, military facilities and western companies operating overseas. AQAP is always looking to provide new ideas of targets to help motivate potential lone wolves and guide their planning. Overall, the tactical guidance provided in the magazine is nothing new, but packaged in a different way to further embolden potential terrorist actors.



AQAP's "Palestine" Magazine
Image Credit: Palestine

TSA Enhanced Security Measures

As aviation continues to be a desirable target for terrorist organizations worldwide, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) recently enacted newly enhanced security measures. In July, the measures were put into place at certain airports overseas after intelligence emerged that AQAP and the Syrian al Qaeda affiliate, the al-Nusra Front, are seeking to blow up an airplane with a device that could pass undetected through airport screening measures. As a result, the TSA is not allowing uncharged cell phones or other electronic devices on aircraft bound for the U.S. at some airports overseas. Travelers may be asked to turn on their electronic devices at security checkpoints. If a device cannot be powered on, it will not be allowed on a plane and its owner may have to receive extra screening. There is still no information pertaining to the type of explosives or device design.

Implications

As previously mentioned, there are no credible plots against the U.S. homeland at this time. This is despite an uptick in chatter online, which is common surrounding the 9/11 anniversary. The Islamic State has been at the forefront of the current terrorist landscape, which has essentially placed al Qaeda and its affiliates out of the headlines. With Ayman al-Zawahri's announcement of the formation of an India-based affiliate, al Qaeda may be seeking to reestablish itself as a legitimate, global threat. Additionally, a U.S. airstrike effectively targeted and killed the Somali-based al Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab's leader last week. These developments, as well as those mentioned above, may provide impetus or inspiration for attacks targeting the west. Security teams should be reminded of recent worldwide terrorist activity and remain vigilant in the days surrounding the anniversary.

