

ISSUE BRIEF

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Terrorist Plot 63: Attempt to Bomb the U.S. Capitol Shows the U.S. Cannot Ignore the Threat of Terrorism

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On January 14, the FBI arrested Christopher Cornell for plotting to bomb the U.S. Capitol and then fire upon those who fled from the buildings. According to the complaint filed against him, Cornell, who was using the alias Raheel Mahrus Ubaydah, supported the Islamic State and sought to wage jihad against the U.S. This is the 63rd successful or foiled Islamist terrorist plot against the United States since 9/11 and continues the trend of homegrown terrorism.

In light of this plot and the recent Islamist terrorist attack in Paris, it is clear that the U.S. cannot simply wish away the threat of terrorism at home and abroad. Despite rhetoric about the defeat of al-Qaeda, the insignificance of ISIS, and the end of the war on terror, the reality is that the threat of terrorism remains. The U.S. cannot merely be content with its existing counterterrorism efforts, but must look to improve and build on these efforts to keep the U.S. safe.

The Plot

The criminal complaint filed by the FBI against Cornell states that he created Twitter accounts in the summer of 2014 and began posting statements and videos supportive of ISIS as well as voicing support for violent jihad and acts of terrorism around the world.¹ The FBI used a confidential informant to

reach out to Cornell and investigate his intentions. In August, Cornell wrote an instant message to the informant in which he stated, “I believe we should just wage jihad under our own orders and plan attacks and everything... [W]e already got a thumbs up from the Brothers over there and Anwar al Awlaki before his martyrdom and many others.”²

These messages led to an in-person meeting between Cornell and the informant in October in which Cornell described his need for weapons and his desire to attack but without specific details. In a second meeting in November, Cornell identified the Members of Congress as enemies and specified that he sought to build and plant pipe bombs near the U.S. Capitol and then shoot those fleeing the scene. Cornell showed the informant research on government buildings, the construction of pipe bombs, and the acquisition of firearms. After saving money, Cornell put his plan into motion on January 14, purchasing two semi-automatic rifles and around 600 rounds of ammunition from a store in southern Ohio. He was then arrested before the public was put in danger.³

Homegrown Terrorism

Cornell’s plot marks the 52nd homegrown Islamist terrorist plot or attack since 9/11 out of 63 total attacks and plots. Homegrown, lone-wolf terrorist plots present a challenge to U.S. counterterrorism efforts due to their low profile and lack of connections to other groups or individuals. In this case, Cornell forfeited his low profile by announcing his thoughts and beliefs on Twitter, but not all terrorists will be so brazen. Cyber capabilities that allowed law enforcement to find extremist and terrorist behavior online were critical to ensuring that Cornell’s plot was discovered.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4333>

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The U.S. must redouble its efforts to combat terrorism by maintaining and building on current counterterrorism tools. Congress should:

- **Maintain essential counterterrorism tools.** Support for important investigative tools is essential to maintaining the security of the U.S. and combating terrorist threats. Legitimate government surveillance programs are also a vital component of U.S. national security and should be allowed to continue. The need for effective counterterrorism operations, however, does not relieve the government of its obligation to follow the law and respect individual privacy and liberty. In the American system, the government must do both equally well.
- **Ensure that FBI information is shared more broadly with state and local law enforcement.** Despite the lessons of 9/11 and other terrorist plots, the culture of the FBI continues to resist sharing information with state and local law enforcement. While cooperation with state and local law enforcement through the local Joint Terrorism Task Force was present in this case, it should be present in all cases. As large-scale, complicated terrorist attacks become harder to execute, the lone-wolf scenario becomes more of a threat. America therefore has to leverage the experience, capabilities, authorities, and relationships found in local law enforcement to detect budding terrorists before they strike. Either Congress should pass legislation to enable sharing, or the Administration should change internal FBI procedures.
- **Prioritize local cyber capabilities.** Building cyber investigation capabilities in the higher-risk urban areas must become a primary focus of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security grants. With so much terrorism-related activity occurring on the Internet, local law enforcement must have the ability to constitutionally monitor and track violent extremist activity on the Web when reasonable suspicion exists to do so.
- **Emphasize community outreach.** Federal grant funds should be used to create robust community outreach capabilities in higher-risk urban areas. Such capabilities are key to building trust in local communities, and if the United States is to thwart lone-wolf terrorist attacks successfully, it must put effective community outreach operations at the tip of the spear.

Rejecting Complacency, Remaining Alert

The U.S. cannot view terrorism and terrorists as defeated; the threat remains as real as ever. The U.S. may have ended the war on terror, but terrorists are still at war with the U.S. To win the long war against terrorism and foil future terrorist plots, the U.S. must continue to improve its counterterrorism strategies and tools.

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1. Complaint at 4, *United States v. Cornell* (S.D. Ohio Jan. 14, 2015) (No. 1:15-mj-00024), http://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/01/14/cornell_complaint.pdf (accessed January 15, 2015).

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.