

ISSUE BRIEF

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65th Islamist Terrorist Plot or Attack Since 9/11: Persistent Terrorism Requires Constant Vigilance

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Last Thursday, just one week after two cousins in Chicago were arrested for attempting to support a foreign terrorist organization, two women in New York City were arrested and charged with conspiring to use a weapon of mass destruction.¹ This plot is the 65th Islamist terrorist plot or attack aimed at the U.S. homeland since 9/11 and proves that the threat of terrorism is real and growing.

Terrorist Plot Details

U.S. citizens Noelle “Najma Samaa” Velentzas and Asia “Murdiyyah” Siddiqui were arrested for willfully conspiring to use a weapon of mass destruction in the United States.² Using the Internet and relevant books, the two roommates researched and obtained the items needed to create an explosive device made from propane tanks. Velentzas noted several weeks ago that there are more “opportunities of pleasing Allah” in the United States, implying that she intended to launch an attack on U.S. soil rather than going to fight overseas.³

An investigation revealed that both defendants took to Islamist ideology several years ago. Velentzas admired Osama bin Laden and his mentor Abdullah Azzam and had been obsessed with pressure-cooker bombs since the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings. She also considered herself a citizen of the Islamic

State (ISIS). Siddiqui showed an interest in Islamist ideology even earlier. In 2006, she became close to a prominent figure in the al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula terrorist group, Samir Khan, who died in 2011. In 2009, she wrote a poem for a magazine called *Jihad Recollections* and called for readers to engage in violent jihad. In 2010, she sent a letter of support to Mohamed Mohamud, who was arrested for attempting to detonate a car bomb in Portland, Oregon.⁴

Through an undercover agent, the FBI began tracking both Velentzas and Siddiqui in July 2014. About that time, the two women showed an increased interest in learning how to construct and detonate explosive devices within the United States. Velentzas and Siddiqui read about how to make homemade grenades, pipe bombs, and pressure-cooker bombs and on electrical currents and chemistry. Velentzas showed a growing interest in attacking police, military, and other government targets, and discussed how she and Siddiqui could defend themselves with concealed knives or with stolen weapons in the event they were arrested.⁵

Ultimately, the FBI acted because Velentzas and Siddiqui had not only acquired the materials necessary to build a bomb, including multiple propane canisters, but Siddiqui had indicated a desire to proceed with independent planning and plots. With the potential for a bomb to be built, the undercover agent unable to track the progress of the work, and Siddiqui and Velentzas’s clear desire to attack the U.S., the FBI arrested them before harm could come to the public.⁶

Terrorism on the Rise

Of the 65 Islamist terrorist plots or attacks since 9/11, this marks the 54th homegrown terrorist plot,

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as both individuals were U.S. citizens who were radicalized in the U.S. This case is also the third terror plot in less than three months, indicating an uptick in Islamist terrorism. This may be due to the success of terrorist campaigns by ISIS and other terrorist organizations inspiring individuals to radicalize and act on those extremist beliefs.⁷ The past three terrorist plots have all expressed at least some, if not direct, allegiance to ISIS and a desire to help ISIS by attacking targets here in the U.S.

With the trend of homegrown terrorism continuing to grow and the recent increase in terrorist plots, both here in the U.S. and across the West, the U.S. must redouble its efforts.

Specifically, the U.S. 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. To this end, Congress should ensure that the Administration has a comprehensive strategy for addressing violent Islamist extremism both at home and abroad. This includes working with allies to strengthen intelligence sharing and collaborative counterterrorism efforts.

A Complete Counterterrorism Effort

With ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other Islamist terrorist groups actively attacking Western nations and interests, the U.S. must push through complacency to maintain and improve its counterterrorism efforts domestically and abroad. If terrorism continues to trend upward, the U.S. will need these strategies and tools sooner rather than later.

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