

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Foiled Anarchist Plot Shows Why All-Threats Approach Is Needed

*Jessica Zuckerman*

On Monday, the FBI arrested five individuals in a planned attack to blow up a Cleveland-area bridge. Unlike many of the foiled terror attacks seen in recent years, this recent plot seems to have no connection to Islamist extremism. Instead, three of the suspects are said to be self-proclaimed anarchists.

The inspiration for this week's thwarted anarchist plot, however, is largely where the disparity ends. Not surprisingly, this recent plot was foiled in the same manner as the majority of the 50 thwarted Islamist-inspired plots since 9/11: through the concerted efforts of U.S. intelligence and law enforcement. Thus, while the threat of transnational Islamist terrorism remains front and center, efforts to counter Islamist extremism serve to protect the nation against all manners of threats. The

U.S. should continue to build its capabilities to combat all terrorist threats and thwart plots long before the public is in danger.

**All-Threats Approach to Counterterrorism.** According to the FBI, between 1980 and 2001, approximately two-thirds of terrorism in the U.S. was carried out by non-Islamist extremists. From 2002 to 2005, this number jumped up to 95 percent.<sup>1</sup> Examples of this threat include the 2011 Tucson, Arizona, shooting that nearly took the life of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords (D-AZ) and the 2009 shootings at the U.S. Holocaust Museum and a Los Angeles-area synagogue.

Yet, while the importance of protecting against the non-Islamist terror threat should not be overlooked, the risk posed by Islamist-inspired extremism represents a broader systemic transnational threat. It is for this reason that U.S. leadership, and even The Heritage Foundation in its effort to track thwarted terrorist plots since 9/11, continues to place an elevated focus on the threat of Islamist extremism.

In the U.S., at least 50 Islamist-inspired terror attacks have been thwarted since 9/11. Globally, al-Qaeda, its affiliates, and other Islamist-inspired terrorists are said

to be responsible for 12,000 deaths worldwide.<sup>2</sup> While extensive efforts have been taken to disrupt the global terrorist networks since 9/11, the war on terrorism is not yet won. The U.S. should continue to remain vigilant against the system threat of transnational Islamist extremism.

Protecting against one type of terrorist threat, however, does not mean that the nation is ignoring all others. The best defense against all manners of terrorist threats, Islamist-inspired or otherwise, is to stop them before they occur by developing and maintaining effective counterterrorism, intelligence, and information-sharing programs. Thus, by employing an all-threats approach to counterterrorism, the Department of Homeland Security can protect against the many varied terrorist threats posed against the U.S.

It should, therefore, come as no surprise that this week's thwarted anarchist plot was foiled in much the same way as many of the 50 thwarted Islamist-inspired plots since 9/11. While details have yet to be fully revealed, reports indicate that both the FBI and the federal Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) played a role in the investigation of the Cleveland bomb plot. Since 9/11, both the FBI and JTTF have been

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involved in thwarting a large number of terrorist attacks, including the 2002 Islamist-inspired Lackawanna Six plot and the 2007 planned attack on JFK International Airport.

**Protecting Against All Threats.**

Efforts to combat the continued threat of Islamist extremism can serve to protect the nation against all manners of terrorist threats. Thus, in order to better protect the nation, U.S. homeland security leadership should work to enhance all-threats preparedness. Specifically, Congress and the Administration should:

- **Preserve essential counterterrorism tools like the PATRIOT Act.** The PATRIOT Act expanded the definition of terrorism to include both domestic and international terrorism. It also granted important investigative tools to help ensure that the intelligence community has the tools they need to effectively combat terrorism. Key provisions within the act, such as the roving surveillance authority and business records provision, have proven essential in thwarting terrorist plots and should be made permanent.
- **Clarify the domestic counterterrorism framework.** Cooperative efforts among local law enforcement and federal agencies have proven essential in thwarting numerous terrorist plots long 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 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. Information sharing should be strengthened both domestically and internationally to allow the early detection of all manners of terrorist plots long before the American public is put at risk.

**The Best Defense.** The threat of Islamist extremism remains a systemic transnational threat. Yet, as yesterday's arrests show, protecting against one terrorist threat does not mean disregarding another. An all-threats approach to security and effective counterterrorism, intelligence, and information-sharing programs continue to offer the best defense against the sustained threat of terrorism.

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1. See Jonathan Masters, "Militant Extremists in the United States," Council on Foreign Relations, February 7, 2011, <http://www.cfr.org/terrorist-organizations/militant-extremists-united-states/p9236> (accessed May 1, 2012).

2. National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, "Background Report: 9/11, Ten Years Later," 2011, [http://www.start.umd.edu/start/announcements/BackgroundReport\\_10YearsSince9\\_11.pdf](http://www.start.umd.edu/start/announcements/BackgroundReport_10YearsSince9_11.pdf) (accessed May 1, 2012).