

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## Terror in Paradise: 73rd Terrorist Plot Highlights Need to Act

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The Department of Justice recently charged Harlem Suarez with attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction as he sought to use a bomb against beachgoers in the Florida Keys. Suarez was inspired by the Islamic State (IS) and considered himself a member of the terrorist organization. Though the FBI intervened before the public was in any danger, Suarez's plot demonstrates that the IS is extending its reach across the U.S. This is the 73rd Islamist terrorist plot or attack since 9/11 and the 11th plot in 2015—the largest number of plots against the U.S. in a single year since 2001.

Heritage has not yet made a judgment on the inclusion of the Chattanooga shooting in its record of Islamist terrorist plots and attacks. While a great deal of material is available in the press, law enforcement sources have provided little information on the motives of the shooter Mohammad Abdulazez. When the FBI releases the findings of its investigation, a decision can be reached regarding the nature of that horrible attack.

### The Plot

In April 2015, the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office was contacted by an individual who claimed to have received a Facebook friend request from an

Almlak Benitez that “included extremist rhetoric and the complainant believed the user...was attempting to recruit the complainant to join the Islamic State.”<sup>1</sup> The sheriff's office shared the information with the FBI, who found Benitez had made several statements supportive of the Islamic State and had expressed a desire to bring the caliphate to the U.S. by means of violence. Later in the investigation, the FBI also found beheading videos and additional pro-IS material on his Facebook page. With assistance from Facebook and AT&T, the FBI was able to identify and locate Suarez, a 23-year-old living with his parents in Key West, Florida.<sup>2</sup>

An FBI confidential informant then approached Suarez through Facebook. Suarez was wary of giving his location and of Facebook reporting his communications, but he did say that he had two handguns and was looking for a long gun and possibly a bulletproof vest. Suarez was attempting to recruit others and invited the informant to his town in May. Around that time, Suarez purchased an AK-47-style weapon. He also told the informant that he wanted to “learn how to make a controller bomb,” meaning a bomb that was remote-controlled.<sup>3</sup> The informant met Suarez in person, and they discussed bomb making, weapons, and making a recruitment video. They met again later to make at least one recruiting video.

The FBI would later introduce a second confidential informant to Suarez, who he was led to believe could supply him with explosive devices. He considered bombing police or military targets or softer targets like hotels or 4th of July celebrations. Suarez also considered building a car bomb, though he decided on backpack bombs for at least the first bomb. He provided the FBI informants with

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<http://report.heritage.org/ib4449>

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galvanized nails, a backpack, a cell phone, and \$100 in cash for the building of the first devices. He continued to ask about learning to build bombs, acquiring additional weapons, and recruiting more terrorists. On July 27, Suarez met with a third confidential informant to pick up what he believed was a working bomb, but was actually an inert device. After receiving the device and walking away, he was arrested.<sup>4</sup>

## Foiling Terrorists

This plot is the 73rd Islamist terror plot or attack against the U.S. homeland since 9/11. It is also the 11th plot in 2015, more than any other year since 9/11 and more than in 2012, 2013, and 2014 combined—and there are still five months left in the year. This is also the 62nd homegrown terror plot, i.e., Suarez was radicalized while living here in the U.S. It is also the 13th plot directed at a mass gathering, the third most common terrorist target after the U.S. military and New York City.

This dramatic spike in terrorist activity comes at a time when the U.S. is losing much-needed tools with which to fight terrorists. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper recently said as much when he stated that lone-wolf terrorists are now a greater cause for concern than al-Qaeda.<sup>5</sup> The recent changes to the Patriot Act and the fear of terrorists going dark with encrypted technologies have intelligence and law enforcement officials worried that they will not be able to find potential terrorists. Given this, law enforcement will need to lean more heavily on remaining tools to find terrorists before they strike. To bolster counterterrorism efforts, 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 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.

- **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. The remaining centers should then be fully funded and resourced by the UASI.
- **Support stronger action against Islamist terrorist groups.** The United States and its allies need to take more effective steps to isolate, undermine, and defeat IS 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.

## Keeping the Homeland Secure

The FBI is tracking individuals with potential ties to Islamist extremism in all 50 states, and this plot proves that terrorists are active across the U.S. From Garland, Texas, to Boston, Massachusetts, and from New York City to the beaches of Key West, Islamist terrorists are trying to attack the United States. The U.S. must remain vigilant and do all it can to maintain a proactive approach to counterterrorism.

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1. Government's memorandum in *United States of America v. Harlem Suarez a/k/a Almlak Benitez*, United States District Court, Southern District of Florida, Case No. 15-5016-SNOW, July 28, 2015, <http://www.justice.gov/opa/file/641111/download> (accessed July 30, 2015).

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Julian Hatter, "Spy Head: 'Lone Wolves' Bigger Threat than Al Qaeda," *The Hill*, July 28, 2015, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/249447-spy-head-lone-wolves-bigger-threat-than-al-qaeda> (accessed July 29, 2015).