

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 3415  
November 21, 2011

## Foiling 43rd Terror Plot Test for Administration's Priorities

*James Jay Carafano, Ph.D.*

On November 20, the mayor of New York City announced the arrest of Jose Pimentel. Pimentel, a naturalized U.S. citizen from the Dominican Republic, was charged with a number of offenses in connection with a terrorist bomb plot. Allegedly, Pimentel drew inspiration from al-Qaeda to attack postal facilities, police stations, and U.S. military personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

This arrest marks at least the 43rd Islamist-related plot aimed at attacking the U.S. homeland since 9/11. This thwarted attack is another wake-up call that the Administration must exercise more urgency in plugging the shortfalls in U.S. counterterrorism operations.

**Pipe Bomb Terror.** Arrested on November 19, the 27-year-old Pimentel (also known as Muhammad Yusuf) had reportedly been under surveillance since 2009. His arrest was prompted by evidence that he had begun assembling pipe bombs that he planned to use for launching a string of attacks throughout New York.

According to statements at the press conference, Pimentel was motivated to conduct these attacks by reading al-Qaeda material on the Internet, including bomb-making instructions. "He was a reader of al Qaeda's slick online magazine Inspire—and inspire him it did," Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance stated. Officials believe that Pimentel was acting as a "lone wolf" plotting the attacks without the aid of accomplices.

**Terror Trends.** Similar to the suspects in most of the publicly known plots aimed at the U.S. since 9/11, Pimentel was arrested before he could undertake alleged acts of terrorism. Of the thwarted post-9/11 plots, only three were not stopped in the preparation stage.

Overwhelmingly, most terrorist targets have been in and around New York City. Washington has also been frequently targeted.

Extremist materials on the Internet apparently contributed to Pimentel's alleged efforts to embrace violent extremism. This is not unusual. As America has become a "harder target" for transnational terrorists groups, they have increasingly relied on the Internet for promulgating propaganda, fundraising, recruiting, and planning and conducting operations.

Foiled Islamist-related terrorist plots aimed at the U.S. homeland have increasingly been undertaken by individuals or small groups within the U.S. with limited or no direct material support from transnational terrorist organizations. The frequency of attempted attacks has also increased. Approxi-

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
<http://report.heritage.org/wm3415>

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

mately one-third of the publicly known thwarted plots have occurred in the past two-and-a-half years.

**Lessons Learned.** The arrest of Pimentel reminds that lone-wolf operations can be effectively detected and disrupted by law enforcement. As with other terrorist conspiracies, lone wolves typically undertake suspicious activity that legitimately warrants attention and investigation from law enforcement authorities.

Maintaining robust, legitimate counterterrorism tools is the best means to continue to thwart plots similar to the one recently disrupted in New York City. This thwarted attack is a reminder that a real threat remains. The Administration should act with a greater sense of urgency to address the shortfalls in the U.S. counterterrorism enterprise that still remain. The Administration should:

- **Fully implement a strategy to counter violent extremism.** The Administration recently published a strategy for enhancing a national effort to combat violent extremism. However, the Administration did not fully develop a plan for implementing the strategy.
- **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 governments 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 among 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.** While the attack was stopped, trends suggest that this attack will not be the last. 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, at The Heritage Foundation.