

ISSUE BRIEF

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64th Islamist Terrorist Plot Since 9/11 Shows the U.S. Must Combat Radical Islamist Threat

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Last Wednesday, two cousins were arrested in Chicago on charges of conspiring to knowingly provide material support and resources to a foreign terrorist organization. According to the criminal complaint brought against them by the FBI, Army National Guard Specialist Hasan Edmonds planned to travel to Syria to fight with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), while his cousin Jonas Edmonds planned to attack the U.S. military installation at which Hasan had trained. Both men were U.S. citizens, and both were radicalized in the U.S.

This attempt by two homegrown terrorists represents the 64th Islamist terrorist plot or attack against the U.S. since 9/11 and should remind policymakers that critical law enforcement and intelligence tools are essential to stopping terrorists before they strike. This event is also the second terrorist plot in the U.S. in which the attacker was primarily inspired by and supportive of ISIS, which demonstrates that what happens in Syria and Iraq does not necessarily stay in Syria and Iraq. Preventing additional terrorist plots requires going beyond U.S. borders to deal with the root of the problem.

Terrorist Plot Details

According to the FBI, in January 2015, Hasan Edmonds communicated online with an undercover

FBI agent about getting his and his cousin's affairs in order and their plans to travel to the Middle East. Hasan wrote that it was his "duty" to support ISIS and stated that he and Jonas had taken an oath to support ISIS.¹

While Hasan wanted to travel to Syria and use his military training to help ISIS there, he also expressed an eagerness to attack targets in the U.S. in the event he was prevented from traveling to Syria or if ISIS commanded him to remain in the U.S. His stated rationale for such acts was that "the best way to be[a]t them is to break their will. With the U.S. no matter how many you kill they will keep coming unless the soldiers and the American public no longer have the will to fight.... If we can break their spirits we will win."²

The FBI began to communicate with Jonas in February 2015, and the goals he expressed to them were similar to Hasan's. Law enforcement officials met several times with the cousins during February and March. During these meetings, it became clear what the cousins sought to do. Hasan purchased tickets to fly to Egypt, from where he would make his trip to Syria, while Jonas would purchase assault rifles and grenades for use against a U.S. military base.³ Hasan provided Jonas with his knowledge of the base and recommended specific targets and tactics.

On March 25, Hasan went to Chicago's Midway Airport to fly to Cairo. Hasan was arrested at Midway airport, and Jonas was arrested at his home shortly thereafter.⁴

Counterterrorism at Home and Abroad

Out of the 64 plots and attacks against the U.S. homeland since 9/11, the plot by the Edmonds is the

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53rd by a homegrown Islamist terrorist. This trend of homegrown terrorists is likely to continue as ISIS makes use of aggressive messaging and social media efforts to attract followers to itself or other Islamist terrorist groups. This plot also represents the 17th Islamist attack or plot aimed at military targets, the most frequent targets of such attacks since 9/11.

In order to combat these threats at home, U.S. counterterrorism efforts must maintain and build the intelligence tools necessary to prevent terrorists from attacking. The U.S. should also empower state, local, and civil society partners to help prevent individuals from radicalizing in the first place.

Such actions are, however, essentially treating the symptoms of violent Islamism as opposed to the disease itself. With “successful” terrorist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates (e.g., al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula) maintaining their bases of operations across the Middle East and Africa and in some places growing in influence and power, the core of the problem festers even as Western law enforcement and intelligence agencies perpetually combat terrorist acts at home.

For example, ISIS controls one-third of Iraq and one-third of Syria. It has drawn some 20,000 foreign fighters from as many as 90 countries.⁵ Despite six months of a U.S.-led coalition air campaign, it continues to maintain territory to develop a caliphate. ISIS is also credited with coordinating and supporting a number of recent, high-visibility domestic terrorist attacks in European capitals such as the shooting at the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*. One of the Paris attackers also claimed affiliation with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

It might even be argued that perceptions of ISIS or al-Qaeda affiliates as “winners” or as having notable successes, despite their acts of brutality and terrorism, will serve as a powerful motivator for further radicalization and violence. Unless this perception

is altered by any number of possible means, these groups will continue to attract followers at home and abroad, ensuring a continuation of their brand of violent Islamist extremism.

Counterterrorism Policy

To combat terrorism in the U.S., 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.
- **Emphasize community outreach.** Federal grant funds should be used to create robust community outreach capabilities in higher-risk urban areas. Importantly, these funds must not be used for political pork or so broadly used that they are no longer targeted at those communities at greatest risk. Such capabilities are key to building trust in local communities, and if the United States is to be successful in thwarting lone-wolf terrorist attacks, it must put effective community outreach operations at the tip of the spear.
- **Develop a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy.** Since the inspirational source of domestic radicalization and terrorism often lies overseas, battling violent Islamist extremism abroad must be addressed in concert with the challenges presented by the terrorism at home.

1. Kim Janssen, “Edmonds Complaint Affidavit,” Scribd, March 26, 2015, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/260041011/EDMONDS-Complaint-Affidavit> (accessed March 30, 2015).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, “U.S. Army National Guard Soldier and His Cousin Arrested for Conspiring to Support Terrorism,” March 26, 2015, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/us-army-national-guard-soldier-and-his-cousin-arrested-conspiring-support-terrorism-isil> (accessed March 30, 2015). The FBI complaint indicates that Jonas had not yet purchased any of the weapons for his attack but had only figured out his plan and identified a supplier.

5. CBS News, “20,000 Foreign Fighters Flock to Syria, Iraq to Join Terrorists,” February 10, 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/ap-20000-foreign-fighters-flock-to-syria-iraq-to-join-terrorists/> (accessed March 30, 2015).

To this end, Congress should ensure that the Administration has a comprehensive strategy for addressing violent Islamist extremism both at home and abroad.

Security Requires Vigilance

Until it is able to combat and destroy ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other Islamist extremist groups effectively, the U.S. will remain the target of terrorists inspired by this extreme ideology. The U.S. cannot afford complacency but instead must use intelligence, community outreach, and efforts to defeat ISIS and other terrorists abroad to stop them before they strike.

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