

ISSUE BRIEF

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Islamist Terror Plot No. 70: Congress Needs to Take Terror Threat Much More Seriously

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On June 13, the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) in New York City arrested Munther Omar Saleh and charged him with providing material support to the Islamic State (ISIS). Saleh and two co-conspirators were conducting reconnaissance on various landmarks around New York, had downloaded and studied plans for building a bomb, and told a confidential source that they were planning an "op" in New York. Saleh and one co-conspirator were arrested early in the morning on June 13 after charging with knives at a police vehicle following them. Another co-conspirator, Fareed Mumuni, was arrested on June 16, but not before trying to stab an FBI agent who had come to arrest him. When interviewed after his arrest, Saleh said that his group planned to bomb a location, use a vehicle to run down police officers, and then use their weapons to attack others.

This plot is the 70th publicly known Islamist terrorist plot or attack in the U.S. since 9/11, and continues a major spike in terrorist activity here at home. The U.S. must use all lawful tools at its disposal to prevent terrorists from attacking here.

Terror Plot No. 70

Law enforcement was alerted to Saleh when, in late 2014 and early 2015, Saleh began making radical statements online through social media. Saleh called

al-Qaeda "too moderate," and expressed support for the caliphate that the Islamic State claims to have established in Iraq and Syria.¹ He expressed support for the recent attack on the Mohamed cartoon contest in Texas and also began to translate ISIS and other radical videos and material into English. The FBI began watching Saleh and his computer activity through judicially authorized surveillance, and in March twice found him suspiciously examining the George Washington Bridge between New York and New Jersey. The JTTF interviewed Saleh, who denied supporting ISIS or holding any radical, violent beliefs, but provided access to his computer containing radical material, which he then denied reading or translating.²

In May, Saleh began to research weapons, training, and equipment that could be used to carry out violent attacks and bombings. He downloaded instructions for building a pressure-cooker bomb; researched weapons including knives, axes, and firearms; researched surveillance and disguise equipment and electronics; and continued to look at a variety of New York landmarks, likely as research for which targets to attack.³ During this time, Saleh was also enrolled in an electrical engineering course that would teach him skills useful for building a bomb. When approached by a confidential informant, Saleh said he was "in NY and trying to do an Op," a reference to his terrorist operations and plotting.⁴ He would not communicate further with the informant, however, because he was ordered by officials he believed to be part of ISIS not to communicate with others.

Very early in the morning on June 13, Mumuni picked up Saleh and the other co-conspirator and began to perform anti-surveillance measures, such as driving without lights, not stopping at stop signs,

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and erratically pulling over and speeding up. At around 4 a.m., they stopped at a red light, and Saleh (with knife in hand) and one other individual got out of the car and charged a law enforcement vehicle tracking them.⁵ With their surveillance operation blown, the police moved in and arrested Saleh and the other conspirator who ran at the police vehicle. After questioning Saleh, the FBI learned that the group had planned to use a bomb, run over law enforcement that responded with a car, and then take their weapons to attack others. Saleh pledged full allegiance to ISIS and claimed that his co-conspirators had also.⁶ When the FBI went to arrest Mumuni on the morning of June 17, Mumuni stabbed an FBI agent multiple times, but the agent's vest prevented the knife from doing any serious injury.⁷

Reality of Terror

Based on publicly available information, the U.S. is currently experiencing the highest level of terrorist activity since 9/11. This terror plot is the eighth Islamist plot against the U.S. homeland this calendar year, and just like all the others this year, has involved individuals with some level of inspiration from ISIS. In this case, Saleh believed that he was taking orders straight from ISIS. ABC News is reporting that this recent arrest is likely to be followed by others, as the FBI is "in the midst of a broad campaign to disrupt potential terrorists inspired by ISIS, with several arrests expected before July 4th."⁸ While such news has not been confirmed by the FBI, it fits the reality that terrorist activity is spiking, and prior statements by the FBI regarding how it is tracking individuals at various levels of radicalization in

all 50 states.⁹ It is also the 16th plot targeting New York City, the second-most popular U.S. target for Islamist terrorists (after the military), and the seventh plot targeting law enforcement, which is the fifth-most-common target. This plot is also the 59th homegrown terror plot, that is, Saleh and Mumuni, both U.S. citizens, were radicalized here in the U.S.

This reality should challenge those who believe the danger from terrorism has passed. Rather than fewer tools, the law enforcement and intelligence community need *additional* tools to stop terrorists before they strike. Congress must:

- **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.
- **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.

1. Criminal Complaint in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of New York, *United States of America v. Munther Omar Saleh*, Case No. 15M543, June 13, 2015, <https://cbsnewyork.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/munther-signed-complaint.pdf> (accessed June 17, 2015).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Criminal Complaint in the United States District Court for the Eastern District of New York, *United States of America v. Fareed Mumuni*, June 17, 2015, <https://cbsnewyork.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/mumuni-complaint-final-2.pdf> (accessed June 18, 2015).

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Aaron Katersky and Pierre Thomas, "Exclusive: FBI in Midst of Broad Campaign to Disrupt ISIS, Sources Say," ABC News, June 17, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/fbi-midst-broad-campaign-disrupt-isis-sources/story?id=31826983> (accessed June 17, 2015).

9. Jesse Byrnes, "FBI Investigating ISIS Suspects in All 50 States," *The Hill*, February 25, 2015, <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/233832-fbi-investigating-isis-suspects-in-all-50-states> (accessed June 17, 2015), and Evan Perez and Shimon Prokupecz, "FBI Struggling with Surge in Homegrown Terror Cases," CNN, May 30, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/28/politics/fbi-isis-local-law-enforcement/> (accessed June 17, 2015).

- **Support stronger action against Islamist terrorist groups.** The United States and its allies need to take more effective steps to isolate, undermine, and defeat ISIS and the al-Nusra Front. Greater intelligence and law enforcement cooperation is needed to uncover and neutralize terrorist plots, curtail the flow of foreign fighters to Syria, and monitor the activities of foreign fighters who have returned to the United States and other countries.
- **Support state, local, and civil society partners.** The federal government should strengthen its efforts to empower local partners. The federal government is not the tip of the spear for countering violent extremism; it exists to support local partners who are in the best position to recognize and counter radicalization in their own communities.

Coming to Grips with Terror

Recognizing the seriousness of the current spike in terrorist activity is critical to addressing the threat. Congress should provide those who protect this country with tools they need to keep the U.S. safe from terrorist attacks.

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