

WebMemo



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Forty-First Terror Plot Foiled: Homegrown Threat Thwarted by Local Law Enforcement and Intelligence

James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., Matt A. Mayer, and Jessica Zuckerman

On September 28, Rezwan Ferdaus, a 26-year-old U.S. citizen, was arrested on three charges, including attempting to provide material support and resources to a foreign terrorist organization. Self-radicalized online, the Massachusetts man had supplied a modified cell phone meant to serve as a detonator for an improvised explosive device to an undercover FBI operative whom he believed to be an al-Qaeda operative. Ferdaus intended the detonation device to be used to kill U.S. soldiers overseas.

In addition to his international plot, Ferdaus sought to attack U.S.-based targets, specifically the Pentagon and the U.S. Capitol. With the goal of terrorizing the U.S., “decapitating” its military centers, and killing as many non-believers as possible, Ferdaus sought to use small drone airplanes to drop explosives onto the two targets. The aerial assault would be followed by a ground attack involving six men, automatic assault rifles, and grenades.

The attack was foiled through the work of local law enforcement, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), and the FBI. If convicted, Ferdaus faces 15–20 years in prison for each of the three charges. His arrest marks at least the 41st terrorist plot foiled against the United States since 9/11.

A Continued Homegrown Threat. At least 41 publicly known, Islamist-inspired terrorist plots have been thwarted against the U.S. since 9/11. Of these plots, 29 have involved one or more Ameri-

can citizens. Like Ferdaus, who claimed that he was drawn to *jihad* after viewing jihadist Web sites and videos online, many of these would-be “homegrown” terrorists were radicalized via the Web.

No longer is it necessary for would-be terrorists to attend terror training camps in the flesh. Instead, anyone with a computer and Internet access can connect to the vast array of Islamist materials online. Today, al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations make use of videos and chat rooms to radicalize and recruit individuals, as well as e-mail, LISTSERV groups, mobile Internet services, online magazines, stand-alone Web browsers that direct users only to Islamist materials, online forums complete with training manuals and instructions for avoiding detection online, video games, and even Web-based libraries. These new forms of online media are used as tools for recruitment, motivation, fundraising, education, and training—and they pose a growing threat to the United States.

Thwarting the Next Terrorist Attack. The manner of radicalization in this most recent plot is nothing new. Yet important lessons may still be learned—namely, that even homegrown and “lone wolf” threats can be stopped with good law enforce-

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ment and intelligence. In order to thwart the next terrorist attack the United States should:

- **Maintain essential counterterrorism tools.** Support for important investigative tools such as the PATRIOT Act is essential to maintaining the security of the U.S. and combating terrorist threats. Key provisions within the act, such as the roving surveillance authority and business records provision, have proven essential in thwarting terror plots yet require reauthorization every year. In order to ensure that law enforcement and intelligence authorities have the essential counterterrorism tools they need, Congress should seek permanent authorization of the three sunset provisions within the act.
- **Clarify the domestic counterterrorism framework.** Cooperative efforts among local law enforcement, the ATF, and the FBI were essential in thwarting this plot before the American public was ever in danger. To aid future efforts, the U.S. should properly apportion roles and responsibilities among federal, state, and local government based on their resources (e.g., money, people, and experience). In order to clarify the domestic counterterrorism framework, the President should issue an executive order establishing a national domestic counterterrorism and intelligence framework that clearly articulates how intelligence operations at all levels should function to combat terrorism while keeping citizens safe and free.

- **Examine information-sharing gaps.** Efforts to increase information sharing between the U.S. and its allies while improving interagency communications between the Departments of State, Justice, and Homeland Security and intelligence agencies are vital to protecting the U.S. from the continued threat of terrorism. Increased efforts at information sharing would amplify efficiency and timeliness in the counterterrorism field. Yet all too often, information sharing does not make for truly crosscutting communication but rather simply entails state and local law enforcement sending information up to the federal government. This gap in information sharing should not be allowed to continue.

Greater Efforts Needed. At least 41 terrorist plots against the United States have been foiled since 9/11. The local Massachusetts police, ATF, and FBI worked well in coordinating their efforts and thwarting this latest plot. However, greater efforts are needed to help combat the continued threat of terrorism. Thwarting the next terrorist attack requires a dedication by both Congress and the Administration to ensure that law enforcement and intelligence have the resources they need.

James Jay Carafano, Ph.D., is Deputy Director of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies and Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Davis Institute, Matt A. Mayer is a Visiting Fellow, and Jessica Zuckerman is a Research Assistant in the Allison Center at The Heritage Foundation.