

ISSUE BRIEF

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Terrorist Plot No. 71: Rise in Terrorism Calls for Increased Vigilance

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On Monday, the FBI charged Justin Sullivan with attempting to provide material support to a terrorist group as well as two weapons charges. Sullivan was planning to attack a public venue, such as a bar or a concert, with a rifle in support of the Islamic State (ISIS). This is the 71st Islamist terrorist plot or attack against the U.S. homeland since 9/11 according to publicly available information. It is the third plot foiled this month alone and part of an ongoing spike in terrorist activity within the U.S.

The U.S. must recognize that terrorists have not stopped trying to strike us and, indeed, have only grown bolder in the past few months. While the U.S. should not give in to fearmongering, it cannot naively ignore the threat that confronts it. The U.S. must use all the tools of its national power to prevent terrorists from striking.

Plot No. 71

In April 2015, Sullivan's father called 9-1-1 after Sullivan began to destroy various household items, particularly religious items, seemingly in support of ISIS. Sullivan's father said that they were "scared to leave the house." Following this incident, the FBI assigned an undercover agent (UC) to communicate with Sullivan. Sullivan praised ISIS and swore his allegiance to it, describing himself as a "mujahid," a guerilla fighter engaging in violent jihad.

Sullivan told the UC that the two of them should remain in the U.S. to support ISIS since they would likely be captured if they tried to travel. Instead, Sullivan had settled on attacking a U.S. target with a gun, saying that "[yo]u only need 600 dollars... for the gun and bullets."¹ Sullivan said that he would be purchasing an AR-15 rifle "in about two weeks" at a nearby gun show, promising that "I'll kill people this month." Sullivan estimated that he and the UC could kill 1,000 people with AR-15s.²

Sullivan then began to talk about firearm silencers and poisons that could be used on the bullets or in a bomb. He asked if the UC could make the silencers for use in June or possibly July. In addition to seeking out a silencer and poisons, Sullivan also sought 100-round drum magazines for the AR-15 as well.³ After gaining as much information as possible from Sullivan, the FBI then provided him with a silencer that Sullivan believed was homemade on June 19. The FBI then raided the Sullivans' house, finding the silencer and arresting Sullivan. Sullivan admitted that he was planning to use the silencer during an attack on a bar or a concert between June 21 and June 23. He intended to buy a rifle from a gun show on June 20.⁴

Combatting Terrorism

This 71st plot is the ninth Islamist terrorist plot in this calendar year and the third in June alone. As was the case with all the other plots this year, Sullivan was inspired by ISIS. Sullivan's was also the 60th plot or attack involving a homegrown terrorist, meaning one who was radicalized here in the U.S. In targeting a bar or a concert, Sullivan was also going after the third most common terrorist target: different types of mass gatherings (plots against the U.S.

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<http://report.heritage.org/ib4425>

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military and New York City are the most and second most common targets, respectively). Together with the recent release of State Department research showing a spike in global terrorism in 2014, the U.S. must come to grips with the true nature of the terrorist threat, both at home and abroad.⁵

To combat the real and growing threat of terrorism, Congress should:

- **Ensure that the FBI shares information more readily and regularly with state and local law enforcement and treats state and local partners as critical actors in the fight against terrorism.** In this case, a local 9-1-1 call seems to have triggered FBI involvement. While using state and local partners as important sources of information is half the battle, local partners must also receive timely information from the FBI. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) should play a role in supporting these partners' efforts by acting as a source or conduit for information and coordinating information sharing between the FBI and its partners.
- **Designate an office in DHS to coordinate countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts.** CVE efforts are spread across all levels of government and society. DHS is uniquely situated to lead the federal government's efforts to empower local partners. Currently, DHS's CVE working group coordinates efforts across DHS components, but a more substantial office will be necessary to manage this broader task.
- **Support state, local, and civil society partners.** Congress and the Administration should not lose sight of the fact that all of the federal government's efforts must be focused

on empowering local partners. The federal government is not the tip of the spear for CVE efforts; it exists to support local partners who are in the best position to recognize and counter radicalization in their own communities.

- **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.

Winning the Long War on Terrorism

As the U.S. experiences the highest level of terrorist activity since 9/11, Congress must remember that this is not a short-term skirmish but a long war. Failure to recognize the nature of this conflict, our enemy, or the reality of the threat will leave the U.S. unprepared. Instead, the U.S. must remain vigilant and provide U.S. counterterrorism officials with additional legal tools to confront the growing threat.

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1. Criminal Complaint in the United States District Court for the Western District of North Carolina: *United States of America v. Justin Nojan Sullivan*, Case No. 1:15-MJ-82, June 22, 2015, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/file/479816/download> (accessed June 24, 2015).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Paul Richter, "Terrorist Attacks and Their Toll Soared in 2014, U.S. Reports," *Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/world/africa/la-fg-terror-report-20150620-story.html> (accessed June 22, 2015), and U.S. Department of State, Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights, Bureau of Counterterrorism, "National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism: Annex of Statistical Information," April 2015, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239416.htm> (accessed June 24, 2015).