

NEW YORK CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT

— NEW YORK CITY INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE —
December 2018





PREFACE

Over the past decade, the terrorism threat environment in New York City has been characterized by two trends: an acceleration in the rate of plots and attacks and the increasing dominance of lone actors who are inspired, but usually not directed, by foreign and domestic extremist organizations that espouse violent action. The New York City Police Department assesses with high confidence that both of these trends will continue over the next four years.

- Between 2001 and 2009, there were nine plots or attacks targeting New York City. Since 2009, there have been a total of 20, 12 of which have occurred since the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) declared a caliphate in 2014, a historical event that energized local New York City-based Salafi-jihadist supporters to mobilize to action in support of the group.
- Whereas in the aftermath of September 11th, attacks conducted by foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) posed the greatest threat to New York City, between 2009 and 2010, lone actors inspired by groups across the ideological spectrum rose above foreign terrorist organizations as the predominant kinetic threat. Before 2009, only one lone actor plot targeted New York City. Since that date, there have been 15 such plots and attacks.

The rise of lone actors appears to have dispersed the U.S. terrorism threat to some extent, as would-be terrorists are now encouraged and empowered to strike wherever they may be, but New York City continues to face a unique threat environment that demands a specific response. New York City is rich in sought-after targets for a wide range of ideological extremists, including economic and financial icons, symbols of globalization, crowded public spaces and events, transportation hubs, prominent diaspora groups, and buildings connected to the current U.S. President, among many others.

SCOPE NOTE

This New York City Intelligence Estimate (NYCIE) seeks to provide a forward-looking assessment of the kinetic threat environment that New York City will face during the next four years (2019-2023). The analysis contained in this product is underpinned by historical data beginning on September 11, 2001 and ending in November 2018. For the purpose of this intelligence estimate, terrorism is defined as an unlawful act of violence against persons or property with the intention of coercing a government or civilian population to achieve a political objective.

Our analysis is based on observed trends over the last several years in New York City and other regions of the world, and we assume a steady state of affairs related to U.S. counterterrorism missions here and abroad as well as the relative capabilities of lone actors and foreign terrorist organizations to stage attacks.



KEY JUDGEMENTS

1. We assess that low-complexity attacks using explosives or easily-obtainable weapons carried out by lone actors inspired by a variety of ideologies will continue to present the most prevalent terrorist threat to New York City over the next four years.
 - Despite the volume of propaganda calling for low-complexity tactics, in New York City, would-be terrorists—both lone actors and those directed by FTOs—have overwhelmingly plotted attacks involving explosives, despite simpler weapons such as knives, firearms, and vehicles being easier to operate and obtain. Only one ISIS supporter eschewed explosives in favor of other violent means: Sayfullo Saipov, who conducted a vehicle-ramming attack on October 31, 2017.
 - Lone actors across the ideological spectrum appear to have selected targets in New York City opportunistically and expediently.
2. We assess that the threat to New York City from returning foreign fighters who have traveled to Iraq and Syria will remain low, as overseas travel to join terrorist groups continues to prove logistically difficult for New York City-based extremists.
 - Among those who are able to travel, returning to the U.S. in an operational capacity will remain unlikely due to national and international counterterrorism efforts.
3. We assess that while a number of FTOs—notably ISIS, al-Qa’ida, and their affiliates—continue to express interest in striking the U.S., the likelihood of such an operation is relatively low in comparison to the lone actor threat as years of counterterrorism pressure have degraded the capacity of these organizations and their affiliates to conduct external operations in the West.
 - While many terrorist organizations in recent years have predominately focused on improving their local position, propaganda released by these groups—most notably ISIS and al-Qa’ida—continue to demonstrate their interest in striking distant countries directly or inspiring others to do so.
 - Despite their degradation, these organizations remain a threat because of their nimble and innovative approach, as well as the ease with which capacity can be regenerated.



LONE ACTORS¹

We assess with high confidence that low-complexity attacks using explosives or easily-obtainable weapons carried out by lone actors inspired by a variety of ideologies will continue to present the most frequent terrorist threat to New York City over the next four years. Lone actor terrorist attacks or plots in New York City since 2001 have overwhelmingly (13 of 16) been perpetrated by Salafi-jihadist violent extremists and terrorism suspects have invoked ISIS's ideology most frequently over the last several years, a trend we assess will continue during the next four years.¹

- On December 11, 2017 Akayed Ullah initiated an improvised explosive device while inside an underground passageway connecting Port Authority Bus Terminal and Times Square. Four people, including the attacker, sustained minor injuries. According to the criminal complaint, Ullah claimed he carried out the attack in support of ISIS as revenge for the United States' policies in the Middle East.²
- On October 31, 2017, Sayfullo Saipov drove a rented flatbed pickup truck onto a pedestrian bike lane adjacent to the West Side Highway, killing eight and injuring 12. According to the official criminal complaint, a note found inside Saipov's attack vehicle indicated his allegiance to ISIS and that he was inspired by the group's propaganda videos.³

Far-left and far-right extremist groups have generally limited their activity in New York City to first amendment-protected activities such as organizing rallies and protests, flying on academic campuses, and hosting recruitment campaigns. However, we assess with medium confidence that a small number of those they inspire may conduct acts of violence in support of their ideology. The proliferation of far-right social media outlets can also energize lone actors inspired by the violent ideation and content they encounter to mobilize to violence.

- On November 9, 2018, Florida resident Cesar Sayoc, 56, was charged in a 30-count Indictment related to the alleged execution of a domestic terrorist attack involving the mailing of 16 improvised explosive devices to 13 victims throughout the country between October 22 and November 2. Sayoc's targets included former President Barack Obama, former Vice President Joe Biden, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, members of Congress, and other high-profile individuals who have criticized the current presidential administration, including Robert De Niro, former CIA Director John Brennan, and George Soros. Five of the packages were mailed to addresses in New York, including three in New York City.⁴ Sayoc, a former New York/New Jersey resident, was active on social media, sharing anti-liberal memes and conspiracy theories.⁵

¹ ***Defining "Lone Actor":*** Lone actors rarely operate in complete isolation, but they are "lone" because they typically make key decisions regarding a plot themselves, even if they communicate with, or identify as members of, formal organizations. For this reason, we assess that small, independent cells of up to four people can be grouped with lone actors. A more recent characteristic of lone attacks is an increased focus on the personal dynamic animating individuals to commit acts of violence. This is a shift in the terror landscape as it existed in the first decade after 9/11, which primarily looked at individuals as members of a larger group and emphasized the political motivations of their violence.



- On March 20, 2017, NYPD officers arrested James Harris Jackson, a Baltimore resident and violent white supremacist, accusing him of fatally stabbing a 66-year-old African American man in New York City with an 18-inch edged weapon. According to the criminal complaint, Jackson admitted targeting the man because of his skin color and viewed the killing as “practice,” intending to attack additional black men in Times Square.⁶⁷⁸⁹
- A September 2016 study concluded that white nationalist followers on Twitter have grown by over 600% since 2012, and have surpassed ISIS in number of followers, tweets per day, and almost every other social media metric. Members of leftist anti-fascist movements also rely heavily on social media applications to organize protests and recruit members, though these groups’ activities on social media tend to be less organized than their right-wing counterparts.

Extremist groups with disparate ideologies increasingly broadcast mirrored themes and images to their adherents. The Atomwaffen Division (AWD) and other like-minded White Nationalist groups have created a millenarian, uncompromising brand of violence in an attempt to appeal to frustrated, alienated youth, a tactic similarly practiced by Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups. Using slick propaganda reminiscent of ISIS media releases, AWD and its offshoots encourage their members to conduct “lone wolf” attacks that will advance their ideological cause and accelerate what they believe to be the inevitable end of the current democratic system.

- AWD and other White Nationalist groups have also crafted ideological justifications for various targets and methods of violence that resemble religious “rulings” made by clerics sympathetic to Salafi-jihadist organizations.
- AWD members or affiliates have been linked to five murders in the United States between May 2017 and January 2018, including an attack in Southern California in which Samuel Woodward, an affiliate or member of the group, allegedly stabbed his homosexual Jewish classmate to death. Atomwaffen members denied advanced knowledge of the attack, but subsequently praised the act, calling Woodward a “one man gay Jew wrecking crew.”¹⁰

Far-Right vs Far-Left: Feuding Narratives and Reciprocal Violence

While New York City has historically been the frequent target of organized far-left violence, groups associated with anarchist and other leftist causes have not presented a consistent terrorist threat since the 1970s. The recent nation-wide increase in public rallies and events held by both far-right and far-left extremist groups has prompted a marked—and frequently violent—counter-response, most commonly between far-right groups and anti-fascist actors, or “antifa.”

- On October 12, 2018, members of the Proud Boys, an all-male, far-right group, and Antifa protesters fought following a speech by Proud Boys founder Gavin McInnes. Two members of the 211 Bootboys—an ultranationalist far-right skinhead group based in the New York City area—allegedly assisted the Proud Boys in the fight. Nine people were arrested.
- In 2016, a group of far-right skinheads affiliated with the 211 Bootboys assaulted two brothers at a bar in Manhattan’s Lower East Side after noticing a “NYC Antifa” sticker on one of their phones.



Trends in Extremist Lone Actor Activity

Social media and online communications platforms offer varied paths to radicalization and options for plotting violent action – Consuming content primarily through the internet and social media allows would-be terrorists to construct belief systems pulled from various sources—which may include personal grievances, emotional stress, and violent extremism—to form blended ideologies. These virtual communication tools also allow those with extremist views to easily find likeminded others, connections that can result in the creation of virtual cells and networks, which possibly motivate people to action more quickly. Additionally, individuals who radicalize through the internet often possess varying degrees of association with the core members of extremist organizations, resulting in a “choose your own adventure” radicalization process that allows the individual to decide his or her level of engagement in their attack planning.

- **Propagating virtual radicalization** – In August 2017, a nine-year investigation by the NYPD Intelligence Bureau culminated in the arrest of pro-ISIS cleric Trevor William Forrest, known as Shaikh Faisal, in his native Jamaica. Faisal, 53 at the time of his arrest, managed the Authentic Tauheed network, which employed social media sites including Paltalk and Facebook to promote a violent interpretation of Islam and encourage followers to support ISIS. His followers have included convicted terrorists involved in plots to attack the New York City subway, an airliner, and members of the U.S. armed forces. Although Faisal had been isolated in Jamaica since approximately 2009, his online outreach allowed him to continue to radicalize across the globe, expanding his influence well beyond his physical location.¹¹
- **Developing a virtual network** – In July 2017, Abdulrahman El Bahnasawy, a then 19-year-old Canadian, Russel Salic, a then 37-year-old Filipino, and Talha Haroon, a then 19-year-old American living in Pakistan, were charged for a May 2016 plan to attack various targets in New York City that was designed via internet messaging applications. The plot, disrupted by an undercover FBI agent who posed as an ISIS supporter online, involved constructing explosives to detonate in Times Square, as well as attacking crowded spaces, such as concerts, with firearms. None of the alleged perpetrators was based in New York City.¹²¹³
- **Communicating with official group members** – In March 2018, then 20-year-old New Jersey-based Gregory Lepsky pled guilty to providing material support to ISIS. Lepsky admitted in February 2017 that he had communicated with ISIS members through social media, that he had learned online how to make a bomb, and that he planned to detonate a pressure cooker bomb in a busy area of New York City to kill as many people as possible. An examination of Lepsky’s social media activity confirmed he communicated with ISIS members, including regarding his desire to carry out a martyrdom operation. Investigators also uncovered a new pressure cooker hidden in his New Jersey home.¹⁴
- **Blending ideologies** – New York City resident Zale Thompson, 32, was killed by police after attacking a group of four NYPD officers with a hatchet in October 2014. Thompson was apparently motivated by multiple ideologies, including Salafi-jihadist violent extremism, an affinity with black separatism, and ideas of a race war in the U.S. Thompson consumed significant amounts of terrorist propaganda, and his attack occurred one month after ISIS implored its followers to murder “disbelievers.” His actions were lionized in the May 2015 issue of ISIS’s English-language publication *Dabiq*.¹⁵¹⁶



Explosives are preferred among Salafi-jihadist plotters – Since 2001, would-be terrorists in New York City have overwhelmingly plotted attacks involving explosives, despite simpler weapons such as knives, firearms, and vehicles being easier to operate and obtain. Explosives have long been lauded among Salafi-jihadists, and as English-language terrorist propaganda took hold, so too did the idea of the “simple explosive,” which can ostensibly be constructed using everyday household items. But even so-called simple explosives have proved difficult to construct and detonate successfully for would-be terrorists.

- Between 2001 and 2018, 11 of 14 Salafi-jihadist lone actor terrorist plots against New York City involved explosives.¹⁷ None of these plots has been lethal, likely because the vast majority of attempted attacks was thwarted before a device was constructed, but also because the devices’ construction, placement, or detonation timing have been flawed, rendering the explosives ineffective.

Over the last few years, ISIS has used its propaganda to encourage its supporters to use simpler tactics, specifically using the “Just Terror Tactics” section of its *Rumiyah* magazine to provide explicit instructions on arson and vehicle-ramming attacks, hostage-taking, and edged-weapon assaults. This guidance appears to have been effective in inspiring the group’s supporters, as evidenced by the number of low complexity attacks perpetrated globally by lone actors in ISIS’s name. In New York City, however, only the ISIS-inspired vehicle-ramming attack on October 31, 2017 eschewed explosives in favor of other violent means.¹⁸

- Both Akayed Ullah, the Port Authority bomber, and Ahmed Khan Rahimi, the Chelsea bomber, appeared to use al-Qa’ida guidance published in *Inspire* to construct their “simple” explosives; neither attack was lethal. In September 2016, Rahimi assembled pressure cooker and pipe bombs meant to target civilians in New York City and New Jersey; only one of the pressure cooker bombs successfully detonated, resulting in dozens of injuries but no deaths. Similarly, in December 2017, Akayed Ullah used an ill-constructed pipe bomb and allegedly intended to conduct a suicide attack, but the only serious injury to result was his own.¹⁹

Despite the accessibility of firearms in New York City, their proven lethality in lone actor attacks across the United States, and ISIS’s recent propaganda encouraging their use in future U.S. operations, lone actors’ attempted attacks in New York City have generally not involved guns.²⁰²¹²²²³ Given the publicity generated by recent mass shootings in San Bernardino, CA, Orlando, FL, Las Vegas, NV, and Parkland, FL, we assess that this tactic may be adopted by lone actors in New York City in the future.

- In May 2011, Ahmed Ferhani was arrested for purchasing guns and a grenade which he intended to use to target a synagogue in New York City. Ferhani was sentenced in 2013 to 10 years in prison under the New York State terrorism statute in the first successful local terrorism prosecution in New York.

Lone actor target selection impacted by propaganda, peers, influencers; ultimately driven by opportunity – FTO-directed plots and attacks have historically targeted New York City’s transportation and financial infrastructure, and FTO literature has often highlighted the city’s iconic locations along with law enforcement as other acceptable targets of violence. However, recent propaganda released by groups across the ideological spectrum—which is then shared and emphasized by peers online—has attempted to empower the lone actor by broadening the set of acceptable targets and encouraging would-be



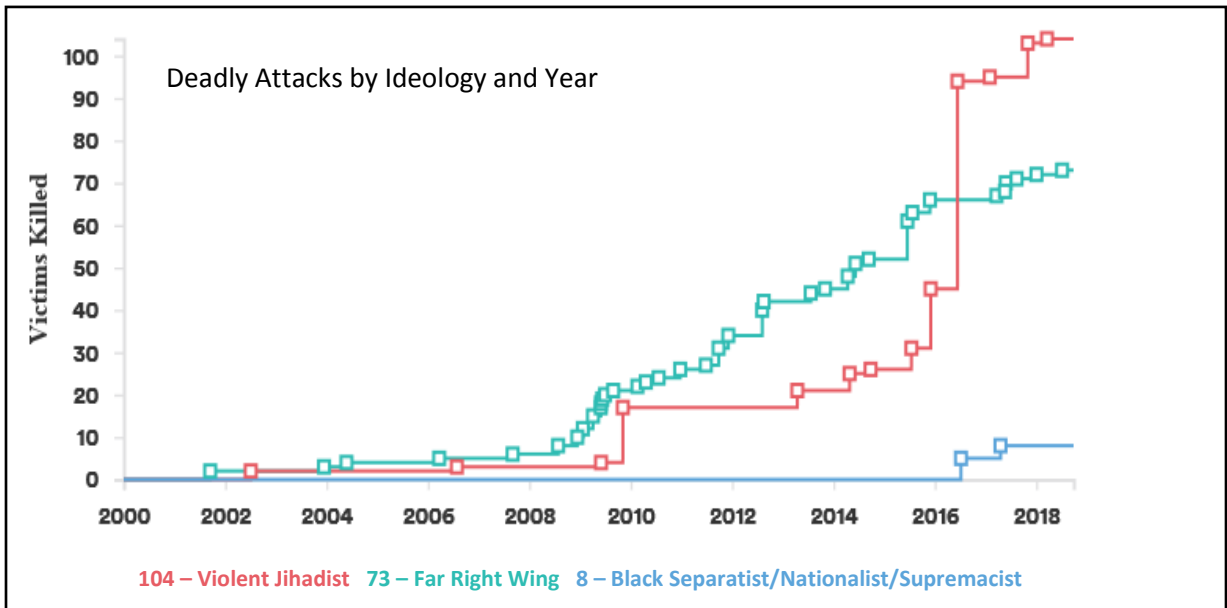
attackers to be opportunistic in their violence. Law enforcement in particular has been a popular target for both planned and opportunistic attacks, a trend we assess with high confidence will likely continue.

- In February 2015, Massachusetts-based co-conspirators Usaamah Rahim and David Wright, and Rhode Island-based Nicholas Alexander Rovinski, allegedly began plotting a “martyrdom” operation in the U.S. Wright shared and consumed violent ISIS propaganda, including *Dabiq* magazine, and Rahim received operational instruction directly from now-deceased prominent British ISIS member Junaid Hussain. Hussain directed Rahim to behead Pamela Geller, a New York City-based political activist,²⁴ but advised him to carry a knife in case he was approached by law enforcement. Rahim allegedly abruptly changed the target from Geller to Massachusetts police officers in June 2015, which led local police and FBI agents to confront, and ultimately kill, him after he lunged at them with an edged-weapon.
- Queens, NY resident Munther Omar Saleh, who pleaded guilty in February 2017 to conspiring and attempting to provide material support to a terrorist organization, also received guidance from Hussain in 2015 on how to create a pressure-cooker IED to target law enforcement in New York City. Saleh was arrested after charging, with a knife, at a law enforcement officer performing physical surveillance on his vehicle. His co-conspirator, Staten Island resident Fareed Mumuni, was arrested days later on attempted murder charges after he stabbed an FBI agent multiple times while a search warrant was executed at his home. He admitted in his post-arrest interview that he kept a knife in his bed and vehicle in anticipation of attacking law enforcement.²⁵

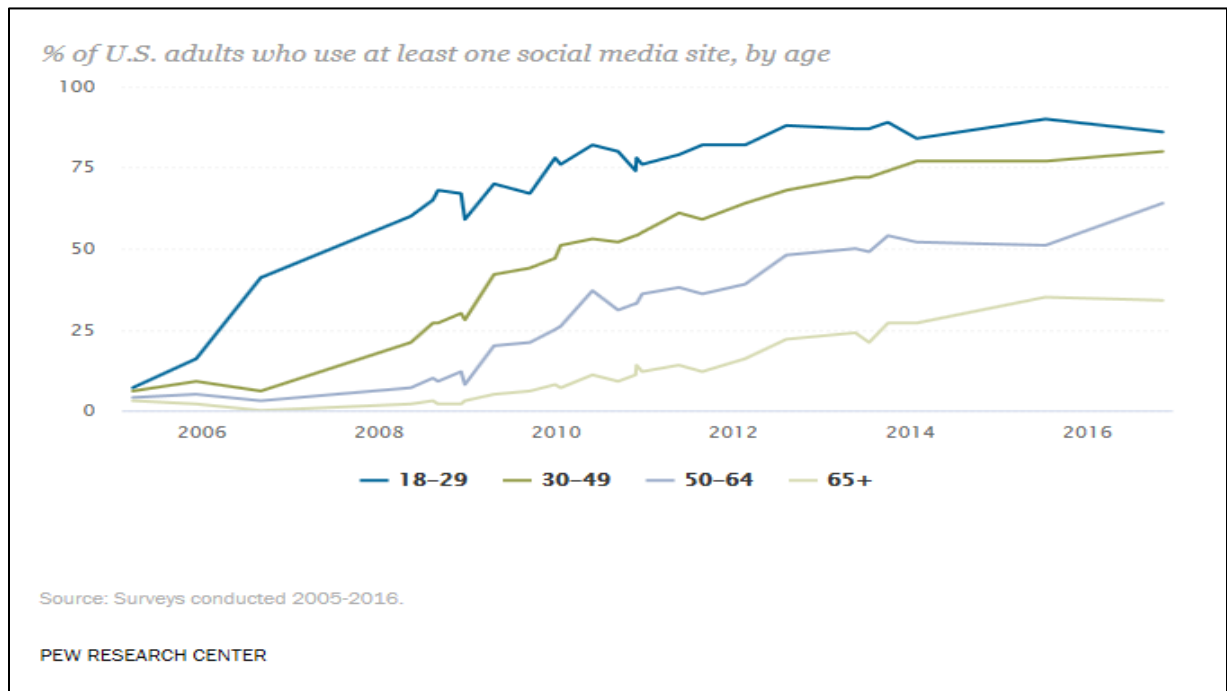
The Role of Women in Extremist Attack Plotting

While the percentage of women playing operational and support roles in extremist attack plotting has risen in recent years across the West and within the U.S., women remain an outlier among New York City lone actors.

- In November 2018, 27-year old Zoobia Shahnaz of Brentwood, NY pleaded guilty to providing material support to ISIS. Between March and July 2017, Shahnaz defrauded numerous financial institutions, fraudulently obtained and used multiple credit cards to buy over \$60,000 in cryptocurrencies, and then sent over \$150,000 to shell entities serving as fronts for ISIS in Pakistan, China, and Turkey. During that time, Shahnaz also accessed ISIS –related propaganda, social media, and websites online. She was intercepted in July 2017 at JFK airport while attempting to board a flight to Turkey, with the goal of traveling to Syria to join ISIS.¹
- The sole case involving women allegedly plotting an attack in New York City is that of Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, who researched bomb making online, including in al-Qa’ida’s *Inspire* magazine, and acquired explosive precursors in a disrupted 2015 plot to attack a police funeral with IEDs they planned to assemble in a private home in Queens.¹



*Numbers reflected in New America's report "Terrorism in America After 9/11: Part IV – What is the Threat to the United States Today"²⁶



*Pew Research Center: Social Media Fact Sheet²⁷



RETURNING FOREIGN FIGHTERS

We assess with high confidence that traveling overseas to Iraq and Syria to join a terrorist organization will continue to prove logistically difficult for New York City-based extremists, which will limit the number of individuals who consider attempting to travel and the number of those who successfully do so. Among the small number who are able to travel, returning to the U.S. in an operational capacity will remain unlikely due to increased counterterrorism pressure abroad and local law enforcement efforts. However, as global theaters for terrorism continue to evolve beyond Iraq and Syria, individuals may elect to travel to different battlespaces. These potential shifts in viable destinations is likely to produce new blind spots that will require new law enforcement tripwires in order to detect these flows. Though we assess that an attack carried out by returning U.S. foreign fighters is less likely than a lone actor attack, it poses possibly greater risk, given that the perpetrators could combine training and contacts acquired in overseas combat zones with familiarity with local terrain. We assess the largest threat to New York City from returning foreign fighters likely stems from Europeans who traveled to join groups in Iraq and Syria and who can more easily access the U.S. homeland through the visa waiver program.

- Since October 2012, the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) estimates that 41,100 foreign fighters from approximately 110 different countries have traveled to fight or otherwise support Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria, including at least 5,700 individuals hailing from western countries. NCTC estimates that as many as 300 U.S. persons have traveled or attempted to travel to Iraq and Syria.

The decision-making process for individuals traveling abroad remains highly idiosyncratic, with the choice of destination, travel route, and group being highly personal. We have seen a multitude of destinations draw aspiring and successful New York City foreign fighters, to include the Afghanistan/Pakistan region, the Balkans, Yemen, and Somalia. During the height of the Syria-Iraq conflict, particularly after ISIS's declaration of a so-called caliphate, we noted a spike in the number of would be foreign-fighters; we assess that most formerly New York City-based foreign fighters who successfully traveled to Iraq and Syria post-2014 likely joined FTOs, most likely ISIS. However, a smaller number of others may have joined opposition groups, the Assad regime, Lebanese Hizballah, or the foreign faction of the Kurdish militia People's Protection Units (YPG). Going forward, we expect aspiring foreign fighters to continue to be drawn to a range of destinations and groups, especially as travel to join ISIS in Iraq and Syria remains difficult.

- In March 2017, 26 year-old Long Island-based Elvis Redzepagic was charged with attempting to provide material support and resources to ISIS and the al-Nusrah Front. Redzepagic allegedly twice tried and failed to reach ISIS territory – once in 2015 via Turkey and again in 2016 via Jordan, where he was stopped and returned to New York by Jordanian authorities. Redzepagic would later admit to law enforcement that he was prepared to strap a bomb to himself at the time he attempted to travel to Syria via Turkey.²⁸
- In August 2017, the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) arrested Queens, NY resident Parveg Ahmed and charged him with attempting to provide material support to ISIS after he tried to join the group in Syria. Ahmed in June 2017 traveled to Saudi Arabia and was detained in an unnamed Middle Eastern country after he attempted to travel to Syria to join ISIS. Brooklyn resident Rasheedul Mowla was arrested under near identical circumstances as Ahmed after attempting a similar travel route through Saudi Arabia in June 2017 in order to join ISIS in Syria.²⁹³⁰



- In 2014, 22-year-old Queens-based Ali Saleh expressed his desire to join ISIS on Twitter, claiming he was ready to die for the terrorist group. Between then and mid-2015, Saleh made multiple attempts to travel overseas to join ISIS—at one point communicating with an ISIS facilitator providing guidance on travel to Libya³¹—before he was ultimately arrested in September 2015. He later stated to law enforcement that he would have continued attempts to join ISIS were he not arrested.³²

Travel increasingly difficult – We assess that while some extremists may desire to travel overseas, the number of New York City residents who manage to join terrorist organizations abroad is likely to remain small, in part due to the elimination of ISIS’s so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria, lack of an alternative destination of equal appeal, and difficulty in accessing combat zones. Financial and logistical issues faced by individual extremists—such as difficulty funding travel or obtaining a passport—and law enforcement efforts may also thwart some motivated extremists possessing limited resources.

- Beginning in January 2017, 30-year-old Bronx-based Saddam Mohamed Raishani expressed support for ISIS and had discussed plans to join the terrorist organization. By April 2017, Raishani began actively planning travel abroad to join ISIS and in June 2017, he purchased a flight from New York to Istanbul, via Lisbon, allegedly with the intent of crossing into ISIS territory. However, when it came time for him to make the trip, he was arrested at JFK Airport as he attempted to board the flight.³³
- In November 2016, 37-year-old Brooklyn resident Mohamed Rafik Naji was arrested and charged with attempting to provide material support to ISIS following a joint investigation by the NYPD Intelligence Bureau and FBI NY JTTF. Since December 2014, through social media posts, Naji expressed his support for ISIS and in March 2015, travelled from New York to Yemen in an effort to join the group. While overseas, Naji claimed his allegiance to ISIS and explained to an associate that he was on his fifth attempt to reach ISIS-controlled territory. Upon returning from Yemen, Naji continued to express support for ISIS and violent jihad, praising the deadly attack in Nice, France in July 2016, and expressing support for a similar attack in Times Square.³⁴
- In May 2016, Bronx-based Sajmir Alimehmeti was arrested for attempting to provide material support to ISIS and making a false statement in an application for a U.S. passport. According to the federal complaint, he provided assistance to an individual whom he believed was traveling from New York to Syria to fight alongside ISIS and asked that individual to help facilitate his travel overseas in May 2016. In 2014, he was twice denied entry to the UK after authorities found imagery supportive of ISIS and military equipment on his person.³⁵

Formerly New York City-based foreign fighters unlikely to return – We assess most U.S. foreign fighters remaining in ISIS-held territory in Iraq and Syria traveled there after 2013 and are unlikely to attempt to return because they probably remain committed to the Salafi-jihadist cause and expect to face legal repercussions if they returned.

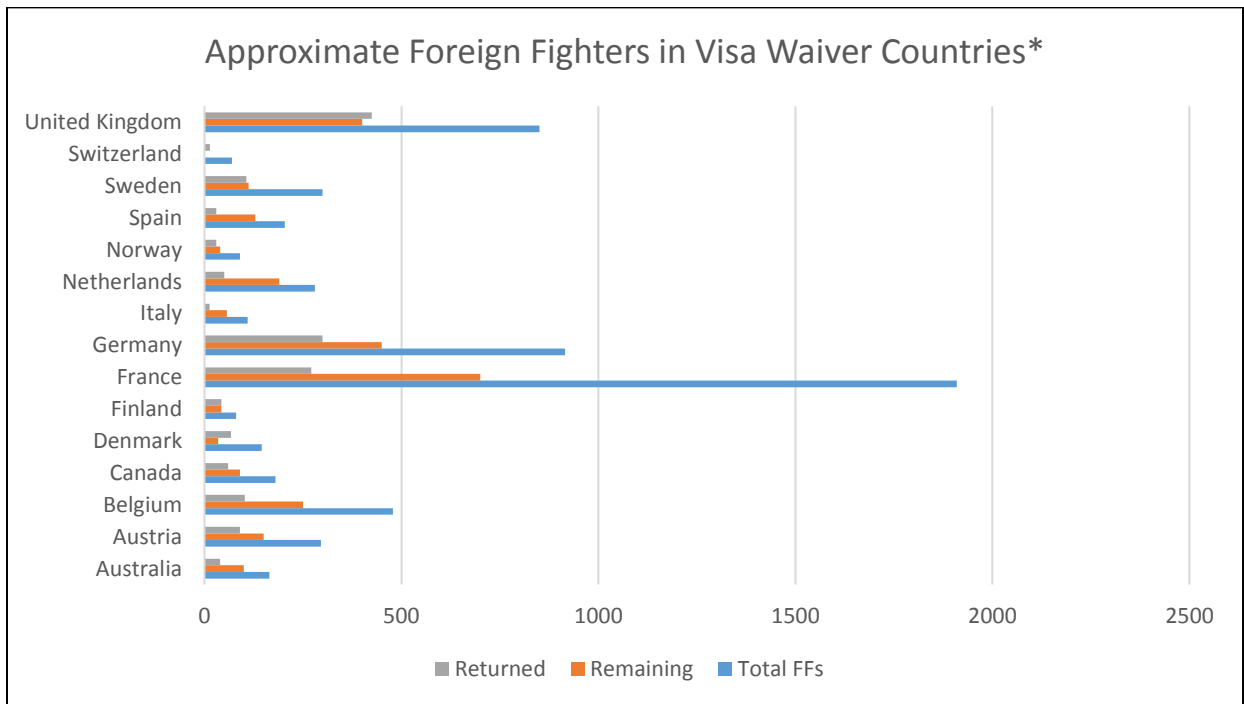
- In November 2016, federal prosecutors charged then 36-year-old Mirsad Kandic with providing material support to ISIS.³⁶ Kandic previously lived in the Bronx and Brooklyn before traveling overseas to support ISIS in 2013. In online communications, Kandic said that he worked in ISIS’s “border office” in Turkey and conducted background checks on aspiring foreign fighters. Kandic,



who was extradited from Bosnia in October 2017, is also accused of supporting ISIS media and propaganda operations, using over 100 Twitter accounts to provide near-real-time announcements about ISIS attacks and territorial gains.

- In 2015, New Jersey native Zulfi Hoxha travelled to Syria where he joined ISIS and adopted the nom de guerre Abu Hamza al-Amriki. Hoxha rose through the group to become a senior commander and he reportedly appeared in a propaganda video where he beheaded captured Kurdish soldiers. Prior to his departure to Syria, Hoxha was in frequent communication with Massachusetts resident David Wright and Wright’s uncle, Usaamah Rahim. Wright and Rahim helped Hoxha travel to Syria and both were involved in the plot to kidnap and behead Pamela Geller.³⁷

European foreign fighters may pose the biggest risk – We assess with low to medium confidence that returning foreign fighters or operatives directed by Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups may attempt to travel to the United States via a port of entry in the New York area to conduct an attack. Former foreign fighters from countries participating in the U.S. government’s visa waiver program—including Western Europe and Australia—likely pose the largest risk as their travel documents allow ease of entry to the U.S. However, these actors would likely lack the local context that formerly U.S.- and New York City-based fighters would possess, challenging their ability to successfully prepare and execute an attack.



*Approximate figures as represented in *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees*, The Soufan Center, October 2017



FOREIGN TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS

We assess with low to medium confidence that while a number of FTOs—notably al-Qa’ida and its affiliates and ISIS—continue to publicly express their intent to strike the U.S., and New York City in particular, the likelihood of such an operation occurring in the next 4 years is relatively low in comparison to the lone actor threat. Years of counterterrorism pressure—including military operations to erode safe havens and global law enforcement efforts—have degraded the capacity of al-Qa’ida and its affiliates to conduct external operations in the West. More recent campaigns against ISIS have achieved similar results. Al-Qa’ida, ISIS, and Hizballah are preoccupied by local and regional conflicts in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Libya, and the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. Nonetheless, we judge that these organizations are innovative and nimble, and capacity is relatively easy to reacquire. ISIS, al-Qa’ida, and their affiliates often reference New York City as a viable target in their propaganda materials, underlying their intent.

Hizballah remains capable of targeting New York City, but currently lacks intent – Hizballah

possesses a vibrant global network with cells operating on five continents, including in the U.S. While these cells primarily provide logistical support and fundraising, they also provide Hizballah with a broader physical reach than any other terrorist organization in the world and the capability to conduct global strikes. We assess that despite the current geopolitical tensions between Iran and the U.S., it is unlikely that

Hizballah would decide to target New York City with a kinetic attack in the next five years. However, we make this assessment with low confidence as we do not know under what conditions Hizballah would adjust its operational calculus, and the arrest last year of two Hizballah external operatives suggests that the group does maintain some operational capacity within the U.S. homeland.

- On June 8, 2017, the U.S. Department of Justice announced that two men had been arrested on charges related to activities conducted on behalf of Hizballah’s external operations arm, the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO). One of these men, Ali Kourani, a former Bronx resident who was recruited by the IJO in 2008, was reportedly responsible for locating cooperative U.S. weapons suppliers, identifying Israeli military officers and associates, collecting information about

Threat Posed by Iranian-Linked Actors

The August 2018 arrests of two individuals in California with links to the Iranian government and the July 2018 disrupted bombing of a Paris rally organized by an Iranian opposition group demonstrates that actors linked to the Iranian government continue to pose a security threat around the world. Given the current geopolitical climate and the ongoing efforts to stifle dissident elements within Iran and their offshoots abroad, we assess that this threat is likely to persist.

- On August 20, 2018 Ahmadreza Mohammadi-Doostdar, a dual U.S.-Iranian citizen, and Majid Ghorbani, an Iranian citizen and California resident, were indicted by the Department of Justice for allegedly acting as operatives on behalf of the Iranian government. The two are accused of conducting covert surveillance of Jewish and Israeli facilities in the U.S., in addition to surveilling Iranian dissident groups in New York City on behalf of the regime.
- On July 11, 2018 a German court charged Assadollah Assadi, an Iranian diplomat stationed in Vienna, with activity as a foreign agent and conspiracy to commit murder after he was accused of providing a Belgian couple with explosives to carry out a terrorist attack targeting a June 30 rally organized by the Iranian opposition group Mujahedeen-e-Khalq (MEK). The couple was stopped with 500 grams of triacetone triperoxide (TATP) and a detonator in their vehicle.



LaGuardia and JFK airports, and conducting surveillance of U.S. military and law enforcement facilities in Manhattan and Brooklyn. ³⁸

- Hizballah’s plots and attacks in recent years outside of Lebanon and Syria have largely targeted Israeli or Jewish interests and have typically been ordered in response to an event, often as an act of revenge. The U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement, in combination with a new round of sanctions, may elicit a retaliatory response from Iran via various state-run apparatus and global proxies. Previous Iranian responses to sanctions have taken the form of cyber attacks.

Al-Qa’ida remains intent on targeting New York City – Though al-Qa’ida has not carried out an attack within the U.S. homeland in several years, the group maintains a strategic intent on doing so, as demonstrated by disrupted plots and disseminated propaganda by the group and its affiliates. We remain concerned that the group’s legacy plotting—operational plans to attack New York City put in motion in the recent past—may continue to advance despite counterterrorism pressure and the removal of al-Qa’ida leaders from the battlefield.

- In recent audio messages, Hamza bin Laden—the son of Usama bin Laden—states that “American crusaders” remain the priority target and encourages supporters to conduct attacks using any means necessary. In a November 7, 2017 audio message, Hamza asserts that victory for al-Qa’ida requires defeating both the near and far enemy. ³⁹
- Al-Qa’ida leader Ayman al-Zawahiri names the U.S. as the group’s chief adversary in his propaganda releases, asserting that it is behind the “fiercest attack” in Muslim history and that it seeks to dominate the Middle East. In these messages, Zawahiri remains focused on elucidating the group’s strategy: uniting jihadists of all groups behind the recognition of the U.S. as the true enemy of Muslims in order to combine their efforts to combat it. ⁴⁰
- The Syria-based al-Qa’ida affiliated Hurras al-Deen (Guardians of the Religion) represents a potential external operations threat to New York City due to its composition of experienced al-Qa’ida fighters, demonstrated battlefield bonafides, and access to foreign fighters in Syria. The group reportedly was formed earlier this year and it likely has close connections to veteran al-Qa’ida actors with a legacy of planning attacks in the West, raising the concern of revived external plotting, a staple of al-Qa’ida strategy. ⁴¹
- From approximately 2013 -2015 a Syria-based network of al-Qa’ida core linked extremists, referred to as the Khorasan group, allegedly intended to recruit western foreign fighters for use in aviation attacks. Khorasan group members purportedly worked with AQAP bomb-makers to develop nonmetallic devices that could pass through airport security undetected. Counterterrorism pressure dismantled this network and likely disrupted these efforts. ⁴²



What about TTP?

Since the September 11th attacks, New York City has been the target of disrupted external operations by FTOs who provided operatives with both training and funds. Of those, only Faisal Shahzad, a Pakistani-American who trained in Pakistan with the FTO Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), attempted a terrorist attack when he unsuccessfully detonated an explosives-laden vehicle in Times Square in May 2010. The NYPD assesses that the TTP likely worked through Shahzad opportunistically and that counterterrorism pressure in Pakistan and the TTP's limited appeal among U.S.-based HVEs will continue to constrain the group to local operations and that it is unlikely to target New York City through 2022.

AQAP continues to be the most externally-focused AQ affiliate and continues to express intent to target the U.S. homeland, rebuilding capacity to do so – Though AQAP in recent years has predominately focused on improving its local position, we judge that AQAP remains the al-Qa'ida affiliate that represents the greatest threat to the U.S. homeland. The group continues to express its desire to strike the U.S.,⁴³ raising concerns that it could exploit the permissive operating environment in Yemen to launch an operation targeting the U.S.^{44,45}

- Over the past two years, AQAP has exploited the Yemeni civil war to further strengthen its position in Yemen, solidifying its relationships with local tribes in order to gain support and acquiring a significant amount of funds, weapons, and manpower.^{46,47} These developments have left AQAP—a group with seasoned external operations planners and explosives experts, as well as a history of targeting American aviation in failed sophisticated plots in 2009, 2010, and 2012⁴⁸—with a greater operational capacity to conduct operations in the U.S. in the foreseeable future. The group has demonstrated the ability to withstand counterterrorism pressure, maintaining its strong presence in Yemen despite being targeted by over 100 U.S. airstrikes in 2017 and more than 25 strikes in 2018.
- AQAP continues to be innovative in its terror plots. In March 2017, the U.S. banned selected electronic devices from passenger cabins on flights originating from a handful of countries in North Africa and the Middle East partly in response to a reported plot developed by AQAP that involved placing explosives in batteries and battery compartments of electronic devices. Subsequent reporting revealed that the plan involved concealing explosives in a fake iPad and detonating the device on an airplane. The U.S. applied these restrictions to flights travelling from specific airports in Jordan, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE.⁴⁹
- On August 13, 2018, a UN report announced that Ibrahim al-Asiri, AQAP's chief bomb-maker, had reportedly been killed by a U.S. airstrike in Yemen in the second half of 2017. Although Asiri's removal from the battlefield denies al-Qa'ida its most innovative bomb-maker and a specialist in difficult-to-detect explosives, we assess that its long-term impact is likely to be minimal given that he has likely shared his expertise and trained acolytes for over a decade.⁵⁰

ISIS continues to express intent to target U.S. and New York City with a coordinated attack, but has not yet demonstrated the capability to do so – ISIS is likely to continue to highlight U.S. cities for attacks in its propaganda and has demonstrated its ability to plan, facilitate, and carry out coordinated mass-casualty attacks in the West. We assess that several factors decrease the threat of ISIS-directed attacks in



the U.S., including: the distance to the United States and interdiction capabilities on air and sea transportation routes from the battlefield in Iraq and Syria; low rates of returned foreign fighters; and robust and well-coordinated counterterrorism efforts by law enforcement and intelligence agencies in the United States. However, the group recently has employed increasingly sophisticated and innovative facilitation networks around the world to provide supporters with the means to carry out potentially more lethal attacks without traveling to a conflict zone or receiving specialized training. This includes the direct provision of the components that untrained supporters abroad need in order to conduct more capable, lethal attacks.

- In July 2017, two sibling ISIS supporters in Australia attempted to place a viable and functioning explosive device on a flight from Australia to the United Arab Emirates, but they abandoned the plot while at the airport. The suspects were in contact with ISIS militants in Syria for months and received components of the device from the group, which were sent via international air cargo from Turkey, through ISIS operatives in Syria, to one of the suspects in Australia. After the Sydney plotters abandoned their plot to target aviation, they were allegedly encouraged by their ISIS contacts to construct a device that would disperse hydrogen sulfide in a confined, crowded space.⁵¹

In addition to ISIS core in Iraq and Syria, we assess with medium confidence that ISIS's other provinces are continuing to develop the capability to conduct external operations, and that they are serving as facilitation hubs and training grounds for people seeking to carry out attacks in the West.

- Salman Abedi, who was responsible for the May 2017 Manchester suicide bombing, traveled to Libya shortly before the attack where he was reportedly supported by ISIS members in the country. Open source media reports attributed to U.S. and European intelligence agencies have stated that Abedi previously met with operatives of the Katibat al-Battar al-Libi a.k.a. "the al-Battar Brigade," a Libyan ISIS external operations unit.⁵² Similarly, Anis Amri, the Tunisian-born assailant behind the December 2016 vehicle ramming attack on a Christmas market in Berlin, was reportedly in contact with ISIS members in Libya via Telegram prior to the incident, although the specific degree of operational connectivity has not been publicly released by German authorities.⁵³
- ISIS's Sinai province claimed responsibility for the October 2015 mid-air downing of Metrojet Flight 9268 over the northern Sinai with a concealed explosive, an attack that killed all 224 onboard.⁵⁴

ISIS continues to demonstrate interest in using new weapons overseas, deployment in U.S. unlikely – ISIS continues to demonstrate an interest in using alternative weapons in the Iraq and Syria warzones; however, we assess that the group is unlikely to employ them successfully in a directed attack in the U.S. Given the size and scope of ISIS's online activities, the concern remains that the group could provide supporters with virtual instructions that they could use to successfully employ alternative weapons in an attack.

- Disrupted plots and arrests in the US, Germany, and France over the summer of 2018 highlight interest in conducting attacks using ricin by Salafi-jihadists motivated by ISIS's violent ideology and calls for support.⁵⁵⁵⁶⁵⁷ Ricin—a toxin that can be made relatively simply from easily obtainable castor beans—is unlikely to be effectively weaponized for a large scale mass-casualty



attack but could be used in smaller random or targeted killings in an enclosed space. Pro-ISIS media groups have recently published propaganda encouraging bio-terrorism attacks and detailed instructions on how to product ricin remain readily available online.

- Over the course of at least two years, ISIS has demonstrated its commitment to exploiting widely available remotely piloted aircrafts (RPAs) and fielding innovative weaponized versions of these platforms, going so far as to commit the resources of a specialized brigade to this tactic. In propaganda footage, ISIS demonstrates that it has effectively modified military-grade munitions—specifically 40mm rifle grenades and mortars—to function with quadcopter RPA as bomblets that detonate on impact with a target.⁵⁸ On April 16, 2017, an ISIS-produced infographic claimed the group had carried out at least 81 aerial bombings using weaponized RPA throughout Iraq and Syria, killing at least 39 people and injuring 103 others.⁵⁹
- According to the 2018 Worldwide Threat Assessment released by the Director of National Intelligence, ISIS has employed chemical weapons—typically chlorine, but also sulfur mustard—in Iraq and Syria.⁶⁰ On March 1, 2018, anonymous U.S. officials reported that the U.S. has intercepted communications by ISIS followers in which they discussed employing chlorine gas in the homeland. The officials said that the government has been working to counter this threat.⁶¹



DRIVERS OF CHANGE

We assess New York City will face a persistent threat from lone actor extremists along the ideological spectrum, and the city's many iconic locations and symbolic targets will remain in the crosshairs of FTOs despite operational and territorial setbacks overseas. We expect to see similar levels of complexity and pace of lone actor plotting as well as attempts to travel overseas; however, we assess that the geo-political environment will remain volatile over the course of the next four years, and as such, have identified several drivers of change that would alter our assessments.

- ***National security/CT policy actions*** – We assess that if the U.S. enacted domestic and/or foreign policies that were domestically perceived as hostile to certain religious or ethnic groups, a potentially higher number of U.S.-based lone actors could mobilize to violence in response.
- ***New charismatic radicalizing figure emerges*** – We assess that the emergence of a new charismatic ideologue or organized local extremist group could accelerate radicalization to violence among local HVEs.
- ***CBRN capabilities increase*** – Recent advancements in the development and attempted deployment of CBRN weapons outside of conflict zones, to include in the West, lower our confidence that near-term attack vectors will remain relatively simple. Should an FTO provide direct instruction on CBRN use to an operational component here in the U.S. or provide step-by-step guidance to supporters to make and use CBRN weapons in domestic attacks, a local CBRN incident could take place.
- ***Terrorism-related cyberattacks continue to develop in complexity*** – If terrorist actors develop increasing capability—or increasing access to advanced cyber tools or mercenary actors—to conduct the sorts of cyber-attacks against New York City that non-terrorist actors have carried out in other Western cities, we assess New York City could experience disruption of or other damage to critical infrastructure or other physical and functional security assets
- ***Local counterterrorism programs degrade*** – The ability for the NYPD and other local agencies to sustain robust counterterrorism operations that can complement federal efforts significantly mitigates the terrorism threat to New York City. Should these programs be constrained, a more permissive operating environment for terrorists would likely result.



APPENDIX

Lone Actor Terrorist Attacks or Plots Targeting New York City: 2002 – 2018				
YEAR	SUSPECT	TARGET	TACTIC	FTO/LONE ACTOR/CELL
2002	Iyman Faris	Transportation	Sabotage	FTO - AQ
2003	AQ Subway Cyanide Attack	Transportation	CBRN	FTO - AQ
2003	Uzair Paracha and Saifullah Paracha	Transportation	Explosives, CBRN	FTO - AQ
2004	Dhiren Barot	Financial	Explosives	FTO - AQ
2004	Shahawar Matin Siraj, James Elshafay	Transportation	Explosives	L/C
2006	Assem Hammoud	Transportation	Explosives	FTO - AQ
2006	Rashid Rauf, et. al.	Transportation	Explosives	FTO - AQ
2007	Russell Defreitas, Abdul Kadir, Abel Nur	Transportation	Explosives	FTO – Misc.
2008	Bryant Neal Vinas	Transportation	Explosives	FTO - AQ
2009	Sabrihan Hasanoff, Wessam el-Hanafi	Financial	Unknown	FTO - AQ
2009	James Cromitie, et. al.	Religious	Explosives, Ordinance	L/C
2009	Najibullah Zazi, et. al.	Transportation	Explosives	FTO - AQ
2010	Faisal Shahzad	NYC Landmarks	Explosives	FTO – TTP
2011	Ahmed Ferhani, Mohammad Mamdouh	Religious	Firearms, Ordinance	L/C
2011	Jose Pimentel	Military	Explosives	L/C
2012	Quazi Mohammad Rezwanul Ahsan Nafis	Financial	Explosives	L/C
2012	Raees Alam Qazi, Sheheryar Alam Qazi	NYC Landmarks	Explosives	FTO - AQ
2014	Zale Thompson	Law Enforcement	Edged Weapon	L/C
2015	Asia Siddiqui, Noelle Velentzas	Law Enforcement	Explosives	L/C
2015	Munther Saleh, Fareed Mumuni, Samuel Topaz, Alaa Saadeh	NYC Landmarks	Explosives	L/C
2015	Usaamah Rahim, David Daoud Wright, Nicholas Rovinski	Assassination/Law Enforcement	Edged Weapon	L/C
2016	Abdulrahman El Bahnasawy, Russel Salic, Talha Haroon	NYC Landmarks/Transportation/ Entertainment Venue	Explosives, Firearms	L/C
2016	Ahmad Khan Rahimi	Crowds	Explosives	L/C
2017	Gregory Lepsky	Crowds	Explosives	L/C



2017	James Harris Jackson	Racially Motivated	Edged Weapon	L/C
2017	Ali Mohamad Kourani	Transportation/Military	Firearms	FTO - Hezbollah
2017	Sayfullo Saipov	Crowds	Vehicle	L/C
2017	Akayed Ullah	Transportation	Explosives	L/C
2018	Cesar Sayoc	High-profile Individuals	Explosives	L/C

TOTAL FTO PLOTS: 13

TOTAL L/C PLOTS: 16

TARGET	FTO	L/C
Transportation	9	3
Crowds	0	3
NYC Landmarks	2	2
Assassination	0	1
Financial	2	1
Military	1	1
Racially Motivated	0	1
Religious	0	2
Law Enforcement	0	3
High-profile Individuals	0	1

METHOD	FTO	L/C
Explosives	9	11
Edged Weapons	0	3
Firearms	1	2
Ordinance	0	2
Vehicle	0	1
CBRN	2	0
Sabotage	1	0
Unknown	1	0



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- ¹ See Appendix for full list of attacks and plots targeting New York City since 2002;
<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/new-york-woman-pleads-guilty-providing-material-support-isis>
- ² <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/akayed-ullah-charged-manhattan-federal-court-terrorism-and-explosives-charges>
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- ⁵ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/29/politics/pipe-bomb-suspect-cesar-sayoc-court/index.html>
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- ¹⁶ Dabiq, issue 9, released May 21, 2015
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- ¹⁹ <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/akayed-ullah-charged-manhattan-federal-court-terrorism-and-explosives-charges>
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- ²² <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36511778>
- ²³ <http://jihadology.net/2017/12/27/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-inside-the-caliphate-6/>
- ²⁴ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/isis-america-hoxha/550508/>
- ²⁵ <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-new-york-city-residents-pleaded-guilty-all-charges-terrorism-case>
- ²⁶ <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/terrorism-in-america/what-threat-united-states-today/>
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- ²⁹ <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/queens-man-charged-attempting-provide-material-support-isis>
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- ³³ <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/975511/download>
- ³⁴ <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/brooklyn-man-arrested-attempting-provide-material-support-isis>
- ³⁵ <https://www.justice.gov/opa/file/861501/download>
- ³⁶ <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1008001/download>



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