

PBS NewsHour

N.C. Arrests Raise Concerns about Homegrown Terrorism

After seven North Carolina men were arrested on accusations of planning a terrorist attack, law enforcement officials said they were concerned about other possible homegrown terrorists. Ray Suarez speaks with a terrorism expert and a civil rights advocate.

RAY SUAREZ: It was from this home in a rural corner of North Carolina that 39-year-old Daniel Boyd and a group of alleged co-conspirators are accused of quietly planning "violent jihad."

ROB ROEGNER, neighbor: I spoke with him on several occasions, and never was there any idea that he was involved in something like that.

RAY SUAREZ: On Monday, more than 100 federal agents fanned out across the state to arrest Boyd, his two sons, and four others. A 14-page indictment accuses the men of a long-standing conspiracy to plan and launch an overseas terrorist attack.

Boyd, the silent cell's alleged mastermind, is an American-born Muslim convert. The indictment claims he traveled to Afghanistan and Pakistan in the late 1980s to train alongside Islamist fighters then battling the Soviets.

The North Carolina case -- and similar recent incidents -- worry American law enforcement officials, including Attorney General Eric Holder, who spoke to ABC News.

ERIC HOLDER, attorney general: This whole notion of radicalization is something that perhaps did not loom as large a few months ago as it does now. And that -- it's the shifting nature of threats that, I think, keeps you up at night.

RAY SUAREZ: In a memo issued shortly after Monday's arrests, the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security cited the Boyd case and others as evidence of a growing trend.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano addressed the issue yesterday.

JANET NAPOLITANO, secretary of homeland security: We need to comprehend and anticipate an expanding range of threats. Now, DHS monitors and shares information about potential homegrown threats, as well. These can be individuals, radicals radicalized by events abroad or lone wolf attacks.

RAY SUAREZ: Federal prosecutors recently disclosed an American raised on Long Island was currently being detained for training with al-Qaida in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

And this week, a Virginia man, who had joined al-Qaida, was sentenced to life in prison for planning to kill former President George W. Bush.

Boyd and his co-defendants are scheduled to appear in a federal court in Raleigh next Tuesday.

RAY SUAREZ: Just how widespread is homegrown radical extremism? And how do you combat that threat?

For answers, we turn to David Schanzer, director of the Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security, located at Duke University and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and Ibrahim Ramey, director for human and civil rights at the Muslim American Society Freedom Foundation, an advocacy group in Washington, D.C.

Scope of the threat

David Schanzer, is Daniel Boyd an anomaly or part of a phenomenon that merits significant and ongoing attention from law enforcement?

DAVID SCHANZER, director, Triangle Center on Terrorism and Homeland Security: I think it does merit ongoing attention. This is a problem. It shouldn't be an overstated problem, but it is a significant one.

We've collected data here of 125 Muslim Americans that have been prosecuted over the past eight years for a terrorism-related offense that involves some element of violence.

Now, to put that in context, there's been 130,000 murders over the past eight years in America. So this is a problem, but we should keep it in context and we should treat it seriously, but not overdo it.

RAY SUAREZ: There have been arrests of Americans and naturalized citizens and legal residents in places like Lackawanna, New York, outside Buffalo, in Miami, in other places around the country. Did any of them turn out to have significant links, ongoing links to international terrorism? Or were they just people who started to hatch plots here in the United States?

DAVID SCHANZER: Well, of those 125, about 40 percent had some element of a domestic plot or attack, and the other 60 percent were totally connected with activities abroad.

RAY SUAREZ: Ibrahim Ramey, have mosques, have Muslim organizations like yours been approached by the FBI, for instance, for aid in tracking these threats?

IBRAHIM RAMEY, Muslim American Society Freedom Foundation: Well, certainly that's true, and we also know that there have been instances nationally where Muslim organizations, and

particularly mosques, have been infiltrated by the FBI and where people have been approached to be undercover agents or even agent provocateurs for the FBI.

Now, let me say categorically that terrorism and that kind of violence is something that we categorically condemn and absolutely reject. But we want law enforcement to also understand that this should not be a pretext for demonizing an entire community or trying to turn the community against itself in a way that's both counterproductive and also not likely to yield any great results.

RAY SUAREZ: Well, you've talked about above-board and, let's say, below-board approaches. In the almost eight years since September 11th, has a rough relationship been hammered out, the rules of engagement, so that Muslim organizations and the FBI have some sort of understanding?

IBRAHIM RAMEY: I think we have to really answer the question in two parts. The first part would look at the Bush administration, which did not have categorically a very good relationship with the Muslim community. We think that that relationship can improve and has improved somewhat under the new administration, but there are still elements of concern.

We know that there are very zealous prosecutors in different parts of the country that will twist evidence against Muslims. We know that Muslim charities that are totally legitimate have been shut down. We know that the human and civil rights of some Muslims have been abrogated or challenged by the current climate of Islamophobia in the country.

So I would have to say to you that those rules of engagement are really a work in progress.

A question of timing

RAY SUAREZ: David Schanzer, at the time of the arrests in some of these cases, even FBI agents called the plots involved more aspirational than operational. Is there a decent question to be asked about timing here?

DAVID SCHANZER: Well, there's always a tough call for law enforcement as to whether they want to cut something off before anything could possibly happen or they want to let it play out a little more, let the plot ripen a bit to see if you can catch somebody in the act.

More recently, in the case in New York, with the plot to bomb a synagogue in Brooklyn, the authorities let that go to the point where an inert bomb was actually planted outside the synagogue. And I think that demonstrated, I think, more convincingly to the community that these individuals were potentially very dangerous.

So I think it's a tough call for law enforcement. Maybe we're seeing things allowed to go a little bit further, the further we get from 9/11.

RAY SUAREZ: Has there been a different approach in other countries that have faced this kind of threat?

DAVID SCHANZER: Well, I think the rest of the world, especially our friends in the United Kingdom, thought we were a bit jittery early on and that we were arresting people at a very early stage.

That didn't mean that they had not engaged in a conspiracy or violated the law in some way. Although there have been some acquittals, most of the trials for these homegrown plots have been successful.

But, again, I think that our friends abroad usually like to try to let things play out a little bit more, really, for the purpose of gathering greater intelligence.

Preserving civil rights

RAY SUAREZ: Ibrahim Ramey, how do you balance the needs of a country to protect itself with the civil rights of its own citizens? There have been complaints from Muslim organizations in the past about this.

IBRAHIM RAMEY: Certainly. Certainly.

RAY SUAREZ: Well, how do you strike that balance?

IBRAHIM RAMEY: I think the balance has to be struck by engaging and increasing engagement with Muslims in the process of civic involvement, the process of raising young people in a way that is fully respectful of the laws of the country, but also committed to the rights of Muslims and the rights of all citizens.

More than that, I would say that our own organization, the Muslim American Society, has Boy Scout troops and civic engagements with other faith communities.

And the key, really, is to recognize that Muslims are the best allies in the positive transformation of the country, but also in the protection of the civil rights and the protection of all people from violence.

RAY SUAREZ: You don't deny that there are nefarious elements trying to entice young Muslims in the United States into this kind of thing?

IBRAHIM RAMEY: Of course there are. Absolutely there are. And I think that the response that we have is, number one, to equip our young people with the clear understanding of what Islam really means, to understand that the options that we have for engaging the society in a positive way exclude violence and really categorically ought to do that.

And the third thing is that young people can make intelligent choices and must make intelligent choices about their own lives, the safety of their community, and ultimately creating a world that is less violent and less unjust.

RAY SUAREZ: David Schanzer, racial profiling has been in the news quite a bit lately for obviously other reasons, but is there something that, well, gives you second thoughts and some pause about a Daniel Boyd, who allegedly was able to operate in Afghanistan and Pakistan and the United States, put together a cell, that he might escape notice because of his name, his looks, his background in this country?

DAVID SCHANZER: And the same would apply to the person who was arrested in Long Island.

It would be a gem for al-Qaida to have a Caucasian recruit with a U.S. passport. First of all, they could get a tremendous amount of information to al-Qaida about the way we live, about the railroad stations we go in, things like that. And then they can get into the country much more easily than others.

So those are prime prospects for al-Qaida. And we need to take care not to racially profile, because if you have too much emphasis looking for the obvious people that you think might be terrorists, you are going to miss people who don't stand out as those you might expect would be the perpetrators.

RAY SUAREZ: Ibrahim Ramey, what do you make of that?

IBRAHIM RAMEY: Well, I do agree with what Mr. Schanzer has to say. I would also say that, again, our objective in this kind of global climate and national climate is to protect people from violence, to ensure people that the Muslim community is not a violent community, it's a law-abiding community, and every index that you can look at in terms of our demographics and our political positions indicates that.

But, more than that, that fighting global terrorism and violence is also for me and for us, I believe, a matter of affirming justice, that when you dry up the pond in which terrorism tends to spring and do that through nonviolent engagement and do that through building justice and building alliances with the Muslim community. It's good for Muslims; it's good for America; it's good for the world.

RAY SUAREZ: So better futures for those young fellows and you take away the breeding grounds of terrorism, you're saying?

IBRAHIM RAMEY: Yes, and education, and giving young people the kind of encouragement and nurturing at the mosque level, at the community level, at the national level that youth lead -- and need, rather.

And that the other piece of that is that, when young people are engaged, and when they're nurtured, and when they're cared about, they're not going to do that kind of crazy stuff.

RAY SUAREZ: Ibrahim Ramey, David Schanzer, thank you both.

DAVID SCHANZER: Thank you.