

Analysis: Palestinian Terrorists Plot to Bomb New York Subway in 1997
Two men planned suicide attack on Brooklyn subway in first known suicide mission in the U.S.

Summary

- Ghazi Ibrahim Abu Maizer and Lafi Khalil, illegal Palestinian immigrants, were arrested in 1997 for planning to bomb Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue subway station using homemade pipe bombs.
- Following a tip from the men's roommate, police raided their Park Slope apartment, where they found a bomb ready to be detonated.
- Prosecutors said the men hoped to kill Jews and punish the United States for supporting Israel.
- Abu Maizer admitted supporting the Palestinian terrorist group Hamas, but did not appear to have planned the attack in collaboration with the group.
- Both men were sentenced to life in prison in 1998 for conspiring to use a weapon of mass destruction.



Abu Maizer in 1995 (Time)



The men may have been targeting the Long Island Rail Road (CNN)



Federal agents guarding the apartment building (CNN)

Profiles of Lafi Khalil and Abu Maizer

- Both men were in their early twenties when arrested; both had Jordanian passports.
- Khalil was born in the village of Al-Qwairi in Israel's West Bank. He entered the U.S. on a tourist visa in 1997 claiming he was traveling to Ecuador, but remained in the U.S. after his visa expired.
- Abu Maizer was born in Hebron in the West Bank. As a teenager, he was arrested twice for throwing rocks at Israeli troops. He later went to Canada on a student visa. Once there, he never enrolled in an educational program and acquired a criminal record that included credit card fraud charges.
- In 1996, Border Patrol agents caught Abu Maizer twice attempting to walk into Washington State from British Columbia. Captured again in 1997, he requested refugee status, claiming he was accused by Israel of Hamas membership. He was released after agreeing to leave the United States, but instead went to Brooklyn.
- The men apparently met in New York. They lived in a predominantly Middle Eastern neighborhood along Atlantic Avenue. They spent a month in North Carolina, where they made the bombs—they were working in supermarkets, taking advantage of the Palestinian immigrant network.
- Neighbors described both as apolitical drifters who hung out in local stores, worked odd jobs and engaged in small-time crime.

- Abu Maizer appears to have been the leader in the plot. Both claimed that Khalil was unaware of the scheme. Khalil was subsequently acquitted on all charges except immigration fraud and was eventually deported.

Law Enforcement Response

- On July 30, 1997 the New York Police Department (NYPD) received a tip from Abu Maizer's roommate, Abdel Rahman Mosabbah, that Abu Maizer and Khalil planned to blow up subways and buses the next day to "follow up on" a recent suicide bombing in Israel.
- Mosabbah was himself an Egyptian immigrant, who had been in the U.S. for less than a month. The two police officers he tipped off were rookies.
- An NYPD SWAT team raided the men's 248 Forth Avenue Brooklyn apartment at 4:40am the next morning. Abu Maizer and Khalil were shot and wounded when one tried to detonate the bomb and another reached for an officer's gun.
- The NYPD roped off a two-block surrounding area and evacuated about 100 residents from the neighborhood. They briefly diverted subway service from the area.
- Officials from the FBI, ATF, and the NYPD's bomb squad defused the device and secured the area.



Police secure the area near (CNN)
where the bomb was found.

Tactics

- Abu Maizer may have learned to build pipe bombs while jailed in Israel.
- He bought materials for the bombs — batteries, wire and 4-inch nails — at a hardware store.
- Police found a nine-inch pipe bomb packed with gunpowder and nails as well as four pipe bombs wrapped together with 85 nails and equipped with toggle-switch detonators in the men's apartment.
- Each of the five bombs was powerful enough to kill anyone within 25 feet.
- Lack of timer or remote control detonator suggested that bombs were intended for a suicide attack.
- Prosecutors said the men planned to attack the Atlantic Avenue subway station in Brooklyn, which includes 10 subway lines and a Long Island Railroad terminal.
- An FBI agent testified that Abu Maizer said after his arrest that he wanted to bomb a B-train because of the large number of Jews from the Borough Park area of Brooklyn on that line.
- Some investigators suspected that the men had accomplices, but no collaborators were indicted.
- The operational cycle for the attack was relatively short—about a month or two.
- Maizer arrested a few days before police raid for jumping a turnstile at the station, a possible dry run.

Ideological and Political Motivation

- Plotters appear to have acted alone, hoping to kill Jews and supporters of Israel.
- Abu Maizer said during his trial that he intended to kill as many Jews as possible in retaliation for Israel's occupation of the West Bank and other alleged historical crimes by Jews.
- Abu Maizer told the court, "I feel...the United States should be punished for supporting Israel." He added that "the United States is at war with Islam."
- He also stated, "I always dreamed of being a martyr."

- A note found in the men's apartment threatened attacks against American and Jewish interests and demanded the release of imprisoned Islamic militants, including "Blind Sheik" Omar Abdel Rahman and Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, both jailed for involvement in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

Implications for Law Enforcement

- These men were influenced by Islamist ideology, but acted alone, unsupported by a larger network.
- LAPD's John Miller identifies such smaller efforts as an emerging threat to the Homeland post 9/11. He characterizes this threat as fragmented, trained in Afghanistan and other locations, ideologically inspired by radical philosophy, and prone to conducting smaller scale/casualty producing attacks.
- Police prevented a terrorist attack by acting swiftly after receiving information. As many national security experts have recognized, local cops and public safety personnel are very likely to intersect with terrorist activities and must be trained to recognize the indicators.
- Informant presented credible and easily understood threat information, which will not always be the case. Police training post 9/11 should include instruction on subjects such as Islamist ideology, terrorist tactics, cultural awareness and identification of pre-incident indicators.
- Information did not have to be processed into intelligence here, which will not always be the case. Police operations post 9/11 need intelligence and analytical support. Line officers and other trained observers should have a central location to report information from which they can expect to receive processed intelligence and analytical products. State-managed fusion centers are a model example.
- Both suspects exploited U.S. immigration laws, raising questions about border control and visa policies. The ease with which illegal immigrants can enter the country from Mexico and Canada and obtain false identification must be considered in developing local prevention strategies.
- Attacks targeting Jewish communities and symbols should be anticipated. Police should also anticipate other international disputes manifesting themselves violently in U.S. communities.

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