

American Foreign Policy Council



NORTH AMERICA

COUNTRIES

Canada

United States

Regional Summary

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 brought new attention and urgency to popular discussions of Islamic terrorism in North America, and touched off a wide-ranging global campaign on the part of the United States and its allies to target al-Qaeda and associated groups. Yet a decade later, the larger political phenomenon of Islamism, as well as its manifestations in North America, remains poorly understood and largely unaddressed by governments on the continent.

In the United States, five-plus decades of activity and organization by grass-roots groups associated with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and Pakistan's Jamaat-e Islami have yielded an elaborate web of professional activist organizations involved in local, state and national politics. This network operates on a variety of levels; some of its constituent organizations seek to influence attitudes towards (and discourse about) Islam and Islamism among elected officials and the general public. Others have historically worked through schools, universities, and educational institutions to promote Islamist ideas and values. Still others serve as economic conduits and repositories for wealth and holdings associated with the Brotherhood and Jamaat-e Islami. All have a considerable degree of overlap in terms of associated individuals and boast close associations with both the Brotherhood and Jamaat-e Islami, although those relationships are not commonly known. To a lesser extent, organizations and/or activists affiliated with other Islamist movements (such as Hizb-ut Tahrir) also exist on U.S. soil. And radical Islamist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah are known to have used the United States as a significant financing hub. The joint organizations of the Brotherhood and Jamaat-e Isl-

ami, however, are far and away the most influential, and even have attracted American Muslims who do not espouse or adhere to Islamist ideas or beliefs.

While the threat from this “soft” Islamist activity—which is designed to promote Islamist ideas and policies, as well as to alter popular perceptions toward Islamic law and a range of religio-political issues—can be characterized as pervasive, it has largely been ignored by the United States government. Rather, federal authorities remain focused on the threat posed by Islamic terrorist groups, chief among them al-Qaeda. An estimated thirty-two separate terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland have been successfully thwarted over the past decade, highlighting that the United States remains an active target. The U.S. law enforcement community remains preoccupied with such plots, as well as with the comparatively new phenomenon of “lone wolf” terrorism—terrorism autonomously perpetrated by American Muslims inspired to violence by *jihadist* ideology. The most prominent such incident was the November 2010 massacre at Fort Hood, Texas, in which a Muslim-American serviceman opened fire on soldiers and civilians after being radicalized through his communications with al-Qaeda-affiliated cleric Anwar al-Awlaki.

Canada has historically served as more hospitable soil for Islamist groups and movements. For decades prior to the September 11th attacks, the absence of comprehensive counterterrorism laws and lax oversight on the part of national law enforcement authorities allowed a range of Islamist groups to proliferate. These elements historically have fallen into three broad categories: Salafists (such as al-Qaeda and Algeria’s Armed Islamic Group), Shi’ites (Hezbollah) and Palestinians (including Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad). In recent years, however, a new focus on counterterrorism on the part of the government in Ottawa has made Canada less attractive to terrorist groups and their sympathizers. Nevertheless, a number of Islamist groups—including al-Qaeda and Hezbollah—continue to operate and fundraise within the country. Like in the U.S., Canada is also home to a range of Islamist community organizations, which seek to alter the national debate over Islam, Islamism and Middle Eastern politics. And, as in the United States, these organizations—as well as their linkages with larger Islamist movements active worldwide—remain only sporadically acknowledged and poorly addressed by the government.