

Case 24: Vinas

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Its experience with Bryant Neal Vinas suggests al-Qaeda has a big problem with recruitment.

An American and a converted Muslim, Vinas underwent a fairly lengthy process of “radicalization.” Or more accurately it was self-radicalization because the process was not so much one of seduction as one in which he continually sought out progressively more radical groups to join. Increasingly incensed at America’s support for Israel and at what he saw as America’s war on Islam in the Middle East, he made his way to Pakistan and eventually into the ranks of the Taliban in their battle with American forces in Afghanistan.

Al-Qaeda is highly wary about such people. For example, as David Dawson discusses in a footnote, in 2009 five Americans went to Pakistan to sign up for the cause, but were rejected by the terrorist group out of fears they might be informants or liabilities.¹ However, the terrorist group apparently was impressed by Vinas’ palpable and clearly sincere enthusiasm for the cause, by his equally sincere anti-American vitriol, and by the recommendations of the people who had seen him in operation. Consequently, al-Qaeda took him in and gave him training. He must have seemed an asset of considerable potential value to them. For one thing, he had intimate knowledge of Penn Station in New York and might be highly useful for setting off a bomb in that venue, a venture he enthusiastically helped them plan (there are architectural critics who would consider any explosion at Penn Station to be an improvement, but they, of course, are not terrorists and, regardless, were not consulted).

For reasons that, as Dawson reflects, seem oddly foolish, al-Qaeda allowed its prize asset to leave the training camp for Peshawar in Pakistan, where he was arrested by the Pakistanis in October 2008 and then turned over to the United States. (Dawson also notes that Vinas played a supporting role on an al-Qaeda propaganda video made at the time, which also suggests a lack of clear thinking, and certainly of cleverness, on the part of his handlers because it might facilitate his identification by their ever-prying enemies, particularly if he was sent on an operation to the United States.)

With the arrest, Vinas quickly, even instantly, became a hugely cooperative witness, even helping with the disruption of a terrorist plot in Belgium which required him to betray some of the people he had met in the training camp. That is, although he was genuinely sincere about joining and supporting al-Qaeda, as soon as he was arrested he acted like he had been a CIA plant all along. (It appears that in the CIA itself has never actually been able to infiltrate a single genuine plant during the decade and a half that it has presumably been trying to do so.) For a while there, the leaders of al-Qaeda must have been sent to wondering whose side Allah was on, anyway, and the Vinas

¹ Alex Rodriguez and Sebastian Rotella, “Pakistan looks at militant as key to Americans’ journey,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 2009.

fiasco quite possibly played into their decision to turn down the five enthusiastic would-be recruits in the following year.

There is another issue, this one for terrorism analysts. What, exactly, does “radicalization” mean if a genuinely radicalized Islamist, once arrested, can suddenly turn warm and cuddly toward the very people he has spent years radicalizing himself against?

Shortly after Vinas’ arrest, the story took another comic opera twist. As Dawson stresses, there was nothing in Vinas’ fruitful testimony, nor in any other source, to indicate that the plot against Penn Station was anything but a gleam in the eye of a few dreamy conspirators ten thousand miles away. Nonetheless, our guardians sent out warnings that there might just possibly be an attack on the subway system in New York, and they further divined, or fantasized, that it might take place over the Thanksgiving weekend. Extra police patrols were instituted at taxpayers’ expense, and seasoned terrorism provocateurs like Juval Aviv came out of the woodwork to soberly inform television viewers that “we’re at critical times right now...terrorists are gearing up.”²

² “Juval Aviv Interviewed About Possible Thanksgiving Terrorist Attack,” December 8, 2008. <http://youtu.be/IfKMOsL084Y> For more on Aviv, see John Mueller, *Overblown*. New York: Free Press, 2006, 42.

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1. Overview

There is a huge debate over the threat that so-called “homegrown terrorism” poses to our national security. Whatever the degree of danger we face from radicalized American immigrants and citizens, it is impossible to deny the threat’s existence. Bryant Neal Vinas was an American citizen of Hispanic descent, born in Long Island, New York, who converted to Islam and became radicalized. He travelled to Pakistan in 2007 and eventually joined an al-Qaeda training camp where he plotted with terrorist leaders to bomb the New York commuter system, providing information about its layout and security. Vinas was a full-fledged member of the terrorist organization, regularly meeting with its leadership and fully acquainted with its training methods. He had a particular aptitude for explosives, the kind he wanted to employ against commuters on the Long Island Rail Road (LIRR) subway system.

He was captured by Pakistani security forces in 2008, and then transferred to American custody, one month before his 25th birthday. After his capture, his testimony provided valuable evidence in European terror cell cases, and gave counter-terrorism officials insight into the unseen world of al-Qaeda training camps in north-west Pakistan. He provided a witness statement in a Belgian terror group’s trial that gave information about their ties to al-Qaeda. His cooperation also helped the U.S. military target al-Qaeda training camps with drones in Pakistan.

Vinas was charged in a Brooklyn federal court with conspiracy to murder U.S. nationals, providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization and receiving military-type training from a foreign terrorist organization. He eventually pled guilty to all three counts.¹ His final sentence is pending on the basis of his continuing cooperation and the usefulness of his information in the continuing war on terror. This may explain his readiness to cooperate after being captured, despite his faith in the jihadist cause. His charges could entail a maximum sentence of life in prison.²

2. Nature of the adversary

Bryant Vinas was born in Queens, New York, and lived in Medford, a suburb on Long Island. His parents immigrated to the United States four years before Vinas was born. His father, Juan, was an engineer from Peru. Maria Louisa, his mother, was from Argentina and worked as a caregiver.³ He also had a

¹ *United States v. John Doe*. Guilty Plea. 08-CR-823. United States Courthouse, Brooklyn, New York. January 28, 2009, 9.

² “New Yorker Pleads Guilty to Providing NYC Transit Information to al-Qaeda,” Anti-Defamation League, May 24, 2010. http://www.adl.org/main_Terrorism/vinas_guilty_plea.htm

³ Presumably Vinas knew Spanish; his parents were Spanish immigrants. He would later listen to Puerto Rican music, and have friends of Hispanic descent.

younger sister named Lisa. He had a typical childhood, liking the same activities of any other normal American boy; at one time he was a Boy Scout.⁴ He played the piano and guitar, and liked anime and video games. He was a Mets fan with a passion for baseball, playing on his high school's Junior Varsity team. He was raised Roman Catholic, at his father's insistence. He was even an altar boy.⁵

Neighbors, teachers and family friends remember him as a sweet child who cared deeply about his family. He was very close to his sister, whom he once saved from drowning and was protective of at school. This faith in his family was shattered at the age of 14, because of his parents' bitter divorce. His father had been unfaithful with another woman. This situation not only angered young Vinas, seeing his family suddenly in tatters at a young age, but also shook his faith in Catholicism. He became an angry teenager, with a quick temper. His mother said he was increasingly rebellious and disrespectful towards her. He eventually become too much for her to handle, and she transferred custody of Vinas to his father whom he moved in with shortly after.

At Longwood High School he let his hair grow out and began listening to violent Puerto Rican rap music. However, he avoided drugs, alcohol, sex, and fighting; some friends characterized him as "straight edge." He never had a problem finishing his homework on time. His mother postulated when interviewed that these restrictions could have been part of a deeper spiritual search. Before he moved out of her house, he would at times ask her to drive him to a nearby church when he became interested in evangelical Christianity.

At school, he was considered a loner, quiet and anonymous among his classmates. One of the few he did befriend was Alex Acevedo. He led Vinas into a close circle of friends, mostly of Puerto Rican descent. These friends described the young Vinas as somewhat gullible, and easily swayed by a group or a strong opinion.

Following the September 11 attacks, Vinas enlisted in the army. He had just graduated from high school. Some friends said he felt proud of his country during that time, while others theorized that he was motivated by the eagerness of his friends, and was not particularly patriotic. He only lasted a month in boot camp, from March 12 to April 11, 2002. The records of his time there, obtained by CNN, do not show the army's reason for his discharge. Acevedo said that although Vinas enjoyed it there, army life was too difficult for him. Vinas also suffers from asthma, which could provide another reason.⁶

Upon his return to Long Island, he began to associate with Acevedo's half-brother, a man named Victor Kuilan. Kuilan converted to Islam as a teenager, and was an amateur boxer. When Vinas showed an interest in his religion, he gave him an English-language copy of the Quran. Acevedo said it took Vinas only two days to read the book in its entirety.

⁴ Claire Suddath, "Bryant Neal Vinas: An American in al-Qaeda," *Time*, July 24, 2009.

⁵ Paul Cruickshank, Nic Robertson, and Ken Shiffman, "The radicalization of an all-American kid," CNN, May 13, 2010. This resource was extremely useful and exhaustive in its analysis of Vinas' life in New York.

⁶ Cruickshank et al., "Radicalization."

Shortly afterwards, Vinas abruptly converted to Islam, reciting the Muslim profession of faith, the Shahada, at the Al Falah mosque in Queens. Early in his conversion, there did not seem to be much change in him. His already strict behavioral choices matched well with the similar tenets of the Muslim faith. The mosque where he converted was run by the evangelical organization Tablighi Jamaat. The movement has a worldwide following and is known for its missionary charity work. Vinas participated in this, knocking on doors throughout his neighborhood. Tablighi Jamaat is known for zealotry in its beliefs but is also thought of in counterterrorism circles as apolitical.⁷

He began attending a different mosque, the Islamic Association of Long Island Masjid in Selden. This mosque was decidedly mainstream, but due to its size there were some radical elements. The Imam there was in regular contact with the F.B.I. and homeland security, and in his own words, he “watched the place like a hawk” for extremist influences. It was the oldest mosque in the area, and was a converted Episcopalian church. Its attendants were primarily of Pakistani descent.⁸ Kulian attended this mosque, as well, and so can provide an eyewitness account of Vinas’ conversion. In this new mosque, with its far larger congregation, Vinas took to his new faith with zeal. He began studying Arabic and the Quran. He also began wearing Islamic robes and a skullcap, and going by the name “Ibrahim” when around other Muslims.⁹ His increasingly fervent views even began to alienate others when he reprimanded them for failing to uphold Muslim tenets, even if they themselves were not Muslim. At this time he also tried to convert his father.¹⁰

His father says that he became a very private person at this time, an observation corroborated by many of his friends at the mosque. Vinas resisted his father’s advice that he attend college, enrolling in technical courses instead, which he failed to complete. He says that Vinas spent most of his time either working or at the mosque. Vinas held various jobs, including one at a car wash and another as a truck driver, but he failed to find consistent employment.¹¹

In 2004, he got a new job as a forklift operator. He also began to become increasingly interested in boxing, something else that Kulian had introduced him to. Vinas found others at his mosque who boxed as well, and they would spar during their free time. This did not quell Vinas’ anxiety, however, at his current living situation. He desperately sought the ability to travel and get out of his neighborhood, where he had lived his entire life. Friends said he saved in order to travel, sometimes eating cereal for every meal. After an accident at his new job, a financial settlement finally gave him enough funds to leave the country.¹²

Instead of just taking a normal vacation and warning very few about his departure, he entered Cuba illegally to try to receive additional boxing training. He ended up spending several months there. By all accounts, he found the

⁷ Cruickshank et al., “Radicalization.”

⁸ Sebastian Rotella and Josh Meyer, “U.S.-born militant who fought for al-Qaeda is in custody,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 2009.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Cruickshank et al., “Radicalization.”

¹¹ Rotella and Meyer, “Militant in custody.”

¹² Cruickshank, et al., “Radicalization.”

experience vastly rewarding. He did not follow a strict Islamic lifestyle while there, and gained a reputation as a womanizer. On a second trip later that year, he moved in with his boxing instructor's daughter with whom he was having a relationship. Acevedo and others noticed that the trips seemed to have a cathartic appeal to Vinas. He relished the different culture and the challenge that entry posed to him. Vinas may have been more interested in the challenge that getting into Cuba posed than he was in how the trip would improve his boxing career. Unable to return to Cuba a third time, he was forced to end his relationship, and he became extremely depressed.¹³

3. Motivation

It was at this point that Vinas' radicalization really began. While other future terrorist suspects became radicalized after meeting a charismatic person with radical views, Vinas seems to have actively sought these people out. He ended his affiliation and work with Tablighi Jamaat. Their apolitical views no longer had any appeal to him, as he became increasingly conservative in his religious philosophy.

He began to spend nearly all his time on a computer, either studying the Quran or visiting religious websites. Counter-terrorism officials would later speculate that the internet played an important role in Vinas' radicalization. He almost certainly visited websites that talked about jihad, conspiracy theories about the United States and other extremist beliefs. Among these theories that he eventually latched on to was one holding that the government had staged the September 11 terrorist attacks and was planning to put all Muslims living in America into concentration camps. As someone who knew this "truth," he felt that he was particularly in danger, becoming fearful and paranoid. This online exposure no doubt contributed to Vinas' emerging worldview. He became increasingly angry and combative with his friends, arguing with them that the United States was at war with Islam. Acevedo noticed his friend was, "always pissed off, always mad."¹⁴

In 2005, Vinas began to associate with a group called the Islamic Thinkers Society. He had heard of them online, through the story of Joseph Cohen who, though Jewish, had converted to Islam, and now was a major spokesman for the group. Those at the Selden mosque knew Vinas by his Muslim name, Yousef al Khattab.¹⁵ This Society is Jihadist in its outlook and views. Based in New York, the Society is small but active, with thousands of online followers around the world, including many Americans. They are known to organize rallies but these are usually sparsely attended. They are affiliated with a similar British organization called Al-Muajiroun. They regularly use inflammatory rhetoric designed to foment Islamic extremism and violence. Although they support al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, they themselves are non-violent. All of their activity falls within the bounds of freedom of speech. However, their support for al-Qaeda worries most officials who are concerned that the Society's rhetoric

¹³ Cruickshank et al., "Radicalization."

¹⁴ Cruickshank et al., "Radicalization."

¹⁵ Cruickshank et al., "Radicalization."

makes violence acceptable and that it provides an outlet for young and impressionable Muslims like Vinas that may inspire them to a level of radicalization that might not have been achieved without such an stimulus. Their calls for violent action, whether they do anything or not, could be dangerous due to the enthusiasm they foster in others.¹⁶

Vinas was a prime target for such a group at this point in his life. His relationship with his friends and family was increasingly being strained by his radical views. Friends said that the Society had a strong affect on Vinas. Their radical views matched up with what Vinas already was learning about on the internet. While his friends and family treated his views with distance and skepticism, the Islamic Thinkers Society embraced and supported them.

The radical friend of Vinas' who led him to this group was an attendant of the Selden mosque named Ahmad Zarinni. Zarinni was of Afghan descent, and though raised and educated in New York, had never assimilated to American society. He had extreme difficulty holding down a job because of his conservative views, such as when he ordered his boss at a cell phone store to stop selling ringtones, because music was *haram*, forbidden. He quit when the owner of the store, a fellow member of the mosque, refused. He also wanted to teach children at the mosque his radical views, but the Imam categorically refused his offer to do so.

Zarinni, according to investigators, was a leader of the Society in New York, and he introduced Vinas to its members. Vinas began to make friends from among Society members including a man named Ahmer Qayyum. Qayyum had come to New York for an education, and attended the William Esper Studio, a prestigious acting school, from 2002 to 2004. However, his career never took off, and Qayyum struggled to find a job. He began to take his faith far more seriously, after rejecting the strict condemnation of his career choice by his father back in Pakistan while he was in school.

Qayyum, like many others, supported the Islamic Thinkers Society because of the wars the U.S. wages in Iraq and Afghanistan and because of its support for Israel. Like Vinas, he felt that the "evil American empire" was waging a war against Islam itself.¹⁷ This is important, because Vinas and his associates seemed to be motivated not by the nature of American culture, condemned as degenerate by many Jihadists, but by foreign policy decisions that the U.S. has made in the Middle East. Vinas, according to his friend Victor Kuilan, was particularly motivated by U.S. support for Israel. These critiques may not be particularly well-informed, but this source of radicalization must still be noted.

Investigators say that Vinas became very close to both Zarrini and Qayyum, attending several meetings with them but not actively participating in the group beyond that. Zarrini also knew the group's spokesperson, Khattab, very

¹⁶ Paul Cruickshank and Tim Lister, "N.J. suspects attended protests organized by radical Islamic group," CNN, June 11, 2010. Paul Cruickshank, "The Growing Danger from Radical Islamist Groups in the United States," *CTC Sentinel*, August 2010, 3(8), 4-9. See this article for further information about the Islamic Thinkers Society and other similar groups in the United States and United Kingdom. This includes a detailed summation of Vinas' involvement with the Society, as well as how other domestic terror suspects relate to them.

¹⁷ Cruickshank, et al. "Radicalization."

well, having met him on several occasions. Back at the Selden mosque, Vinas began to advocate for the Society's extreme views to his continually dwindling group of more moderate friends. They remember him saying on many occasions that Muslims should go to Palestine to fight against Israel. At least three Mosque-goers who knew Vinas told CNN that Vinas had said that he wanted to go overseas in order to fight for jihad.¹⁸ After a particularly bitter verbal confrontation with the mosque's caretaker, one of Vinas' closest friends when he first began going there, Vinas stopped worshipping at the Selden mosque.

Acevedo and Kuilan were still close to him at this point, but were disturbed by his angry tendencies. Acevedo says that Vinas stopped paying U.S. taxes in order to stop funding the American war against Islam, one of Osama bin Laden's orders to American Muslims. By this point, Vinas was obsessed with his anger, regularly venting his frustration verbally to his friends. According to investigators, Vinas was becoming frustrated with the Society. As he began to commit his mind more and more to jihad, he began to think of the Society's leaders as simply talkers, who had no intention of practicing what they preached. "The pattern we see is a lot of these [radicalized] individuals at a certain point realize that these groups are just talkers," said Mitchell Silber, Director of the N.Y.P.D. Intelligence Division. "And those that are serious about the jihad will leave these groups." Not every radical in the Islamic Thinkers Society was a future violent jihadist, but the Director's generalization is an apt one for Vinas.

Kuilan felt more and more uncomfortable around his friend. Vinas began saying that he wanted to go to Pakistan, to kill American soldiers himself. "I didn't take him serious, though," said Acevedo, with Kuilan's agreement. "I didn't think he was going to go kill somebody, you know. I didn't think it could be that simple, that you could be like, 'OK, the [U.S.] military is really aggravating me. Let me go to Pakistan.'"

Yet counter-terrorism officials say that that was exactly what Vinas was planning at this point. They say that he began to search for contacts in the Islamic Thinkers Society who could help him travel to Pakistan. He went to visit Khattab, who had moved with many of his followers to Atlantic City. Counter-terrorism officials say he was fishing for contacts, which they doubt Khattab could have provided. Khattab himself says that Vinas and others were simply there to visit him and hear his story. Officials do say that Vinas got his contacts from Qayyum, who still had family in Pakistan. Qayyum denied this, saying that he and Vinas did have plans to travel to Pakistan in 2008, but only to study Islam and possibly be treated for back pain.

In 2007, Vinas left New York without warning. His family said that he had disappeared, and that few at the mosque could give them any clues as to his whereabouts. He had left for Pakistan with three friends from the Selden mosque who still had family there. He arrived in Lahore, Pakistan on September 12, 2007. One of the friends, presumably Qayyum, arranged for his family to meet Vinas in Lahore, and get him a hotel room. Through the cousin of an Afghan family that another of these friends helped Vinas to meet, he successfully made contact with a Taliban commander. This commander, though unnamed in any of the testimony,

¹⁸ Cruickshank et al., "Radicalization."

is known to have fought U.S., NATO, and Afghan forces on numerous occasions throughout south-eastern Afghanistan. Within three weeks of arriving in Pakistan, Vinas had successfully made contact with, and joined, an organization that would prove to be decidedly more violent than any he had affiliated with in New York.¹⁹

After joining the Taliban commander's battle group, he crossed back into Kunar province in Afghanistan with them. While there, he participated in a rocket attack on a U.S. military base. The attack failed completely, as the attackers decided against firing mortars while American aircraft circled overhead. This attack consisted of twenty or so insurgents. Vinas then returned with the Taliban to the Pakistani Tribal Area of Mohmand. Vinas must have distinguished himself on these attacks, because a Taliban chief recommended him for transfer to a unit that carried out suicide attacks. Vinas accepted almost immediately, heading with other recruits to Peshawar for further training. However, these chiefs decided he needed further religious and spiritual training. He received some training in Peshawar, before traveling to Waziristan to be trained at an al-Qaeda camp. Most of the operatives he was around, he later testified, were from Saudi Arabia and Yemen.²⁰

From al-Qaeda's point of view, the decision to take in Vinas could have been tactical. Vinas is an American citizen, with an American passport, which he had to turn over once he joined the camp. He had no criminal record from New York or anywhere else, and had no previous record of membership in any terrorist organization. He could have gone back to the United States and travelled freely, meeting with contacts, gathering intelligence, planning attacks or any other similar operation that al-Qaeda could have carried out. There was a possibility that he may have been an informant, of course. However, Vinas had an obvious enthusiasm for the cause and he had good recommendations from the system of contacts and tribal relations that al-Qaeda uses in Pakistan. These considerations presumably overrode any concerns they might have had.²¹

Between March and July of 2008, Vinas took courses with other al-Qaeda recruits. In addition to application forms and graduations, they would receive periodic written performance evaluations. Vinas took Arabic with other foreign recruits in classes of ten to twenty students. He would eventually learn to speak Arabic, Urdu and Pashtun extremely well, in addition to knowing English and Spanish. Other classes included a course in small arms, such as the AK-47, explosives theory and the assembly of bombs and suicide vests, as well as a course in rockets and other similar weapons. Vinas showed a particular aptitude

¹⁹ Sebastian Rotella and Josh Meyer, "A young American's journey into al-Qaeda," *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 2009.

²⁰ Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, "New Yorker says he would have been suicide bomber," CNN, July 24, 2009.

²¹ Alex Rodriguez and Sebastian Rotella, "Pakistan looks at militant as key to Americans' journey," *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 2009. This details a case where five Americans were recruited through e-mail, but were then rebuffed by al-Qaeda once reaching Pakistan out of fear they might be informants or liabilities. Critical in the case, authorities speculate, was an inability to tap into traditional networks to gain the organization's trust.

for explosives theory. Around this time he also appeared in an al-Qaeda propaganda video, later pointing himself out to authorities.²²

Receiving paramilitary training with Vinas were other foreign recruits from Europe and Turkey. They lived together in a system of safe houses. He befriended several other foreigners who had come to Pakistan to fight jihad, like him. One was a Turk who died in a suicide attack on a U.S. base. Another was a Frenchman from Morocco named Hamza el Alami, who Vinas said had taken a course on international terrorism that specifically talked about how to recruit cells in hostile countries outside of the region and how to carry out attacks. Another was a Belgian who took courses on assassination and kidnapping, and who wanted specifically to attack “easy targets” such as European subways and soccer stadiums.²³ Vinas’ later testimony revealed that al-Qaeda recruited from Europe’s criminal elements: one Belgian he met there had been a bank robber.²⁴ For security purposes, he went by the name Ibrahim, which he took for himself back at the Selden mosque when he had first converted to Islam. Fellow fighters called him by a different nickname, Bashir el-Ameriki, “the American.”²⁵

4. Goals

In September of 2008, Vinas and other al-Qaeda operatives fired rockets from the Pakistani border with Afghanistan onto American bases. One attack failed due to radio targets, and the other failed to do any damage, Vinas later would learn. He then returned to Waziristan and to the al-Qaeda leadership.²⁶ Having proven his worth as a capable and intelligent fighter, he was now a full fledged member of the terrorist organization. Throughout this period, Vinas was living his dream of fighting for al-Qaeda against the United States and its allies.

Having done this, he now shared the aspirations of his fellow jihadis to take the fight back to the infidel’s home front. Vinas was completely wrapped up in jihadist ideology. He does not say that he wants the United States destroyed, but he does want to inflict mass casualties. His language and that of others about the “American Empire” is vitriolic on this point. Through violent terrorist attacks, that are highly publicized, he may have thought that he could have exerted some pressure on the United States to end its war against Islam.

5. Plans for violence

For these reasons, Vinas began to work with al-Qaeda leaders to plan an attack in the place where he had grown up and lived his earlier life and talked to them about the possibility of bombing the commuter train system in New York City. Specifically, they discussed targeting the Penn Station stop of the Long Island Rail Road (L.I.R.R.). Vinas had taken this train nearly every day while working in New York and would have been familiar with its layout and general security.

²² Ibid.

²³ Rotella and Meyer, “A young American’s journey.”

²⁴ Mike Powell, “U.S. recruit reveals how Qaeda trains foreigners,” *New York Times*, July 23, 2009.

²⁵ Rotella and Meyer, “A young American’s journey.”

²⁶ Powell, “U.S. Recruit.”

According to Vinas, this was the extent of the plan. Surely al-Qaeda was interested in the information, but the attack itself never went beyond the planning stage. According to his testimony, they had discussed using suicide bombers, and the attack would most certainly have used explosives. It is unclear whether Vinas would have participated in person, or whether he was merely providing intelligence. Also, it is not clear whether this bombing would have been an isolated one to inspire fear or as part of a coordinated assault on New York's public transportation system.

Vinas himself may not have been privy to the most relevant details of any such plot that al-Qaeda's operational planners may have been putting into place. His intelligence would have most certainly helped any such attack. Vinas' testimony and later corroborating evidence suggest that the attack idea was a serious one, and would have had at least as high a chance of succeeding as anything else al-Qaeda had attempted up to that point. It is difficult to fully gauge the threat presented by their plan. The attack was plausible, but the group had not taken tangible steps to set the plan in motion.²⁷

In October 2008, Vinas left the camp and returned to Peshawar. It is unclear exactly why he left. Vinas claimed that he was returning to Peshawar in order to find a wife.²⁸ Investigators say that he was there to get supplies and contact a cell of terrorists operating in Belgium. One thing to note here is the oddness of al-Qaeda's tactics. Why use the American, who would be a valuable member of any recruiting, intelligence gathering or offensive mission, to do a job that a local may have been far more suited for? Unless they were seriously lacking manpower, using Vinas in this role would seem to be a huge risk. Either al-Qaeda felt confident enough to send him safely, or he may have actually wanted to come to Peshawar to live there of his own accord.

U.S. counter-terrorism investigators had been monitoring the Belgian group's emails, and may have tracked down Vinas by intercepting his communications.²⁹ Officials say that they had been tracking him once he arrived in Pakistan, or possibly even earlier. U.S. and Pakistani forces seem to have been aware of his arrival, and made many attempts to follow the chain of connections he made up until the point he made contact with the Taliban and al-Qaeda. It is even possible that this monitoring began back in New York, even before he began travelling. The officials who provided these assurances spoke to the *Los Angeles Times* in July, 2009, on the condition of anonymity. Much of Vinas' case is still ongoing and classified, as authorities hope to continue to use him as a source of information about al-Qaeda.³⁰

At any rate, he was arrested by Pakistani security forces and transferred to U.S. custody. He proved to be a treasure trove of information regarding al-Qaeda tactics, training methods and operations. Vinas gave a witness statement in the

²⁷ William K. Rashbaum and Souad Mekhennet, "L.I. man helped Qaeda, then informed," *New York Times*, July 22, 2009. Rotella and Meyer, "A young American's Journey."

²⁸ Powell, "U.S. Recruit."

²⁹ Rotella and Meyer, "Militant in Custody."

³⁰ Josh Meyer and Sebastian Rotella, "American forged own path into al-Qaeda," *Los Angeles Times*, July 26, 2009.

trial of members of a Belgian terror cell arrested in Brussels in December 2008. These operatives had received the same training as Vinas and in the same geographical location. In addition, according to his testimony, Vinas met at least once with the leader of the Belgian cell while training with al-Qaeda.³¹

6. Role of informants

Informants did not play any role in this case, including in the capture of Vinas.

7. Connections

The connections between Vinas, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda proved to be close, and have already been discussed.

8. Relation to the Muslim community

Friends at the mosque, as well as its imam, were shocked when they learned about Vinas' capture and where he had been. They stressed that he was nearly always polite to them, and was quiet and personal. Many noted that the Vinas they knew seemed incapable of going so far away from home for such insidious purposes. Many expressed surprise that someone like Vinas had originated out of a mosque that was so moderate and mainstream.³²

There does not appear to be evidence that Vinas' case led to increased monitoring of mosques that he had attended, or in the New York area. By all accounts, mosques continued to be monitored lightly, with cooperation from community leaders. U.S. officials were already monitoring the Islamic Thinkers Society closely, which is how they may have begun to shadow Vinas' movements.

9. Depiction by the authorities

After Vinas' capture and subsequent testimony, the F.B.I. and homeland security thought it prudent to alert the N.Y.P.D. of a possible terrorist attack on the New York metro system over the Thanksgiving holiday in 2008. Vinas' talks with al-Qaeda operational planners about possibly bombing commuter rail lines gave them enough pause to issue the warning. The L.I.R.R. was cited as the most vulnerable target. There was no evidence, in Vinas' testimony or other sources, that al-Qaeda had any plans to attack anything during this time including those targets. Authorities stressed the hypothetical nature of the threat, but also its plausibility. They speculated about many of the details of the threat, and formulated their precautionary measures accordingly. The N.Y.P.D.'s response did not involve any change in the transit schedule, and the nation's threat level remained at its previous level. There was an increased police presence, with behavior detection officers in both uniform and street clothes, canine teams, federal air marshals and security inspectors.³³

³¹ Robertson, et al., "New Yorker says."

³² Cruickshank, et al., "Radicalization."

³³ "FBI warns of Thanksgiving terrorist threat," *The Telegraph*, November 26, 2008.

10. Coverage by the media

The media coverage was somewhat sensationalist. The fear was the possibility of synchronized bomb attacks in a heavily trafficked metropolitan transit system. Many papers and news outlets compared the planned incident to the Madrid attacks in 2004 even speculating that it was inspired by those deadly bombings. Nothing in the F.B.I. warning gave them any indication that this type of attack was planned. Local news speculated that a G20 Summit in Washington, D.C. and the upcoming inauguration of then President-elect Barack Obama would make the attack of a major transportation system at that time attractive.³⁴ Despite this alarmism, the media did stress that al-Qaeda had only discussed attacking, and some thought the government response over-cautious. The holiday passed without notable incident.³⁵

11. Policing Costs

Vinas' unique case represented a singular challenge from a policing perspective. The possible attack on the New York metro garnered a large police presence that was no doubt expensive for New York City. In addition, the inconvenience to holiday travelers has to be measured. Vinas' capture, however, appears to have been within the policing and intelligence structures developed for the global war on terror. It did not require any extraordinary policing beyond what counter-terrorism officials already employed, and his actual capture by Pakistani security forces seems to have been fairly routine. Although specific details of his capture and detainment remain classified, he is currently in an unnamed Federal Prison in New York.

The legal costs could have created issues, as Vinas' had a footprint in the Belgian terror case. The international nature of his case probably meant that the legal fees could have been expensive. Relative to other cases, his trial did not drag on. He pled guilty fairly quickly to all three counts against him, and is awaiting sentencing. As a result, legal fees would be large, but not necessarily uniquely large.

In fact, relative to the amount of intelligence Vinas was able and willing to provide with almost no coercion, his capture should be considered an amazing boon to U.S. security. His loss, not only in the terrorist's potential, but in names of operatives, locations of bases, methods and numerous other details is an unmitigated disaster for al-Qaeda. Bearing in mind these advantages, the policing costs associated with the Vinas case are comparatively small.

12. Relevance of the internet

As stated above, the internet had a major influence on Vinas. Jihadist websites provided Vinas with information and support that initiated his radicalization. His relative gullibility led him to believe the conspiracy theories that he read, which had a decided influence on his later worldview. The internet

³⁴ "Juval Aviv Interviewed About Possible Thanksgiving Terrorist Attack," December 8, 2008. <http://youtube/lfKMOsL084Y>

³⁵ "FBI warns of Thanksgiving." "Feds Warn Of Possible NYC Terror Plot," CBS News, November 26, 2008.

led Vinas to the Islamic Thinkers Society,³⁶ and therefore to the radicals and contacts that would enable him to travel to Pakistan. Without such a large jihadist presence on the internet, Vinas likely would have not been radicalized and not become a threat to American security.

Allegedly, it was al-Qaeda's use of the internet to communicate with European terror cells that led authorities to capture Vinas.

13. Are we safer?

The capture of Bryant Neal Vinas makes America safer if for no other reason than the intelligence that he was able to provide about al-Qaeda and the Taliban. He readily cooperated with officials. His information led to the arrest of senior al-Qaeda operatives, and Predator drone strikes in Pakistan on insurgent bases by the U.S. Military.³⁷ By any measure, this intelligence has enabled a major step forward in the tactical situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

There is no worry about any civil liberties issues arising out of this case. There was no entrapment, and Vinas pled guilty to all charges. All evidence indicates that Vinas sought out a way to fight jihad with other terrorists, and would have made further attempts to aid al-Qaeda and kill Americans.

There are other intangibles, as well. Vinas was a combat member of al-Qaeda, and almost certainly would have continued planning, and perhaps executing, terrorist attacks. For reasons described above, Vinas' arrival in Pakistan was a major opportunity for the terrorist group. As an unassuming local, Vinas would have had little trouble moving invisibly through networks in America. There is no guarantee that the counter-terror investigators intermittently tracking him would have continued to have success. For the intelligence he provided and for the denial of al-Qaeda of an incredibly useful tool, Vinas' capture undoubtedly helps keep us safer.

14. Conclusions

The case resonates somewhat with that Najibullah Zazi (Case 28). Though a native of Afghanistan, Zazi hatched a similar plot as Vinas, to blow up the New York subway system. He had spent a few years of his life living in New York City, and so may have travelled in similar circles as Vinas. Vinas had met Zazi in 2008 while training in Pakistan, and the two had discussed their respective plans for attacks.³⁸ Zazi was arrested when he returned to America in September 2009, pleading guilty to the charge that he was planning a suicide attack on the New York subway system. Vinas and Zazi have shown that the threat of "homegrown" radicalization is still a distinct possibility that policy makers and police forces have to take into account. Like Vinas, Zazi, whatever the depth of his radicalization, has cooperated after his arrest. Vinas' self-motivation and gradual radicalization make him a dangerous threat, but also a rare one.

³⁶ The Islamic Thinkers Society website can be accessed in English at www.islamicthinkers.com.

³⁷ Rashbaum and Mekhennet, "L.I. Man."

³⁸ Sebastian Rotella, "U.S. sees homegrown Muslim extremism as rising threat," *Los Angeles Times*, December 7, 2009.

Max Abrahms argues that terrorist groups often offer a social bond to their members, changing their views and activities around this fact, rather than an actual political consideration. They seek a social consistency and solidarity when they coordinate their actions towards violence.³⁹ This analysis could explain some of the story of Bryant Vinas' radicalization. At a young age, what he took for family and faith was taken from him, so he may have lacked real social participation that could have satisfied a need for solidarity and social cohesion with peers. Failing to find stable or suitable alternatives, this could have explained his original conversion to Islam, and later his radicalization. It is difficult to determine the exact extent to which social considerations played a role in how Vinas became a member of al-Qaeda. Once he arrived in Pakistan, the theory certainly helps to explain his continued participation in al-Qaeda's activities.

Until his radicalization, Bryant Vinas' life was extremely normal. He showed no signs of mental issues and had no criminal record. His parents' divorce, though tragic, could have occurred in any similar family. Vinas does not fit any type of normal profile for a radicalized Muslim American. It is therefore difficult to draw general lessons from his experience.

The Vinas case suggests a different perspective on al-Qaeda recruitment than what some views of the organization hold. There is certainly no established and official pipeline where al-Qaeda takes radical youths like Vinas and gets them to Pakistan where they are then trained to be terrorists. However, those who become radicalized on their own, in prison, or on the internet are a realistic threat. These potential radicals, if they are as committed as Vinas was, can exploit an informal network of contacts of Muslim immigrants in America and traditional family and tribal relationships in Afghanistan, Pakistan and other fronts. Though this phenomenon appears to be exceedingly rare, at least in the United States, it can still worry counter-terrorism officials. A vast, informal network hostile to the outside world is a much more difficult thing to monitor. It can also be an additional challenge for the CIA and other intelligence agencies which attempt to infiltrate these groups. Those like Vinas who self-recruit can still find ways to join with insurgents and inflict damage abroad or in the United States.⁴⁰

What is shocking about his case, is the relative ease with which he reached the Taliban once he arrived in Pakistan. Once he was determined to join a terrorist group and fight Americans, he had little trouble seeking them out on his own. This is a problem to the authorities. Someone who can tap into the traditional networks that al-Qaeda operates in could reach the organization covertly, without counter-terrorism officials being aware of it. On the other hand, this is encouraging in that al-Qaeda does not seem to be effectively operating a real recruiting pipeline out of the American Muslim community. Relative to many other parts of the world, Muslims in American tend to be well integrated into society, and are largely self-policing when it comes to extremism. However, someone like Vinas who was radicalized online and sought out jihad himself could nevertheless find ways to join a terrorist organization if sufficiently motivated.

³⁹ Max Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want," *International Security*, Spring 2008.

⁴⁰ Meyer, "American forged own path."