

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 3512 | FEBRUARY 21, 2012

Forty-Fifth Attempted Terrorist Plot: U.S. Must Resist Complacency

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On Friday, authorities arrested a man in an attempted suicide attack on the U.S. Capitol. The attempt marks at least the 45th publicly known attempted terrorist attack against the United States since 9/11 and is the sixth such attack targeting Washington, D.C.

This latest attempted attack serves as yet another reminder of the importance of maintaining strong counterterrorism tools. Terrorists continue to seek to harm the U.S. The nation must not become complacent.

Attempted Suicide Attack. Amine El Khalifi, a 29-year-old Moroccan man present in the U.S. illegally, was arrested on Friday on his way to the U.S. Capitol. El Khalifi was carrying an automatic weapon and a suicide vest laced with what he believed to be explosives.

A statement by Capitol Police indicates the “arrest was the culmination of a lengthy and extensive operation during which the individual was closely and carefully monitored.”¹ Sources indicate that El Khalifi has been under investigation for over a year.

Undercover FBI agents, whom El Khalifi believed to be al-Qaeda operatives, provided him with what he believed to be explosives and a gun to carry out his attack. The public, however, was never in danger as the FBI agents had rendered the weapons inoperable. El Khalifi allegedly discussed a number of targets—including military installations, U.S. Army generals, a restaurant, and synagogues—before settling on the U.S. Capitol.

Resisting Complacency. The thwarting of today’s terrorist plot is another example of the success of the U.S. law enforcement and intelligence system in countering terrorism. This success, however, must not be taken for granted. Terrorists continue to seek to harm the U.S., and thwarting the next terrorist plot requires that the nation remain vigilant.

In light of recent dramatic changes made in the Administration’s recent *National Strategy for*

Counterterrorism, it is time for the country to have a serious debate on whether the current strategy for countering the continued terrorist threat makes us safer. Partisan politics aside, there are serious concerns—even with this latest successful intervention—over whether the nation is ready for the next wave of terrorism.²

In order to help thwart the next terrorist attack, Congress and the White House should:

- **Examine information-sharing gaps and improve interagency cooperation.** Efforts to increase information sharing between the federal government, state and local law enforcement, and international allies—while improving interagency cooperation across the federal government—are vital to protecting the U.S. from the continued threat of terrorism. The arrest in this most recent plot seemingly shows an important degree of cooperation between the FBI and Capitol Police. While the level of communication between the two law enforcement and investigative bodies has not yet been revealed, the plot serves as a critical reminder of the importance of strong interagency

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib3512>

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

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cooperation and information sharing in detecting terrorist plots long before the American public is put at risk.

- **Maintain essential counterterrorism tools.** Support for important investigative tools like 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 terrorist plots, yet they remain subject to continued renewal. In order to ensure that law enforcement and intelligence have the tools they need, Congress should seek to make the PATRIOT Act's sunset provisions permanent.

- **Fully implement a strategy to counter violent extremism.** Countering violent extremism is an important complementary effort to an effective counterterrorism strategy. This August, the U.S. government released a plan called "Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States."³ The strategy focuses on outlining how federal agencies can assist and empower local officials, groups, and private organizations to prevent violent extremism. It includes strengthening law enforcement cooperation and helping communities understand how to protect themselves against and counter extremist propaganda (particularly online). Unfortunately, this plan is not a true strategy. It fails to assign responsibilities and direct action

and resource investments. More should be done to transform a laundry list of good ideas into an effective program to support communities in protecting and strengthening civil society.

Need for Continued Vigilance

It has been more than 10 years since the attacks of September 11. Since then, at least 45 publicly known attempted terrorist attacks have been thwarted. This latest plot serves as an important reminder that the threat of terrorism has not abated. The U.S. must continue to remain vigilant.

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1. Billy House, "Suspected Capitol Bomber Was Under FBI Scrutiny," *National Journal*, February 17, 2012, at <http://www.nationaljournal.com/suspected-capitol-bomber-was-under-fbi-scrutiny-20120217> (February 17, 2012).

2. The Heritage Foundation Counterterrorism Task Force, "A Counterterrorism Strategy for the 'Next Wave,'" *Heritage Foundation Special Report No. 98*, August 24, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/08/a-counterterrorism-strategy-for-the-next-wave>.

3. Press release, "Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States," The White House, August 3, 2011, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/03/empowering-local-partners-prevent-violent-extremism-united-states> (February 17, 2012).