

ISSUE BRIEF

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Terrorist Plot 72: Congress Needs to Address Rising Islamist Terrorism at Home

David Inserra

On July 4, while most Americans were celebrating with friends and family, law enforcement officers were arresting Alexander Ciccolo for taking possession of firearms in order to carry out a terrorist attack. Ciccolo was also building pressure-cooker bombs and Molotov cocktails and planned to use them to attack a nearby college or college bar, potentially taking hostages and streaming the executions over the Internet.¹ After he was taken into custody, Ciccolo attacked a nurse with a pen. Reportedly, Ciccolo's father is Boston Police Captain Robert Ciccolo, who alerted the FBI to his son's radicalization and desire to fight for the Islamic State (ISIS).²

This plot marks the 72nd Islamist terrorist plot against the U.S. homeland since 9/11. While Ciccolo has only been charged with weapons violations, prosecutors will likely file terrorist charges as the FBI prepares its case. This attack is the 10th plot since January, making 2015 the year with the greatest number of terrorist attacks and plots, even though it is barely half over. Congress needs to grapple with this reality and improve U.S. counterterrorism efforts to ensure that future plots do not succeed.

The Terrorist Plot

According to the FBI's memorandum for the court, a close acquaintance (believed to be his

father) told the FBI that Alexander wanted to go overseas to fight with the Islamic State, believing that "faith is under attack" and that America was "Satan."³ Ciccolo's Facebook page praised the Islamic State and indicated that he was training with a machete in the forest. The FBI had a cooperating witness meet with Ciccolo, who told the witness that his plan was to attack bars, police, and military personnel using pressure-cooker bombs or other improvised explosive devices together with firearms. He then changed his target to focus more on universities since they have more people. Ciccolo also wanted to take hostages and conduct live executions. He planned to launch his attack before Ramadan was over (July 17) but no later than July 31, saying, "We win or we die."⁴

Ciccolo said he had grown up with firearms and knew what he was doing. He also appeared to have a working knowledge of various explosive devices, planning to get black powder from fireworks, and details regarding the use of pressure-cooker bombs. He purchased pressure cookers from Walmart and said he was making firebombs as well.

Through the confidential witness, Ciccolo arranged to acquire two rifles and two handguns, which he received on July 4.⁵ Since Ciccolo had been convicted of a felony, he was legally prohibited from buying these firearms. Following the purchase, the FBI arrested Ciccolo on the weapons charges and found partially constructed Molotov cocktails. While being processed, he continued to express support for the Islamic State and stabbed a nurse in the head with a pen, thankfully causing only a minor injury.⁶

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/ib4438>

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

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Defeating the Terrorist Threat

Despite the current lack of terrorism charges, this plot will be considered the 72nd Islamist plot or attack against the U.S. homeland. This 10th plot means that 2015 has had more terrorist plots than any other year since 2001, and more are likely in the remaining months. Furthermore, ISIS has inspired or directed all 10 plots this year. Targeting bars and college campuses, this plot went after mass gatherings, the third most popular target for terrorists after the U.S. military and New York City. It is also the 61st homegrown terrorist plot against the U.S. homeland, indicating that the vast majority of terrorist plots and attacks come from individuals who are radicalizing in the U.S.

These statistics should make the American people and Congress realize the nature of the threat that the U.S. faces and the importance of providing law enforcement with the tools to prevent these plots from becoming successful attacks. Congress should:

- **Maintain essential counterterrorism tools.** Support for important investigative tools is essential to maintaining U.S. security and combating terrorist threats. Legitimate government surveillance programs are a vital component of U.S. national security and should be allowed to continue. Yet 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 needs to do both equally well.

- **Emphasize community outreach.** Federal grant funds should be used to create robust community outreach capabilities in higher-risk urban areas. These funds should not be used for political pork or spread so broadly that they no longer target those communities that are at the 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.

- **Streamline U.S. fusion centers.** Congress should limit fusion centers to the approximately 30 areas with the greatest level of risk as identified by the Urban Area Security Initiative (UASI). Some exceptions might exist, such as certain fusion centers that are leading cybersecurity or other important topical efforts. These centers should then be fully funded and resourced by UASI.

Remaining Vigilant

While Americans were enjoying themselves on July 4, a terrorist obtained the weapons to attack his fellow citizens in the name of a radical Islamist ideology. Thankfully, the FBI stopped Alexander Ciccolo's plot, but Congress should not remain complacent. The U.S. cannot assume it is safe just because it has been in the past. The U.S. needs to take a proactive approach against terrorism.

—*David Inserra is a Policy Analyst 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. Press release, "Massachusetts Man Charged with Being a Felon in Possession of Firearms," U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, July 13, 2015, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/massachusetts-man-charged-being-felon-possession-firearms> (accessed July 16, 2015).

2. Michele McPhee, Brian Epstein, and Brian Ross, "Son of Boston Police Captain Arrested as Possible Terrorist," ABC News, July 13, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/officials-son-boston-police-captain-arrested-terrorist/story?id=32414150> (accessed July 16, 2015).

3. Government's memorandum in *United States of America v. Alexander Ciccolo*, United States District Court, District of Massachusetts, Case No. 15-mj-3054-KAR, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/file/629331/download> (accessed July 16, 2015). The FBI report also notes that Ciccolo may have a history of mental illness. The U.S. justice system will take his mental state into account, but that does not change the seriousness of the plot against the U.S.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
