

Training for Terror: The “Homegrown” Case of Jami`at al-Islam al-Sahih

By Jeffrey B. Cozzens and William Rosenau

NO MAJOR TERRORIST attacks have taken place in the United States since September 11, 2001, but the country has not been immune from terrorist plots involving jihadist activists.¹ During the past eight years, authorities have prosecuted so-called “homegrown” U.S. terrorists—U.S. citizens or residents with few, if any, meaningful operational ties to terrorists abroad—in California, New Jersey, New York, and elsewhere.² Most recently, in July 2009 six U.S. citizens and one U.S. resident were indicted in North Carolina on charges that they were supporting and participating in violent jihad in the Middle East, southeastern Europe, and South Asia.³

Although all of these cases were widely reported, there has been little systematic attention to some of the most salient issues surrounding homegrown U.S. violent extremism. Today, paradoxically, more is known about violent extremism overseas than about the phenomena in the United States. Gaps in knowledge about U.S.-based jihadist terrorism are particularly large in three areas: training, target selection and tactics. To date, the most significant research on this inter-related set of issues has focused on European jihadists.⁴ To help

1 This article defines jihadist activism as high-risk behaviors involved with supporting or plotting violence motivated by a militant Islamist worldview. For more, see Jeffrey B. Cozzens, “The Culture of Global Jihad: Character, Future Challenges, and Recommendations,” *The Future Actions Series* (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2008).

2 This definition is drawn from Edward J. Valla and Gregory Comcowich, “Domestic Terrorism: Forgotten, But Not Gone,” in Jeffrey N. Norwitz ed., *Armed Groups: Studies in National Security, Counterterrorism, and Counterinsurgency* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2008), p. 173. The authors recognize the difficulties inherent when applying this term to global jihadist activists, but the term is widely accepted in the above context.

3 Campbell Robertson, “Arrests in Terror Case Bewilder Associates,” *New York Times*, July 29, 2009.

4 See, for example, Petter Nesser, “How Did Europe’s Global Jihadis Obtain Training for their Militant Causes?” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20:2 (2008).

fill these gaps, this article considers the case of Jami`at al-Islam al-Sahih (Assembly of Authentic Islam, or JIS), a group that plotted to strike Jewish-American, Israeli, and U.S. military targets in and around Los Angeles, likely in September and October 2005.⁵ While not terribly sophisticated in organizational or operational terms—there was not the meticulous planning or the employment of explosives associated with al-Qa`ida-inspired terrorism, for example—U.S. law enforcement officials consider the JIS conspiracy the post-9/11 homegrown jihadist plot that came closest to reaching violent fruition.⁶

Research into homegrown U.S. terrorism is often hindered by the inaccessibility of court records and other primary sources. With JIS, however, primary sources are relatively rich and available, making it possible for researchers to develop a more textured understanding than is generally the case. Using court documents and media sources, this article examines the two phases of JIS training, how these phases helped shape the group’s target selection and finally how training influenced the cell’s operational art.

The JIS Conspiracy

Inspired by Kevin James, an imprisoned militant convert to Islam turned spiritual leader, two fellow African-American converts, Levar Washington and Gregory Patterson, and one Pakistani national, Hammad Samana (a U.S. resident), plotted a set of attacks using firearms. The cell discussed acquiring and using standoff explosives—typically devices that can be activated from a distance using remote detonators—but members dismissed this mode as too difficult. The conspirators robbed a dozen gas stations to finance the plot—perhaps the most overt example of the

5 See remarks by FBI Director Robert S. Mueller at www.fbi.gov/pressrel/speeches/mueller042606.htm.

6 The JIS cell “was closer to going operational than any we have seen post-9/11,” according to a senior Los Angeles Police Department official quoted in “Two Plead Guilty to Domestic Terrorism Charges of Conspiring to Attack Military Facilities,” Reuters, December 14, 2007. Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad’s admitted shooting of two soldiers in Arkansas on June 20, 2009 might prove to be the first U.S.-based jihadist strike since the 9/11 attacks. Muhammad, however, is apparently linked to Yemeni extremists, and so does not fit squarely into the “homegrown” category.

confluence of terrorism and criminality in the United States. The plotters were apprehended after they dropped a cell phone at the scene of their last robbery, leading authorities to their apartment. At the apartment, police discovered jihadist paraphernalia, including posters of Usama bin Ladin, evidence of online targeting of the proposed attack sites, and several documents that outlined their operational plan. The plotters all had sworn oaths of loyalty to Kevin James and maintained sporadic contact with him in prison, primarily using letters smuggled out of prison, as well as face-to-face meetings.⁷

JIS’ small-arms training in preparation for the attack was conducted in a park near Los Angeles, and it appears to be limited to a single day on July 4, 2005. This involved Samana, Patterson, and Washington firing a shotgun, a semi-automatic rifle, and performing calisthenics and martial arts in the park. The limited session in the park is best understood as the second and final phase of a training program that began years earlier in prison.

Phase 1: Forging the JIS “Method”

The first training period, which ran from 1997-2005, included several dozen inmates incarcerated at Sacramento’s New Folsom County Prison. This phase included a JIS indoctrination program,⁸ which consisted of learning Arabic, becoming familiar with the “Hadith of Jibreel,” relying heavily on texts written by a cleric named Jamaal al-Din Zarabozo,⁹ identifying enemies, reading literature “required” by Kevin James, developing an organized and

7 The U.S. Department of Justice’s March 2009 overview of the plot is available at losangeles.fbi.gov/dojpressrel/pressrel09/la030609ausa.htm.

8 Evidence of a phased curriculum is available at “Jama`at al-Islami As-Sahih Tutorial Protocol for Prisoners,” NEFA Foundation, December 14, 2007.

9 Shaykh Jamaal al-Din Zarabozo’s “He Came to Teach You Your Religion” is an English-language commentary on the hadith of Gabriel that was noted as a “must read” in the “JIS Protocol.” Zarabozo, a European convert to Islam living in the United States, is a California-educated economist turned popular cleric. He has been a frequent target of the Saudi religious establishment for his independent *fatawa* and willingness to engage more credentialed scholars in debate. It is unlikely that Zarabozo knew anything about JIS. For more, see Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 163-164.

tiered movement structure, devising recruitment strategies, and practicing operational security.¹⁰

Two documents were at the center of JIS indoctrination efforts: the rambling, largely theological “JIS Protocol,” which James authored in 1997, and the 2002 addendum to this original document called the “Jama’at Ul-Islami As Sahih Tutorial Protocol for Prisoners.”¹¹ Martial arts training was also part of the curriculum for the 15 or so committed JIS members,¹² and took place before or after Muslim prayer services—allegedly even when the prison chaplain was present.¹³ Besides his writings and demonstrated religious piety, James’ false claim that he was a veteran of Sudanese jihadist training camps likely furthered his role as the charismatic leader within the group; it also enabled him and his deputies, such as his New Folsom cell mate, Peter Martinez, to frame and promote the JIS worldview more effectively.¹⁴

At the time, James, a former 76th Street Crip from Gardena, CA who rejected his father’s Nation of Islam leanings, also became aware of Levar Washington’s potential utility as a “soldier.” Given Washington’s impending parole (scheduled for November 2004), eager embrace of the JIS curriculum, and parallel biography—that of a street-wise gang member turned Sunni Islamic convert like most of the JIS members—James judged Washington suitable for the task of building an operational cell outside of prison.¹⁵ James influenced Washington to the degree that the

latter allegedly swore *bay`at* (an oath of allegiance) to James as his “shaykh.”¹⁶ Like other JIS members, it is believed that Washington also agreed to the “90 day reporting rule,” in which all members were required to make contact with James every three months.¹⁷

Washington then began to recruit outside of prison for what would develop into the JIS plot. Washington met Samana and Patterson—by all accounts trusting and naïve individuals without criminal histories from decent families—at an Inglewood, CA mosque in May 2005. Only Patterson’s recent conversion to Islam and Samana’s status as a Muslim

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immigrant to the West would have suggested personal vulnerabilities to recruitment into terrorism. Indeed, by the end of May all three were sharing a run-down apartment in south-central Los Angeles, discussing the Iraq war and Guantanamo Bay, and what needed to be done in Islam’s defense.¹⁸ As in other Western cases, the importance of socially reinforced attitudes, values and beliefs; charismatic leadership; group interpretations of geopolitics; and adventurous attempts to reshape individual identities appear foundational to the cell’s turn to violent activism.

The end of the first training phase is marked by James’ 2004 publication of the “Blue Print 2005,” a training pamphlet that should be seen as the

ultimate, “kinetic” end of James’ earlier ideological and organizational writings.¹⁹ This document also provides a window into the intentions of the cell, as it bridges JIS’ unique jihadist ideology²⁰ and operational methods. Likely written with Washington in mind, James exhorted the JIS recruits to learn Arabic; recruit other members (felony free, ideally), who would in turn receive training in Islam and the “JIS Protocol”; conduct “covert” operations; and acquire firearms and explosives training. Additionally, James instructed JIS recruits to “become legitimate,” which entailed obtaining a driver’s license, marriage, school or regular employment, avoiding any overt signs of extremism in dress or behavior. Moreover, recruits were to adhere strictly to guidelines for living in *Dar al-Harb* (Abode of War).²¹

A later document, “Notoriety Moves,” also authored by James, built on “Blue Print 2005” by mentioning potential JIS targets: the Nation of Islam; followers of Warith D. Muhammad; Muslims who “trash” the four schools of Islam and qualified Sunni scholarship; Shi`a Muslims and Iran; Muslims who support and/or join the U.S. military; Muslims who are employed by “non-Islamic governmental institutions... blatantly in opposition to the laws and religion of Islam”; and Jewish and non-Jewish supporters of “an Israeli state.”²²

10 Ibid.; Also see also Mark S. Hamm, *Terrorist Recruitment in American Correctional Institutions: An Exploratory Study of Non-Traditional Faith Groups*, U.S. Department of Justice Commissioned Report #220957, December 2007.

11 The JIS Protocol and the 2002 addendum, the “Jama’at Ul-Islami As-Sahih Tutorial Protocol for Prisoners,” is available at nefaoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/U.S._v._James_JISManifesto.pdf.

12 At the time of writing, it does not appear that any individuals besides James, Washington, Patterson, and Samana will face charges in connection with the plot. As Mark Hamm notes, however, as of late 2007 there remained “about a dozen hard core (JIS) members” in the California prison system.

13 Hamm, p. 44.

14 Ibid., p. 42.

15 Ibid., p. 41; Also see Rob Harris, “Kevin James and the JIS Conspiracy,” PBS Frontline, October 10, 2006.

16 “Man Who Formed Terrorist Group That Plotted Attacks on Military and Jewish Facilities Sentenced to 16 Years in Federal Prison,” U.S. Department of Justice, Central District of California, March 6, 2009.

17 See Kevin James, “Blue Print 2005,” available at nefaoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/U.S._v._James_Blueprint2005.pdf.

18 Hamm, pp. 45-46. Hamm’s account provides a robust narrative of the cell’s radicalization and recruitment processes.

19 “Blue Print 2005.”

20 Although JIS emphasizes the methodology of violent jihad to combat “heretical” strains of Islam such as the Nation of Islam, 50%-ers, and the Shi`a, and lists the U.S. military and Jews among its targets, there are subtle ideological differences separating it from “mainstream” global jihadism as practiced by al-Qa`ida. First, as indicated by the *Protocol’s* content and its suggested reading list, JIS is strongly Shafi`i and promotes Sufism (*tawassuf*). The broader Salafist trend de-emphasizes overt reliance upon single schools of Sunni jurisprudence and generally considers Sufism an innovation. Second, the JIS manifesto labels jihad *fard kifayah* (a collective obligation), rather than *fard `ayn* (an individual obligation), the latter of which is al-Qa`ida’s view. Contrary to perhaps the central jihadist position articulated in the modern era by the Palestinian theoretician Abdullah Azzam, this view implicitly disregards the individual’s “duty” of defending Islam where it is besieged. This topic warrants deeper analysis, as does the study of ideological currents within North American Islamic extremism generally.

21 Ibid.

22 Kevin James, “Notoriety Moves,” available at nefaoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/U.S._v._

An unknown amount of this curriculum was also provided to Patterson and Samana, who, in James' opinion, became "true believers."

Phase 2: Operational Training and Attack Preparation

The second training phase ran from May through June 2005, when the three-man cell of Washington, Patterson, and Samana robbed gas stations to finance the JIS plot. Washington, the operational leader, was a former "Rolling 60s" gang member who likely imparted a modest amount of operational knowledge to the others, as they did not have criminal backgrounds. During his sentencing, Washington told the court that gas stations were targeted because oil was a political symbol of U.S. oppression in the Muslim world.²³ This phase, in which Patterson and Samana committed the bulk of the robberies, helped the two non-convicts develop a modest measure of operational experience already possessed by Washington. Perhaps more importantly, the robberies demonstrated the devotion of the new JIS members—Samana and Patterson—and bolstered their intent to commit the planned acts of terrorism.

Target Selection

The intended targets of the proposed September 11, 2005 JIS operation were listed in "Modes of Attack," a document written by Samana and recovered in the cell's apartment. The proposed targets, all within a 20-mile radius of Patterson's and Washington's apartment, included an El Al ticket counter at Los Angeles International Airport, the Israeli Consulate on Wilshire Boulevard, 16 U.S. Army recruitment centers and offices in and around Los Angeles, and a U.S. military base in Manhattan Beach.²⁴ The prison and post-prison indoctrination and training phases appear to have shaped this target set. The data suggest these targeting catalysts included:

The JIS Manifesto and Other "Required" Readings

These documents identify the U.S. military and emblems of the State of

Israel as enemies of Muslims. They are viewed as corrupting, persecuting influences that "authentic" Sunni Muslims must combat, and impediments to the establishment of Islamic law. Accordingly, JIS was to "sit back, build and attack... Western forces of the US and their Kufr (unbelieving) [sic] society." Serbia, Britain, and Russia are also identified as targets of JIS.

The "Hothouse" Prison Atmosphere

This almost certainly reinforced the JIS literature that "legitimized" the target selection. It is also noteworthy that James urged the study of Arabic and promoted the notion that membership in the global Islamic community (the *umma*) supersedes individual identity. By adopting the language and suffering of the *umma*, the local context took on a global significance for JIS, and the Los Angeles targets aligned with those of the global jihadist movement.

Gas Station Robberies

For the JIS cell members, robbing gas stations served two purposes. The robberies were expected to generate revenues for JIS operations. Moreover, the acts were conceptualized as jihad itself. Patterson, according to a Federal Bureau of Investigation affidavit filed in August 2005, claimed that the gas station hold-ups "were part of a jihad against the U.S., particularly against American oil companies who are stealing from 'our countries,'" that is, Muslim lands.²⁵

Prolonged Interaction Among the Conspirators

This interaction involved discussions about violent jihad, mistreatment of Muslims, and the Iraq war. In the view of JIS cell members, the abuses of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, U.S. military attacks on Muslims in Iraq and Afghanistan, and U.S. policies toward the Muslim world more generally required that the United States suffer for its actions. In his December 2007 plea agreement with federal prosecutors, James said the JIS plot was motivated by the wish to retaliate "for the policies of the United States and Israeli governments toward Muslims throughout the world." Levar Washington, according to the August 2005 FBI affidavit, argued that

something had to "be done to punish the United States," and Samana, his co-conspirator, agreed.²⁶ The natural outgrowth was the target list, which was also approved by the imprisoned James through "kites"—letters smuggled from prison.²⁷

Tactics

How did the training phases help determine how attacks would be conducted? First, James' "Blueprint 2005" established a baseline plan for waging a limited insurgency that would be devised around operational security, the use of standoff improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and firearm assaults upon selected human targets. Later documents such as "Notoriety

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Moves" and "Modes of Attack" echo this assessment. The cell's behavior and planning appeared to follow this logic despite its failure to acquire explosives.

The influence of these documents (and James' leadership) in the cell's choice of tactics is evident, especially its de-emphasis on immediate suicide attacks. Although at least two members of the operational JIS cell took oaths of loyalty to James "until victory or martyrdom"—and Patterson admitted to authorities that his ultimate goal was to "die for Allah in jihad"—like James' documents, where there are only limited references to martyrdom, the culture of the cell was not built around suicide methodologies.²⁸ Very different from many al-Qa`ida-linked writings, this can be attributed in part to the criminal pasts—and thus possible

James_ClaimResponsibility.pdf.

²³ H.G. Reza, "Man Sentenced To 22 Years in L.A.-Area Terror Plot," *Los Angeles Times*, June 25, 2008.

²⁴ See Samana's "Modes of Attack" at nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/U.S._v_Washington_TargetList.pdf.

²⁵ Quoted in "The L.A. Plot to Attack U.S. Military, Israeli Government, and Jewish Targets," NEFA Foundation, January 2008.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁷ Hamm, p. 42.

²⁸ *U.S.A. v. Samana*, (C.D. CA.), No. 05-16662M, affidavit filed August 2, 2005.

interest in self-preservation—of some of the conspirators. In other “strains” of the global jihadist movement, martyrdom in jihad is believed to provide atonement even for criminals—a neglected theme in this case which emphasizes the importance of James’ writings and leadership in the selection of non-suicide methods.

It is also clear that logistical and organizational variables during the training phases influenced the selection of tactics. Difficulty in acquiring explosives, the cell’s lack of expertise and training in their handling, and the considerable ease of acquiring and using firearms made small-arms the weapons of choice, furthering the decision to rule out other, more exotic tactics. Samana’s testimony in the affidavit filed by FBI Special Agent James Clinton Judd supports this view, as he detailed plans to assault U.S. military targets with a semi-automatic rifle and a shotgun.²⁹ Moreover, these tactics would not likely result in the initial martyrdom of the cell, and would eventually allow for James’ “Notoriety Moves” publicity plan to take effect.

It appears that the JIS “curriculum,” the cell’s lack of tactical training, and the conspirators’ apparent disinclination toward martyrdom operations at the outset led them to make the operational choices they did. Firearms—the preferred weapons of amateur thugs—would likely kill many soldiers and Jewish Americans and would potentially afford the cell another day to fight.

Conclusion

The JIS case is instructive on a number of levels. First, it suggests a strong correlation between terrorists’ training curriculum, authoritative ideological framing (in James’ case) and target selection in the United States—a linkage that should be explored in subsequent research on other terrorist plots.

Second, it is clear that JIS was focused on striking political, military, and religious targets, which have received relatively less official attention than U.S. critical infrastructure, such as electrical and transportation systems. Third, the case demonstrates that JIS—a group with no explosives expertise or

experience—sought to maximize its operational potential by using what was at hand and what was familiar, namely robbery and firearms. This might also help explain why other U.S.-based jihadist cells without tangible connections to, or significant online liaison with, foreign extremists were similarly inclined to choose firearms over explosives.

Finally, although there is no evidence that JIS attempted to forge international ties, James’ writings make passing references to working with “Islamic movements” committed to the purification of Sunni Islam worldwide and struggling against the global forces opposing it. Cooperation with foreign jihadist networks could have bolstered the capabilities of the cell and pushed JIS to consider suicide methods against a wider target set.

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²⁹ “The L.A. Plot to Attack U.S. Military, Israeli Government, and Jewish Targets.”