

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 4416 | JUNE 08, 2015

69th Islamist Terrorist Plot: Ongoing Spike in Terrorism Should Force Congress to Finally Confront the Terrorist Threat

David Inserra

On June 2 in Boston, Usaamah Abdullah Rahim drew a knife and attacked police officers and FBI agents, who then shot and killed him. Rahim was being watched by Boston's Joint Terrorism Task Force as he had been plotting to behead police officers as part of violent jihad. A conspirator, David Wright or Dawud Sharif Abdul Khaliq, was arrested shortly thereafter for helping Rahim to plan this attack.

This plot marks the 69th publicly known Islamist terrorist plot or attack against the U.S. homeland since 9/11, and is part of a recent spike in terrorist activity. The U.S. must redouble its efforts to stop terrorists before they strike, through the use of properly applied intelligence tools.

The Plot

According to the criminal complaint filed against Wright, Rahim had originally planned to behead an individual outside the state of Massachusetts,¹ which, according to news reports citing anonymous government officials, was Pamela Geller, the organizer of the “draw Mohammed” cartoon contest in Garland, Texas.² To this end, Rahim had purchased multiple knives, each over 1 foot long, from Amazon.com.

The FBI was listening in on the calls between Rahim and Wright and recorded multiple conversa-

tions regarding how these weapons would be used to behead someone. Rahim then changed his plan early on the morning of June 2. He planned to go “on vacation right here in Massachusetts.... I’m just going to, ah, go after them, those boys in blue. Cause, ah, it’s the easiest target.”³ Rahim and Wright had used the phrase “going on vacation” repeatedly in their conversations as a euphemism for violent jihad. During this conversation, Rahim told Wright that he planned to attack a police officer on June 2 or June 3. Wright then offered advice on preparing a will and destroying any incriminating evidence.

Based on this threat, Boston police officers and FBI agents approached Rahim to question him, which prompted him to pull out one of his knives. After being told to drop his weapon, Rahim responded with “you drop yours” and moved toward the officers, who then shot and killed him. While Rahim’s brother, Ibrahim, initially claimed that Rahim was shot in the back, video surveillance was shown to community leaders and civil rights groups, who have confirmed that Rahim was *not* shot in the back.⁴

Terrorism Not Going Away

This 69th Islamist plot is also the seventh in this calendar year. Details on how exactly Rahim was radicalized are still forthcoming, but according to anonymous officials, online propaganda from ISIS and other radical Islamist groups are the source.⁵ That would make this attack the 58th homegrown terrorist plot and continue the recent trend of ISIS playing an important role in radicalizing individuals in the United States. It is also the sixth plot or attack targeting law enforcement in the U.S., with a recent uptick in plots aimed at police.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4416>

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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While the debate over the PATRIOT Act and the USA FREEDOM Act is taking a break, the terrorists are not. The result of the debate has been the reduction of U.S. intelligence and counterterrorism capabilities, meaning that the U.S. has to do even more with less when it comes to connecting the dots on terrorist plots.⁶ Other legitimate intelligence tools and capabilities must be leaned on now even more.

Protecting the Homeland

To keep the U.S. safe, Congress must take a hard look at the U.S. counterterrorism enterprise and determine other measures that are needed to improve it. Congress should:

- **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 thwart 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.

- **Push the FBI toward being more effectively driven by intelligence.** While the FBI has made high-level changes to its mission and organizational structure, the bureau is still working on integrating intelligence and law enforcement activities. Full integration will require overcoming inter-agency cultural barriers and providing FBI intelligence personnel with resources, opportunities, and the stature they need to become a more effective and integral part of the FBI.

- **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 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.

Clear-Eyed Vigilance

The recent spike in terrorist plots and attacks should finally awaken policymakers—all Americans, for that matter—to the seriousness of the terrorist threat. Neither fearmongering nor willful blindness serves the United States. Congress must recognize and acknowledge the nature and the scope of the Islamist terrorist threat, and take the appropriate action to confront it.

—*David Inserra is a Research Associate for Homeland Security and Cyber Security in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign and National Security Policy of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation.*

1. Criminal Complaint in the United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts: *United States of America v. David Wright*, Case No. 15-6024-MPK, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/file/451956/download> (accessed June 4, 2015).

2. Ray Sanchez, Evan Perez, and Shimon Prokupecz, "Boston Shooting: Suspect Plotted to Behead Pamela Geller, Sources say," CNN, June 3, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/03/us/boston-police-shooting/> (accessed June 4, 2015).

3. Criminal Complaint: *United States of America v. David Wright*.

4. Kevin Johnson and G. Jeffrey MacDonald, "Documents: Boston Terror Suspect Planned Knife Attacks on 'Boys in Blue,'" *USA Today*, June 3, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/06/03/boston-shooting-terror/28399561/> (accessed June 4, 2015).

5. Sanchez, Perez, and Prokupecz, "Suspect Plotted to Behead Pamela Geller."

6. James Jay Carafano, Charles Stimson, Steven P. Bucci, John Malcolm, and Paul Rosenzweig, "Section 215 of the PATRIOT Act and Metadata Collection: Responsible Options for the Way Forward," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3018, May 21, 2015, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2015/05/section-215-of-the-patriot-act-and-metadata-collection-responsible-options-for-the-way-forward>.