

ISSUE BRIEF

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Three Terrorist Plots Disrupted in Three Weeks: 66th Islamist Plot Reconfirms Scope of Threat

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On Friday, April 10, the FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) in Topeka, Kansas, arrested John T. Booker Jr., as he prepared a car bomb for use against the nearby Fort Riley Army post. Booker, a 20-year-old U.S. citizen who goes by the name Mohammed Abdullah Hassan, expressed a desire to support the Islamic State by engaging in violent jihad here in the U.S.¹ Through the use of confidential informants, the FBI tracked Booker's statements, plans, and actions, and arrested him before the public was in danger.

This homegrown, lone-wolf terrorist plot is the 66th known Islamist terrorist plot or attack aimed at the U.S. homeland since 9/11. It is also the third terrorist plot that has been foiled in the past 17 days, and the fourth in the past four months in which the plotter expressed support for ISIS. This surge in terrorism demonstrates yet again that the threat of terrorism continues to be very real, and that stopping terrorists before they attack is more critical than ever.

The Plot

John Booker was accepted into the Army in February 2014, but before he entered basic training the FBI became aware of multiple messages on Facebook in which he claimed to be excited to wage

jihad. When interviewed, Booker "admitted that he enlisted in the United States Army with the intent to commit an insider attack against American soldiers like Major Nidal Hassan had done at Fort Hood, Texas."² As a result, Booker was not allowed to join the military.

Starting in October of 2014, Booker began to communicate with an FBI confidential informant, and "repeatedly expressed to [the informant] his desire to engage in violent jihad on behalf of ISIL."³ Booker told the informant of his desire to go to the Middle East to join ISIS and kill Americans. As their conversations continued into November, Booker showed the informant videos of suicide bombers and spoke fondly of them. When the informant indicated that he had a cousin who could get Booker overseas, Booker excitedly accepted the offer and expressed a willingness to wage jihad in the U.S. to prove his dedication.⁴

In December 2014, Booker told the informant that he was thinking about attacking American soldiers at a nearby military base with a gun or a grenade, believing it justified by the Koran. Then in February, Booker referenced an ISIS propaganda video and expressed a desire to create a similar video. Booker thought that capturing and killing an American soldier in the U.S. would "scare this country" and warn it that "we will be coming after American soldiers in the streets...we will be picking them off one by one."⁵

In March, the confidential informant introduced Booker to his "cousin," another informant; the two told Booker that the cousin was a sheik planning terrorist attacks. Booker said that he had studied suicide bombing and wanted to build and detonate a truck bomb, following in the footsteps

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of an American called Jihad Joe, who died as a suicide bomber in Syria.⁶ Booker then filmed a video threatening the U.S. and rented a storage unit for gathering bomb components.⁷ By the end of March, Booker began purchasing bomb materials and gathering information on military targets, settling on Fort Riley. Booker provided the bomb components to the confidential informants, believing that they would provide the explosive material, which was actually inert. He then proclaimed that “I am going to do this Friday,” meaning April 10, and prepared a second threatening video. On April 10, the two informants drove to Fort Riley and, as Booker was arming the inert bomb, FBI agents arrested him.

Getting Serious About Terrorism

This plot is the 55th homegrown plot or attack, meaning that the terrorist was radicalized here in the U.S. It is also the 18th attack or plot aimed at U.S. military targets, the most common target of Islamist terrorists. Despite suggestions to the contrary in the media and in politics, the threat of ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other Islamist terrorists striking the U.S. has not diminished.

On June 1, a subsection of the Patriot Act—section 215 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Action, the telephone metadata collection program—is set to expire if not reauthorized. There is no way of knowing whether section 215 was used in this case. Congress is now set to debate section 215 before it expires. A healthy discussion of U.S. security and privacy is an important one that the

U.S. should have. In this debate, it is important that Congress understand that intelligence programs are critical to preventing terrorists before they strike. Security alone is not enough since the U.S. cannot make every school, military base, mall, government building, or subway secure and hardened against every type of terrorist attack. Lawful intelligence, collected under proper warrants and court orders, is the best tool that the U.S. has in this battle against terrorists, who have increased the number of plots in recent months. The U.S. government has a responsibility to protect Americans from danger and respect their liberties—and it must do both well.

Stopping Terrorists Before They Strike

As the U.S. faces an apparently growing wave of terrorism, 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.

1. Some individuals who knew Booker have suggested or stated that he may have suffered from mental disorders. The U.S. justice system is capable of adjudicating Booker’s state of mind and ability to determine right from wrong. This paper will focus on the facts of this plot and allow the justice system to determine his culpability for his actions. Nicholas Clayton and John Hanna, “Man Charged with Plotting Bombing at Kansas Military Base,” ABC News, April 10, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/kansas-man-accused-plotting-suicide-bomb-attack-base-30227614> (accessed April 14, 2015).

2. *U.S. v. Booker*, case no. 15-mj-5039-KGS (Kans. 2015), http://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/04/10/booker_complaint.pdf (accessed April 14, 2015).

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. “‘Cat-Loving’ American Suicide Bomber in Syria from Florida,” CBS News, May 31, 2014, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/cat-loving-american-suicide-bomber-in-syria-from-florida/> (accessed April 14, 2015), and “Jihad Joe From Florida in Huge Suicide Truck Bomb Attack in Syria,” YouTube video, June 3, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZcOVLSKEYk> (accessed April 14, 2015).

7. A second man, Alexander Blair, has also been arrested in this case, as he was aware of Booker’s intent to build and use a car bomb, and loaned Booker money to rent the storage unit. *U.S. v. Blair*, case bi,15-mj-5040-KGS (Kans. 2015), http://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/04/11/blair_complaint.pdf (accessed April 14, 2015).

- **Emphasize community outreach.** Federal grant funds should be used to create robust community outreach capabilities in higher-risk urban areas. These funds must not be used for political pork or so broadly that they no longer target those communities at greatest risk. Such capabilities are key to building trust within these communities, and if the United States is to be successful in thwarting lone-wolf terrorist attacks, it must place effective community outreach operations at the tip of the spear.
- **Prioritize local cyber capabilities.** Building cyber-investigation capabilities in the higher-risk urban areas must become a primary focus of Department of Homeland Security grants. With so much terrorism-related activity occurring on the Internet, local law enforcement must have the constitutional ability to monitor and track violent extremist activity on the Web when reasonable suspicion exists to do so.

Keeping the Homeland Safe

Vigilance is necessary to combat terrorism. With three terror plots disrupted in 17 days, the idea of vigilance should take on new meaning for Americans. The U.S. must have the strategies and tools it needs to stop terrorists before they attack again.

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