

Muslim-American Terrorism Since 9/11: An Accounting

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Are Muslim-Americans turning increasingly to terrorism? The pace of Muslim-American terrorist incidents and prosecutions has fueled concerns that this may be the case, leading to calls for increased security measures and restrictions on the religious freedom of Muslims in the United States.

In a report last year, two colleagues and I documented a spike in Muslim-American terrorism, when the number of suspects and perpetrators jumped from an average of 14 per year to more than 40 in 2009. We wondered whether this represented “an aberration or a trend.”¹

As shown in Figure 1, the total for 2010 suggests that the previous year may have been more of an aberration than a trend. The number of suspects dropped by over half, from 47 in 2009 to 20 in 2010. This brings the total since 9/11 to 161 Muslim-Americans terrorist suspects and perpetrators.

Much of the spike in 2009 was due to a group of 17 Somali-Americans who had joined al-Shabaab in Somalia; it appears that only one additional Somali-American (Farah Mohamed Beledi) was indicted in 2010 for joining al-Shabaab. However, the number of individuals plotting against domestic targets also dropped by half, from 18 in 2009 to 10 in 2010 (see Figure 2).

Figure 1.

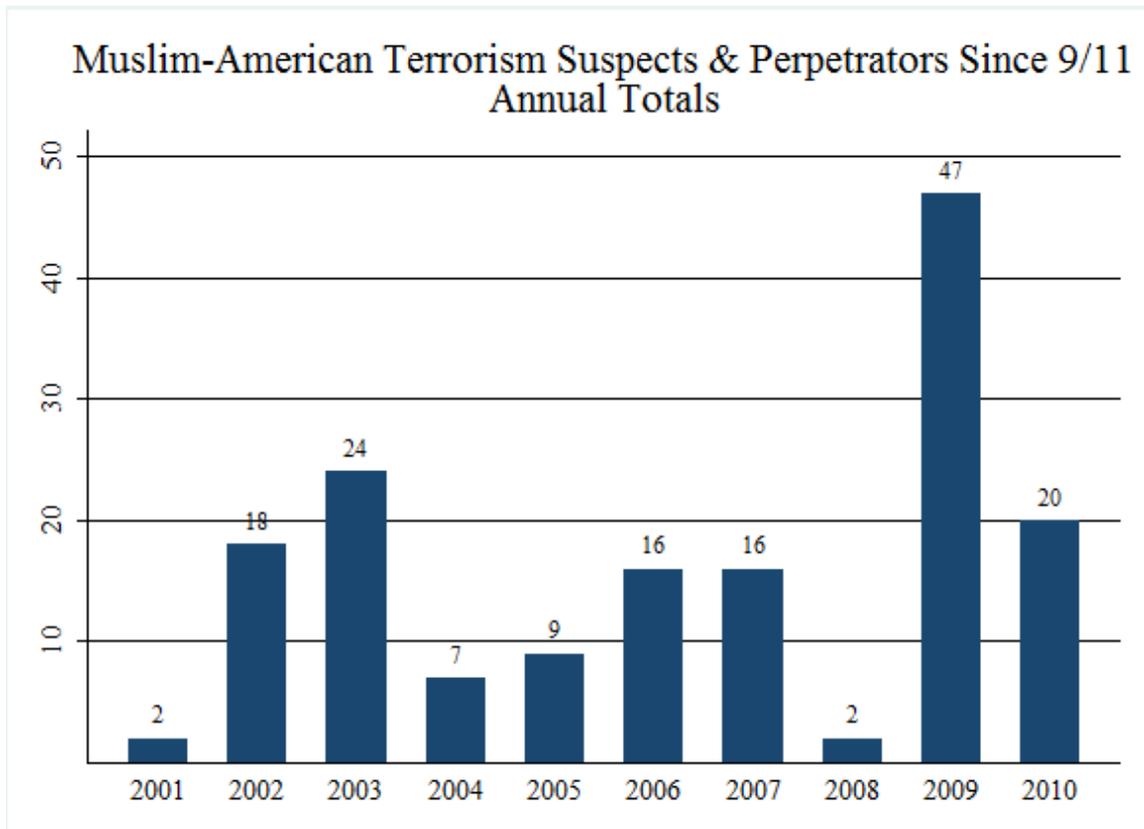
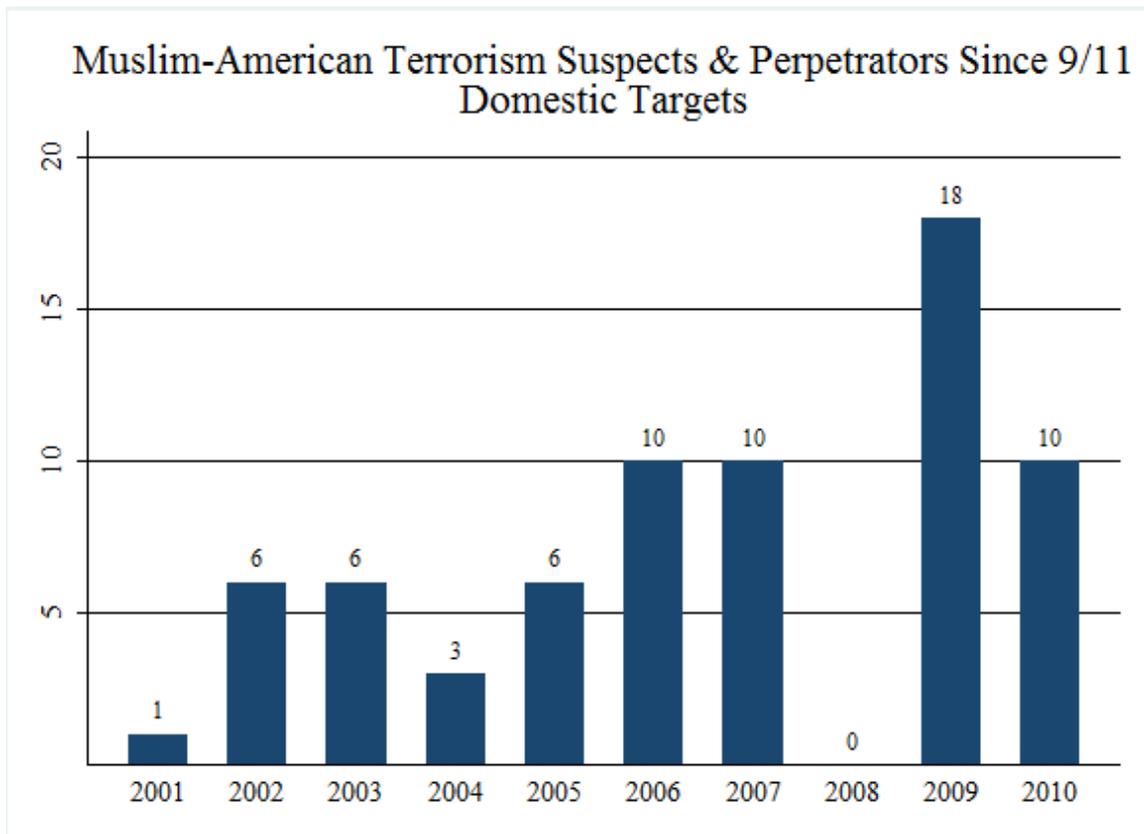


Figure 2.



Plot Disruption

Of the 20 Muslim-American terrorist suspects of 2010, five actually carried out their plots: Faisal Shahzad attempted to detonate a car-bomb in New York City, Anwar al-Awlaki incited Shahzad and other terrorists, Sharif Mobley and Samir Khan appear to have joined al-Qa'ida in Yemen, and Farah Mohamed Beledi appears to have joined al-Shabaab in Somalia. (The 2010 cases are listed in Figure 3 in the order that they became public.) Another two individuals were arrested in the late stages of their plot, after weapons or explosives had been gathered: Zarein Ahmedzay and Adis Medunjanin, who were charged with participation in Najibullah Zazi's plot to plant bombs in the New York City subway system. The other 13 suspects came to the attention of U.S. government authorities

at an early stage of their plots, before weapons or explosives had been obtained. Information on plot disruption is drawn from criminal complaints and news coverage of trial testimony.

Figure 3.

Muslim-American Terrorism Suspects and Perpetrators, 2010				
Name	Location	Alleged plot	Disrupted	Status of case
Zarein Ahmedzay	New York	Planned to attack subway in New York City	Late	Guilty plea
Adis Medunjanin	New York	Planned to attack subway in New York City	Late	Trial pending
Colleen R. LaRose	Pennsylvania	Planned to attack cartoonists in Europe	Early	Trial pending
Jamie Paulin-Ramirez	Colorado	Planned to attack cartoonists in Europe	Early	Trial pending
Sharif Mobley	New Jersey	Arrested in Yemen	No	Trial pending
Raja Lahrasib Khan	Illinois	Spoke of attacking a sports stadium	Early	Trial pending
Anwar al-Awlaki	Yemen	Incited terrorism in the United States and Yemen	No	Convicted in Yemen, targeted for killing by US
Faisal Shahzad	New York	Times Square car-bomb, New York City	No	Guilty plea
Mohamed Alessa	New Jersey	Planned to join al-Shabaab in Somalia	Early	Trial pending
Carlos Almonte	New Jersey	Planned to join al-Shabaab in Somalia	Early	Trial pending
Samir Khan	North Carolina	Joined al-Qa'ida in Yemen	No	Not yet charged
Zachary A. Chesser	New York	Planned to join al-Shabaab in Somalia	Early	Trial pending
Nadia Rockwood	Alaska	Passed along list of assassination targets	Early	Guilty plea
Paul G. Rockwood Jr.	Alaska	Developed list of assassination targets	Early	Guilty plea
Shaker Masri	Illinois	Planned to join al-Shabaab in Somalia	Early	Trial pending
Farah Mohamed Beledi	Minnesota	Joined al-Shabaab in Somalia	No	Trial pending
Abdel Hameed Shehadeh	Hawaii	Planned to join al-Shabaab in Somalia	Early	Trial pending
Farooque Ahmed	Virginia	Planned to attack subway in Virginia	Early	Trial pending
Mohamed Mohamud	Oregon	Attack on Christmas tree ceremony in Portland	Early	Trial pending
Antonio Martinez	Maryland	Planned to bomb military recruitment office in Baltimore County	Early	Trial pending

This fits the pattern for plot disruption since 9/11 (see Figure 4): most Muslim-American terrorism suspects and perpetrators (102 out of 161) came to the attention of authorities at an early stage. Fewer than one tenth (13 out of 161) came to the attention of authorities at a late stage. Just under one third (46 out of 161) came to the attention of authorities *after* their participation in a terrorist attack.

Most of these attacks (35 out of 46) involved activities with terrorist organizations overseas. Plots with domestic targets were more likely to be disrupted: 48 of 69 individuals who plotted against domestic targets came to the attention of authorities at an early stage, 10 were disrupted at a late stage, and 11 individuals (see Figure 5) actually carried out attacks, resulting in 33 deaths. According to press reports, an FBI re-enactment of Faisal Shahzad's car-bomb suggested that he might have killed hundreds of people, perhaps as

many as several thousand, had he used higher-grade bomb materials.²

It may be useful to put these figures in perspective. Since 9/11, there have been approximately 150,000 murders in the United States, more than 15,000 per year.³ There were also more than 20 terrorist plots by non-Muslims in the United States in 2010, including attacks by Joseph Stack, who flew a plane into an IRS building in Austin, Texas; Larry Eugene North, who is suspected of placing bombs in mailboxes across eastern Texas; and George Jakubec, who was accused of manufacturing explosives in his home in Escondido, California.⁴ Still, with Muslims comprising about 1 percent of the American population, it is clear that Muslims are engaging in terrorism at a greater rate than non-Muslims -- though at a low level compared with overall violence in the United States.

Figure 4.

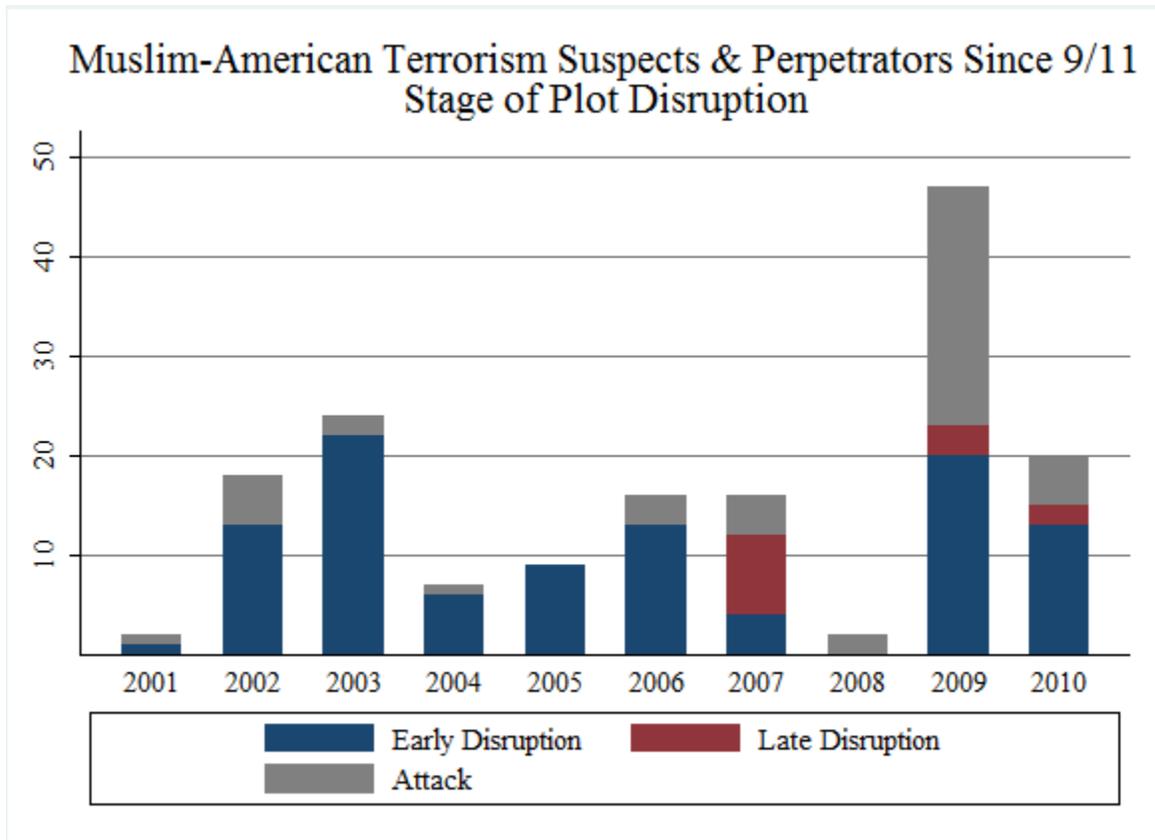


Figure 5.

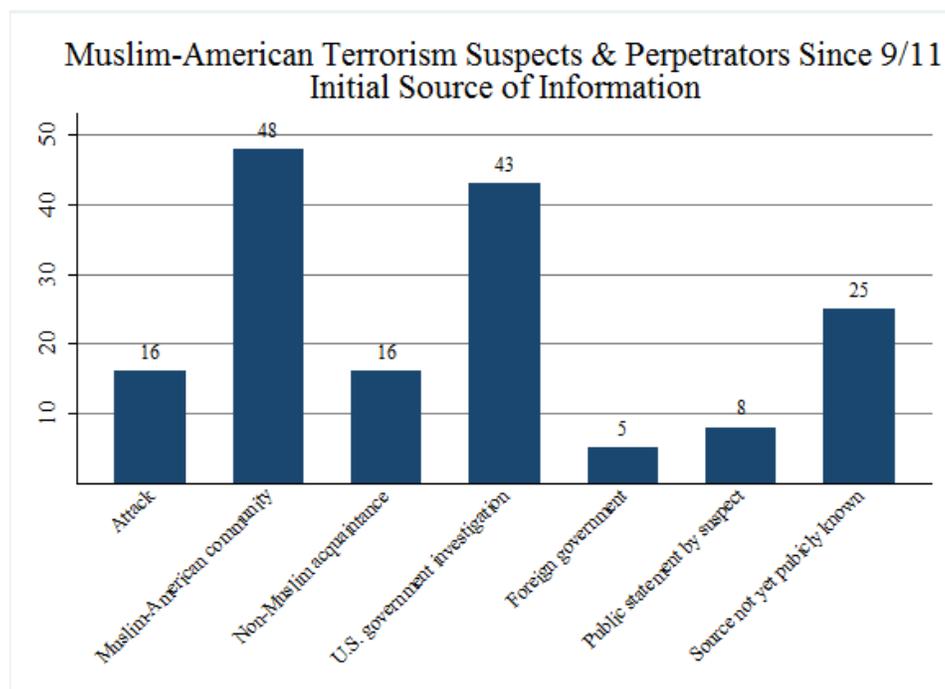
Muslim-American Domestic Terrorist Attacks Since 9/11			
Name	Year	Plot	Fatalities
Hesham Hadayet	2002	Shot Israeli airline personnel, Los Angeles, California	2 (plus himself)
Charles Bishop	2002	Flew plane into office tower, Tampa, Florida	0 (plus himself)
John Allen Muhammad	2002	"Beltway Snipers," metropolitan Washington, D.C. area	11
Lee Boyd Malvo	2002		
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 Talovic	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

Sources of Information

How are Muslim-American terrorism plots being disrupted? The initial source of information that brought suspects to the attention of U.S. government authorities has not been publicly disclosed in 25 of 161 cases (see Figure 6). In an additional 16 cases, it appears that U.S. authorities learned about the plots only from the execution of a terrorist attack. For the remaining 120 individuals, the largest single source of initial information (48 of 120 cases) involved tips from the Muslim-American community. (This figure does not include information delivered by government questioning of Muslim-American terrorism suspects.) In some cases, family members reported that the suspects were missing overseas -- for example, Omar Hammami, who traveled to Somalia and joined al-Shabaab in 2006; the Somali-Americans in Minnesota who left for Somalia in 2007 and 2008; and five young men from Northern Virginia who traveled to Pakistan in 2009. In

other cases, members of the Muslim-American community reported suspicious activities. For example, an anonymous letter from a Yemeni-American led authorities to investigate the Lackawanna Six in 2001 (they were arrested in 2002).⁵ Farooque Ahmed in Virginia "came to the attention of American authorities in April [2010] when he told associates that he wanted to engage in jihad, [an unnamed federal] official said. This information was passed on to law enforcement agencies, which began to monitor him."⁶ The FBI began to investigate Antonio Martinez in Maryland after a Muslim Facebook friend called about his violent postings.⁷ In some communities, Muslim-Americans have been so concerned about extremists in their midst that they have turned in people who turned out to be undercover informants, including Craig Monteilh in Orange County, California, and Darren Griffin in Toledo, Ohio.⁸

Figure 6.



The second largest source of initial information about terrorism suspects (43 individuals) is ongoing government investigations. Of these, 24 cases involved investigations of other terrorism suspects. For example, Tarek Mehanna in Massachusetts was first identified as a person of interest in 2006 through the phone records of Daniel Maldonado, who had fought with al-Shabaab in Somalia and was turned over to U.S. authorities by the Kenyan military.⁹ Lyman Faris, who pled guilty to a plot to attack the Brooklyn Bridge, was identified through the interrogation of detainee Khalid Sheikh Mohammed at the Guantanamo military facility.¹⁰ Other terror-related government investigations included material uncovered during American military and intelligence operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and suspects who turned state's evidence. Another 11 cases came to the attention of authorities through extremist statements they made to undercover agents who had been sent into Muslim-American communities. This includes James Cromitie and three co-conspirators in Newburgh, New York, who were convicted of trying to bomb a synagogue in New York City; they were first identified as potential suspects by an informant who "was told to keep his ear open for 'radical Islamic thoughts,'" according to testimony by the informant's FBI handler. Cromitie struck up a conversation with the informant in a mosque

Conclusion

Muslim-American terrorism makes news. Out of the thousands of acts of violence that occur in the United States each year, an efficient system of government prosecution and media coverage brings Muslim-American terrorism suspects to national attention, creating the impression -- perhaps unintentionally -- that Muslim-American terrorism is more prevalent than it really is.

parking lot and shared an inclination toward violence.¹¹ A final 8 cases involved government investigations into non-terrorist crimes. For example, Kevin James and three co-conspirators in California, who were ultimately convicted of a plot to wage war on the U.S., came to authorities' attention through investigation of two colleagues who were apprehended while making their getaway from a bank robbery.¹²

Just over half of government investigations involved undercover informants (59 of 120 suspects and perpetrators). As noted in a recent report by the New York University Center for Law and Security, which identified a slightly higher proportion of cases involving informants in an overlapping set of cases, the defendants' claims of entrapment have not yet worked in U.S. courts.¹³

These results confirm the findings of other recent studies focusing on smaller samples of Muslim-American terrorism. One study from the Institute for Homeland Security Solutions identified the initial source of information for 18 Islamist terrorist plots; of these, six came from association with other terrorists, six came from the investigation of non-terrorist crimes, and three came from tips from the public.¹⁴ A study by the Muslim Public Affairs Council reported that Muslim communities helped foil 14 out of 41 Islamist terrorist plots since 9/11, four of them prior to the operational stage.¹⁵

Upturns in the pace of Muslim-American terrorism are particularly newsworthy, and have driven much public debate over the past two years. This report documents a downturn in the pace of Muslim-American terrorism -- it remains to be seen whether this is accorded a similar level of attention, and whether the level of public concern will ratchet downward along with the number of terrorism suspects.

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 latest book, *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are So Few Muslim Terrorists*, is forthcoming from Oxford University Press in Summer 2011. Jacob Filip assisted with the research for this report.

¹ David Schanzer, Charles Kurzman, and Ebrahim Moosa, "Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans," report prepared for the National Institute of Justice, January 6, 2010, http://www.sanford.duke.edu/news/Schanzer_Kurzman_Moosa_Anti-Terror_Lessons.pdf. This report counted only individuals suspected of violent plots, and did not include terrorist financing or non-violent crimes.

² *New York Post*, July 20, 2010; Associated Press, July 20, 2010.

³ Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States, 2009*, Table 1, "Crime in the United States by Volume and Rate per 100,000 Inhabitants, 1990–2009," http://www2.fbi.gov/ucr/cius2009/data/table_01.html, and "Preliminary Semiannual Uniform Crime Report, January-June, 2010," http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2010/preliminary-crime-in-the-us-2009/prelimiucrjan-jun_10_excels/table-1

⁴ The most comprehensive recent list of non-Muslim terrorist plots is Alejandro J. Beutel, "Data on Post-9/11 Terrorism in the United States," Muslim Public Affairs Council, Washington, D.C., updated version, November 2010.

⁵ Dina Temple-Raston, *The Jihad Next Door* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007), p. 124.

⁶ *New York Times*, October 28, 2010.

⁷ Affidavit by FBI special agent Keith E. Bender, *USA v. Antonio Martinez*, Criminal Complaint, December 8, 2010.

⁸ *Los Angeles Times*, February 26, 2009; *Toledo Blade*, April 3, 2008.

⁹ Affidavit of FBI special agent Andrew Nambu, *USA v. Tarek Mehanna*, Criminal Complaint, November 7, 2008.

¹⁰ *Columbus Dispatch*, August 26, 2009.

¹¹ *New York Times*, August 26, 2010.

¹² *Orange County Register*, September 3, 2005.

¹³ Center on Law and Security, New York University School of Law, "Terrorist Trial Report Card: September 11, 2001-September 11, 2009," January 2010.

¹⁴ Kevin Strom et al., "Building on Clues: Examining Successes and Failures in Detecting U.S. Terrorist Plots, 1999-2009," Institute for Homeland Security Solutions, North Carolina, October 2010. I thank the authors for making the project's dataset available.

¹⁵ Alejandro J. Beutel, "Data on Post-9/11 Terrorism in the United States," Muslim Public Affairs Council, Washington, D.C., updated version, November 2010.