

Domestic Islamic Extremism in 2016

A Changing Landscape of Threats



2016 Highlights

- Forty-five U.S. residents were linked to terror plots and other activity motivated by Islamic extremist ideology.
- Nearly half of those U.S. residents (21) are accused of being involved in plotting domestic attacks (rather than providing material support), a higher percentage than recent years
- More extremists are using non-traditional weapons (knives, cars) in their attacks.
- Plots are increasingly focused on public spaces rather than symbolic targets (government, religious buildings).
- More extremists are citing allegiance to more than one group.
- Six plots motivated by Islamic extremist ideology resulted in 104 injuries.
- The June shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, was the deadliest domestic terror attack by a U.S. resident since the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.
- The vast majority of U.S. residents linked to terror motivated by Islamic extremism demonstrated some level of support for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).



Credit: NPR/AP

Introduction

The landscape of domestic terrorism motivated by Islamic extremist ideology is in flux. 2016 saw a wider range of targets, weapons and terrorist affiliations. These shifts create significant uncertainty for the public—and challenges for public safety officials attempting to respond quickly and accurately to terror threats.

2016 saw significant developments that will likely continue for the next few years:

First, a higher percentage of those involved in Islamic extremist activity in the U.S. tried to execute attacks rather than travel abroad to provide material support to terror organizations. This is to some extent due to increased security at border crossings and other difficulties in getting to terror organizations' safe havens. It's also traceable to a shift in terror propaganda directives: organizations like ISIS, attempting to compensate for shrinking territory and tighter security, are encouraging supporters to stay in their home countries and execute attacks there.

Second, more terrorists are using non-traditional weapons, including knives and vehicles (for ramming attacks), although guns and bombs remain the most common weapons used in domestic attacks. This development is a result of terror organization propaganda highlighting the efficacy of knives and vehicles, and also a copycat effect in which domestic terrorists are hoping to mimic the success of attacks abroad using those methods. This development creates particular challenges for law enforcement officers, as these types of attacks don't require much in the way of planning and logistical preparations, and are therefore much harder to predict or detect.

Third, terrorists are moving away from symbolic targets (military, government or religious buildings) in favor of targets of convenience,

which tend to be unguarded public spaces (universities and malls, for example). Attacks in these spaces require less planning time, which reduces law enforcement officers' opportunities to detect and stop these plots.

Fourth, an increasing number of extremists cite allegiance to more than one terror group. In 2016, a number of would-be terror actors cited ISIS as inspiration, but also named at least one additional organization (Al Qaeda, for example). This fluidity of affiliation can complicate attempts to identify the motivations behind specific attacks, which in turn makes it more challenging to take steps to effectively counter and disrupt terrorists' messaging and recruitment.

2016: The Numbers

A total of 45 U.S. residents were arrested, charged or otherwise publicly identified for their involvement in crimes ranging from providing support, attempting to fund or traveling to join terrorist groups abroad, or planning or assisting in plots here at home. There were 81 such cases in 2015, 41 in 2014, 23 in 2013, and 17 in 2012.

Nearly half of the 45 U.S. residents linked to Islamic extremism in 2016 (21) are accused of plotting domestic attacks, compared to about 30% of those individuals in 2015 and one quarter overall between the years 2009 and 2015.

There were six plots in 2016 that resulted in 104 injuries, including the August shooting rampage at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida (49 killed)—the deadliest domestic extremist attack by a U.S. resident since the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombing.



Extremist Profile: Omar Mateen

Omar Mateen, the shooter at the Pulse nightclub, was a 29-year-old resident of St. Lucie, Florida. A U.S. citizen born in New York to Afghan parents, Mateen had an associate's degree in criminal justice and was employed as a security guard. Mateen had expressed support for terror groups prior to the attack. In 2013, co-workers reported that he expressed support for Hezbollah and Al Qaeda (rival groups with distinctive ideologies) and said he hoped the FBI would raid his house so he could become a martyr. A subsequent FBI investigation did not reveal evidence of extremist ties. Mateen

may have interacted with Moner Abu Salha, a former Florida resident who went on to become a suicide bomber for Jabhat al Nusra, Al Qaeda in Syria.

Mateen's motivations remain something of a mystery. He reportedly exhibited violent tendencies prior to the attack; his ex-wife accused him of domestic abuse, and he allegedly threatened coworkers. Domestic violence has been linked to mass shootings—extremist and otherwise. Mateen's ex-wife has suggested he may have been gay (the

Pulse is an LGBT club), although that claim has not been substantiated. Acquaintances said that Mateen was not particularly religious prior to the attack but that he did have deeply conservative views about gender, and believed his wife should not work outside their home.

During the attack, Mateen expressed support for ISIS and for rival terror organizations. In a call to 911 at the time of the attack, Mateen pledged allegiance to ISIS and its leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, called the Boston marathon bombers his "homeboys," and mentioned Abu Salha.

2016: The Trends

I. Using More Non-Traditional Weapons

While guns and bombs remained the most common choice of weapon in domestic plots, 2016 saw an uptick in attempts using non-traditional weapons. This may be linked to propaganda from both ISIS and Al Qaeda encouraging the use of any available weapons, including knives, vehicles and even pressure cooker bombs. It may also be a result of copying attacks abroad, including the vehicular attack in Nice, France, in July 2016, and the use of knives and vehicles as weapons against Israelis in 2015. There are no records of plots involving knives prior to 2015.

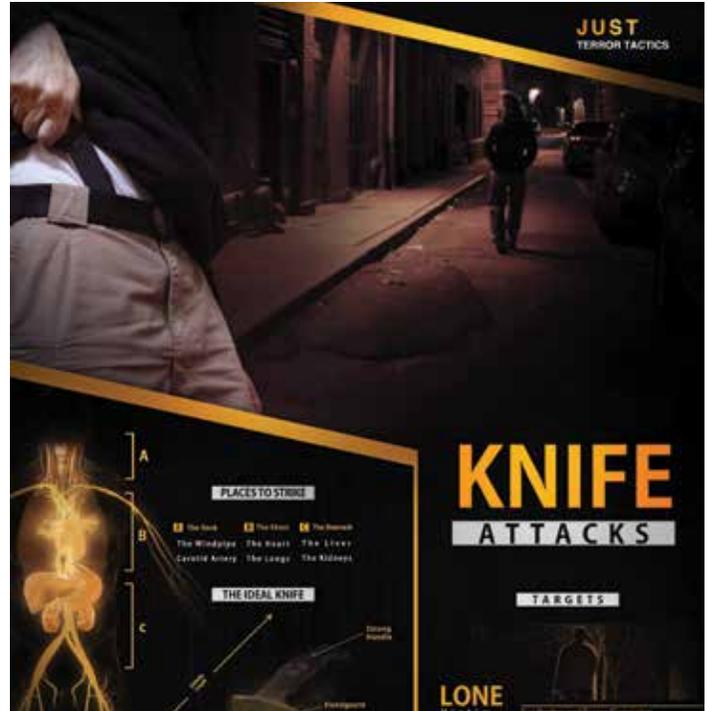
A few examples:

- On November 19, 2016, Mohamed Rafik Naji, a 37-year-old New York City resident, was arrested on charges of providing material support to ISIS. Naji had allegedly been plotting to undertake a vehicular attack in Times Square on behalf of ISIS. According to court documents, he had traveled to Yemen and Turkey in an attempt to join ISIS.
- November 2016: Ohio resident Abdul Razak Ali Artan attempted to run over a group of pedestrians with a vehicle, and then he attacked them with a knife. Artan reportedly referenced ISIS in a Facebook post, and referred to Anwar al-Awlaki, a former U.S. cleric and English-language spokesman for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, as a hero.
- September 2016: Minnesota resident Dahir Ahmed Adan allegedly stabbed 10 people in a Minnesota mall. Although his motivation remains unclear, Adan allegedly asked at least one person if he was Muslim during the attack. ISIS has claimed responsibility.
- September 2016: Two pressure cooker bombs were left in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, allegedly by New Jersey resident Ahmad Khan Rahami. One exploded, injuring 29; the second was tampered with and rendered inert.

Prior to 2016, there have only been two other instances of domestic vehicular attacks inspired by Islamic extremist ideology. In 2011, Michael McCright attempted to run marines off the highway with his vehicle, and in 2006, Mohammad Reza Taheri-Azar injured nine people in a vehicular assault at the University of North Carolina.

Propaganda materials encouraging the use of any weapons available – including knives and vehicles – were released by both ISIS and Al Qaeda throughout 2016. A publication released by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) after the July 14 attack in Nice, France, provided instructions and encouragement for vehicular attacks followed by shooting into the crowd. Vehicular attacks were the main subject of the November 2016 issue of ISIS's English-language magazine, *Rome*, which was released online, and *Rome* magazine's

December 2016 issue featured a full-page graphic with instructions for successful knife attacks.



II. Targets of Convenience

For the last two years, would-be terrorists have increasingly targeted locations of convenience, rather than symbolic (religious, governmental, military) sites.

Just seven of 2016's 19 plots targeted symbolic locations, including three plots to attack U.S. service members or military sites, one targeting Times Square, one threat to assassinate the President, one to bomb a synagogue and one directed at an unnamed military target.

Three plots in 2016 targeted law enforcement agents, which is down from six plots in 2015, but up from one in 2014.

The remaining nine plots in 2016 targeted locations of convenience. These included a mall, a Masonic temple, a prison, the Ohio State University, pedestrians outside an apartment building, a Walgreens drug store, the Pulse nightclub, an unspecified building, and a seemingly random street in New York City.

III. Group Affiliation: Increased fluidity

As in 2014 and 2015, ISIS remained the primary inspiration for the vast majority of U.S. residents linked to in 2016 to terror plots and other activity motivated by Islamic extremist ideology.

But fewer would-be terrorists were apparently inspired by just one terrorist group, as a number of would-be and actual attackers cited ISIS as an inspiration, but also cited other terrorist organizations, including Al Qaeda.

The increased fluidity in affiliation was reflected in terrorist propaganda: AQAP, for example, published the "Inspire Guide," an



Extremist Profile: Nelash Mohamed Das

Nelash Mohamed Das, a 24-year-old Maryland resident, was arrested on October 1, 2016, and charged with providing material support to ISIS. Das, a Bangladeshi citizen and U.S. permanent resident, illustrates how effective online propaganda can be.

Das allegedly spent months in 2015 and 2016 interacting online with other ISIS supporters, frequently announcing his support for the organization. Court documents indicate that on October 26, 2015, Das tweeted the name and location of a U.S. military recruit who “aspires to kill Muslims” – presumably in an attempt to incite violence against that individual. On January 30, 2016, Das allegedly tweeted a picture

of a rifle with the caption, “This is more than just a gun. This is a ticket to Jannah (paradise).”

In April 2016, Das allegedly attended a weapons training class and applied for a handgun permit.

Das clearly followed ISIS propaganda and supporter accounts online. In 2015 and 2016, some ISIS supporter accounts and pro-ISIS hackers began publishing “hit lists” with information identifying U.S. service members, government officials, and private citizens. While the information on these lists was not always accurate, it nonetheless sparked significant concern. In July 23, Das allegedly told an undercover source that he wanted to kill a military member whose personal information

he had obtained from a “hit list.” He later allegedly told the undercover informant that he was on the lookout for additional hit lists and wanted to kill additional people on them – particularly U.S. military personnel.

In September 2016, Das purchased weapons and ammunition from undercover agents and planned to kill “a U.S. service member” on one of the ISIS hit lists (false information provided by the FBI). Das believed he would be paid by ISIS for the murder, although in court documents he said he would carry out the assassination with or without payment.

Das also allegedly hoped to travel abroad to join ISIS.

online guide for domestic attacks, which praised attacks committed on behalf of ISIS and offered suggestions for copy-cat attacks in the name of any Islamic extremist organization.

Omar Mateen, the man who attacked the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida, is a prime illustration of fickle allegiances. Mateen pledged allegiance to ISIS in a call he made to 911 during the attack, and ISIS took credit for the shooting. However, on the same call, Mateen also referred to the Boston Marathon bombers, whose attack predated the rise of ISIS, as his “homeboys,” and mentioned a Florida resident who committed a suicide attack on behalf of Al Qaeda in Syria. Prior to the shooting, Mateen allegedly told co-workers that he supported rival terrorist organizations Al Qaeda and Hezbollah.

The inspiration of Nicholas Young, a 36-year-old Virginia resident accused of providing material support to ISIS, is similarly convoluted. While Young allegedly attempted to send money to ISIS to help the group recruit in the West, he had a history of contacts with a variety of terrorist groups going back to at least 2010. Young allegedly associated with Zachary Chesser, a leader in the domestic extremist group Revolution Muslim, who was arrested in 2010 for attempting to join Al Shabaab, Al Qaeda in Somalia. Young also allegedly discussed weapons and extremist ideology with Amine el Khalife, who was arrested in 2012 for attempting to bomb the U.S. Capitol building on behalf of Al Qaeda.

This is not an entirely new phenomenon. But while there have been multiple cases in the past of ISIS supporters who also cited Anwar al-Awlaki, an Al Qaeda propagandist, most people arrested on terror charges were clear about their inspiration. That was less true in 2016.

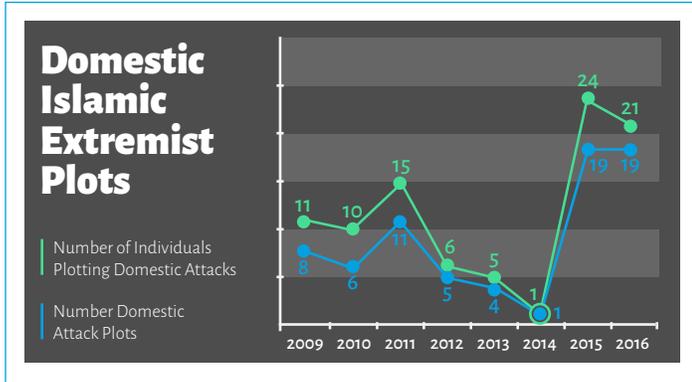
2016: The Plots

The shooting at the Pulse nightclub (49 killed) was the deadliest domestic terror attack since the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. An additional five plots in 2016 resulted in injuries to victims: the shooting of a Philadelphia police officer in January; a stabbing outside a Virginia apartment complex in August that injured two; a stabbing in a Minnesota mall in September that injured 10; an exploded bomb in New York in September that injured 29; and an attack and stabbing at Ohio State University in November that injured nine. The perpetrators in the Minnesota and Ohio State stabbings were killed during the attacks. By comparison, in 2015, three domestic plots caused injuries; two of those plots resulted in deaths.



Credit: Newsweek/Getty

The following chart shows the number of plots, and the numbers of individuals engaged in those plots, since 2009, with a sharp rise in plots during 2015 and 2016.



Foiled Plots

A number of plots were interrupted by arrests, or may never have come to fruition for various other reasons.

Mahin Khan, an 18-year-old Arizona resident who allegedly plotted to attack military targets, reached out to individuals he believed were members of the Pakistani Taliban (Khan claimed to support both the Pakistani Taliban and ISIS) with a request for bomb-making instructions, and court documents indicate that he seriously considered various targets. However, Khan's parents have argued that Khan is autistic and has the mental capability of a 13-year-old, and suggested that his case should be handled in a mental health, rather than correctional, setting. Khan was sentenced to eight years in prison in November, following a plea bargain.

James Gonzalo Medina, a 40-year-old Florida resident, was accused of plotting to attack a synagogue during Passover. But according to court documents, many of the plot's details, including the timing of the attack, were suggested by undercover "co-conspirators," and the FBI supplied the "explosive device." Medina, who was homeless, reportedly had a history of apparent mental health issues, and it is not clear that he would have been able to actually carry out the attack.

Providing Material Support

In 2016, nearly half (21) of the 45 U.S. residents linked to activity motivated by Islamic extremism in 2016 are accused of providing material support to terrorist organizations.

Material support can refer to any type of assistance, from sending goods or money to traveling to join the group, and is sometimes one of several charges levied against individuals attempting plots or other violent activity on behalf of a group. Historically, this category

has included the vast majority of U.S. residents linked to foreign terrorist organizations.

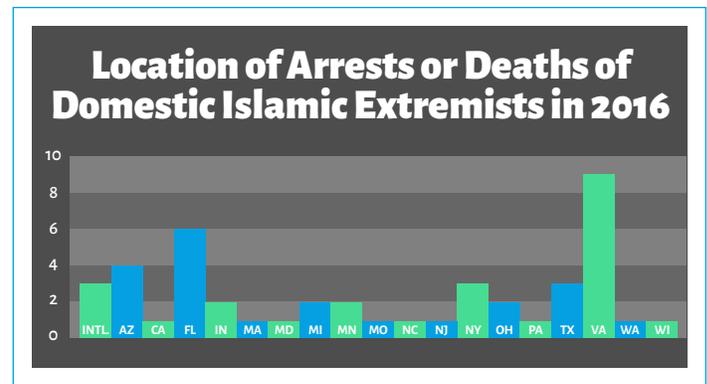
Demographics

I. Location: A broad geographic sampling

The 45 U.S. residents linked to terror plots and other activity motivated by Islamic extremist ideology in 2016 were living in 18 states at the time of their arrests, a far more even geographic distribution than in previous years.

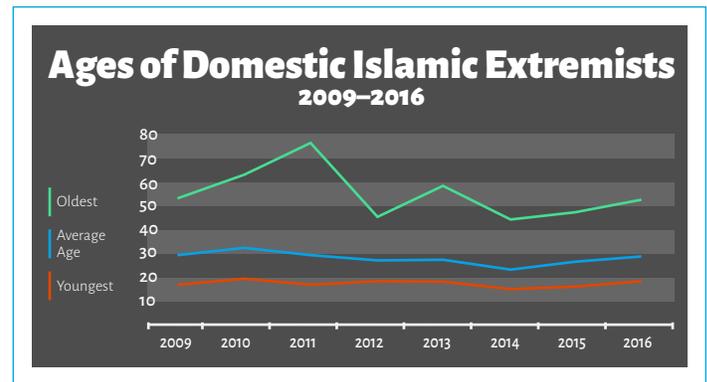
Only two states stood out with a disproportionate number of residents linked to terror in 2016: Virginia, with nine residents linked, and Florida, with six.

This chart shows the state where these individuals were arrested or killed.



II. Age: Trending slightly older

In 2016, the average age of the U.S. residents linked to terror plots and other activity motivated by Islamic extremist ideology was 29.1, while the average age in 2015 was 26.6. There were no minors publicly identified as linked to activity motivated by Islamic extremism in 2016 (as there were in 2014 and 2015).



While a lot of accused domestic Islamic terrorists are in their 20s, the overall age range is actually pretty broad. In 2016, the oldest individual linked to terror was 52-year-old Gregory "Jibreel" Hubbard from Florida, who allegedly attempted to travel abroad to join ISIS. At the other end of the age spectrum, three 18-year-old U.S. residents

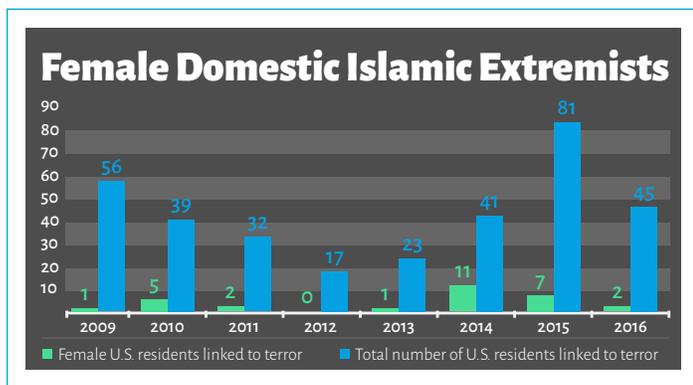
were linked to Islamic extremism in 2016: Akram Musleh of Indiana, who allegedly attempted to travel abroad to join ISIS, Mahin Khan of Arizona, who allegedly plotted to attack an air force recruiting center, and Abdul Razak Ali Artan of Ohio who attacked pedestrians at the Ohio State University.

Interestingly, a comparison of the paths two of those 18-year-olds took toward radicalization indicates the vastly diverse time spans between engagement with extremist narrative and extremist activity. Reports indicate that Akram Musleh had been immersing himself in extremist propaganda at least three years prior to his arrest. Reports indicate that school officials worked with law enforcement in an attempt to discourage him from radicalizing when he was 15 years old. Abdul Razak Ali Artan, on the other hand, is believed to have radicalized in a matter of months, according to reports by fellow students at the Ohio State University. A few months before the attack, Artan expressed frustration with the media's portrayal of Muslims and said he had experienced anti-Muslim bias in the U.S. On the day of the attack, Artan posted to Facebook that he was "sick and tired of seeing my fellow Muslim brothers and sisters being killed and tortured EVERYWHERE..."

III. A Persistent Gender Gap

Of the 45 U.S. residents linked to activity motivated by Islamic extremist ideology in 2016, only two were women. From an historical perspective, this is unsurprising, but it is a departure from 2014 and 2015, when far more (10 and seven, respectively) female U.S. residents were arrested on charges linked to Islamic extremist activity.

In February 2016, Saffya Roe Yassin, a 38-year-old Missouri resident, was arrested for allegedly plotting to kill two FBI agents in support of ISIS. And Michelle Bastian, a 49-year-old Arizona resident, was arrested in October for providing her incarcerated husband, Thomas Bastian, with terrorist propaganda, including bomb-making instructions in AQAP's English-language propaganda magazine Inspire. Court documents indicate that Thomas was also expecting Michelle to bring him bomb-making materials, which he hoped to use to bomb the prison.



The lower number of women arrested in 2016 may be related to an increased call in terrorist propaganda for domestic attacks, rather than travel abroad to provide support, which tends to attract more

female participants. Since 2009, 19 women have allegedly engaged in providing material support to terrorists (including traveling to do so), while only seven allegedly engaged in terror plots.

IV. A Consistent Number of Converts

At least 10 – or just under one quarter – of the U.S. residents linked to terror plots and other activity motivated by Islamic extremist ideology in 2016 were not raised identifying as Muslims but rather converted or claimed to have converted to Islam, at least nominally. This is consistent with the percentage in previous years. It's important to note that these converts are not always particularly observant, or necessarily accepted as Muslims by the mainstream American Muslim community.

Enduring Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism frequently plays a significant role in terror groups' propaganda and self-expression, and anti-Semitic sentiment is disproportionately high among those involved in domestic Islamic extremism as compared to the rest of the population.

Among the U.S. residents linked to activity motivated by Islamic extremism in 2016 who have expressed anti-Semitic views:

- Mahin Khan of Arizona, who allegedly plotted to attack an Air Force recruiting center, is quoted in court documents saying that he would "need AK and pistols can u do that wanna take out marines and jews (sic)." Khan allegedly considered attacking a Jewish Community Center before shifting his focus to the Air Force recruiting center.
- Robert Blake Jackson of Florida, who was arrested for lying to federal agents about his support for ISIS and who allegedly expressed interest in traveling abroad to join the terrorist group, allegedly posted anti-Semitic statements to his social media feed. Court documents include this tweet: "in shallah [God willing] you sent as many jews (sic) as possible unto the maw of hellfire."
- James Gonzalo Medina of Florida was arrested for plotting to bomb a synagogue during Passover.
- Haris Qamar of Virginia, arrested for allegedly photographing and videotaping potential attack targets for what he believed were ISIS propaganda purposes, allegedly "tweeted his prayer that Europe would be conquered 'and Auschwitz will be opened again' for nonbelievers," according to court documents.
- Court documents show that Samy Mohamed Hamzeh of Wisconsin considered plotting an attack against Israelis in the West Bank before changing his plans and allegedly plotting an attack at a Masonic Temple in Wisconsin.

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This work is made possible in part by the generous support of:
William and Naomi Gorowitz Institute on Extremism and Terrorism
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