

ISSUE BRIEF

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Fifty-Third Terror Plot Foiled Since 9/11: Bombing Targets U.S. Financial Hub

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On Wednesday, federal authorities arrested a man outside the Federal Reserve Bank in Lower Manhattan in an attempt to detonate a van he believed to be laced with explosives. The man had been under close surveillance by the FBI for some time, and the explosives were rendered inoperable.

While it appears that the public was never in danger, this latest attempted attack marks the 53rd thwarted terrorist plot against the United States since 9/11 and serves as a stark reminder that terrorists continue to plot against America.

Federal Reserve Bank Plot.

According to reports by the FBI, 21-year-old Bangladeshi citizen Quazi Mohammad Rezwanul Ahsan Nafis came to the U.S. in January 2012 on a student visa with the explicit goal of carrying out a terrorist attack on U.S. soil. Upon arriving

in the U.S., Nafis actively sought out al-Qaeda contacts within the U.S. to assist him in carrying out an attack. Unbeknownst to Nafis, one of the individuals he sought to recruit for his terrorist cell turned out to be an FBI informant.

Nafis allegedly considered and surveilled multiple targets in Manhattan's financial district, including the New York Stock Exchange, before settling on the Federal Reserve Bank. Undercover agents supplied Nafis with 20 50-pound bags of explosives. Nafis then purchased components for the weapons detonator and assembled what he believed to be a 1,000-pound bomb inside a van in a nearby warehouse.

In discussing the attack, Nafis indicated that he had a "Plan B" that entailed a suicide bombing in the event that the attack was about to be thwarted by police. Nafis further stated: "I came up to this conclusion that targeting America's economy is most efficient way to draw the path of obliteration of America."¹

Immediately before attempting to detonate the vehicle bomb, Nafis also recorded a video statement to the American public, in which he stated: "We will not stop until we attain victory or martyrdom."²

While it appears that Nafis sought to carry out his attack in the name of al-Qaeda, it is not yet clear whether he had direct support from any foreign terrorist organizations.

Combating the Continued Threat of Terrorism. At least 53 publicly known Islamist-inspired terrorist plots against the U.S. have been thwarted since 9/11. Of these, 13 have involved New York City as a target, second only to domestic military targets, showing that terrorists continue to seek to strike at the heart of the U.S.

In order to combat the continued threat of terrorism on U.S. soil, Congress and the Administration should:

- **Maintain essential counterterrorism tools.** Support for important investigative tools, such as the PATRIOT Act and the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA), is essential to maintaining the security of the U.S. and combating terrorist threats. FISA authorizes electronic surveillance within certain legal limits, while key provisions of the PATRIOT Act—such as the roving surveillance authority and business records provision—have proven essential to thwarting terrorist

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plots. Yet these resources require reauthorization every year. In order to ensure that law enforcement and intelligence authorities have the critical counterterrorism tools they need, Congress should seek permanent authorization of the three sunset provisions within the PATRIOT Act. At the same time, Congress should ensure that it does not deny the intelligence community the vital tools contained within FISA and the subsequent FISA Amendments Act, which is set to expire at the end of this year.

- **Increase visa coordination.** Careful screening of those who wish to come to the U.S. provides the opportunity to apprehend terrorists and other criminals before they enter the country. The Obama Administration has yet to place visa coordination at the top of its agenda. In fact, the Visa Security Program—which would

provide background screening on visa applicants—has not been deployed at many high-risk diplomatic posts. At the same time, Congress has let the Visa Waiver Program—which requires pre-screening of visa waiver participants and robust information sharing with member countries—to come to a virtual standstill. Both efforts should be allowed to expand.

- **Examine information-sharing gaps.** Efforts to increase information sharing between the U.S. and its allies while improving inter-agency 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 cross-cutting communication and simply entails state and local law enforcement sending information to the federal government. This gap in information sharing should not be allowed to continue.

Remain Vigilant. Though it is encouraging that, since 9/11, 53 terror plots against the U.S. have failed, the U.S. cannot afford to become complacent. Exploiting America's visa system, Quazi Nafis sought to attack the center of the U.S. financial system. Continued vigilance is needed, as are critical reforms of visa coordination and information sharing.

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1. United States District Court, Eastern District of New York, complaint *United States of America vs. Quazi Mohammad Rezwanul Ahsan Nafis*, October 17, 2012, <http://cbsnewyork.files.wordpress.com/2012/10/nafis-complaint.pdf> (accessed October 17, 2012).
2. *Ibid.*