

Analysis: “Lone Wolves” and the Domestic Terrorism Threat

Two men prevented from carrying out plot to bomb subway station

Summary:

- James Elshafay and Shawar Matin Siraj plan to bomb New York’s Herald Square subway station, near the site of the 2004 Republican National Convention
- Police alerted to Siraj’s potential for violence when someone called in tip on terrorism hotline regarding Siraj’s frequent and virulent anti-American rhetoric
- Dawadi, an Egyptian informant, spent 6-7 months gaining the suspects’ confidence; the evidence he obtained through undercover work and by wearing a wire was instrumental in preventing attack
- Conspirators planned attacks against New York transportation and commercial sites with the intent to damage the economy
- In furtherance of the conspiracy, they conducted pre-attack reconnaissance of Herald Square subway station, as law enforcement officials monitored
- Arrests made 6 days after reconnaissance mission
- Thorough investigation prior to arrest uncovered no links to international terrorist groups

Profiles of Elshafay and Siraj:



Siraj and Elshafay at trial

- Elshafay 19-year old US born citizen of Irish and Egyptian descent who lived with his mother on Staten Island
- Overweight, disheveled in appearance, suffered from anxiety, and treated for psychological problems
- High school dropout, disillusioned by perceived anti-Arab sentiment following 9/11
- Siraj 22-year old Pakistani national who lived in Queens and worked at an Islamic bookstore
- Entered US illegally 6 years ago, probably via Canada
- Arrested twice for assault and wanted to portray an image of street toughness
- Both men displayed hatred for America; Siraj expressed his interest in jihad, stating, “I want at least 1,000 to 2,000 to die in one day”; Elshafay expressed hatred for Zionists

Tactics:

- Initial target planning included NYC subway stations, Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, Staten Island jail and 3 police precincts
- Conspirators selected 34th Street station and planned a reconnaissance mission
- Information requirements included number and location of garbage cans, frequency of trash removal, video camera coverage, police guard activity, and ingress/egress routes
- Garbage cans designated drop location for bomb
- Dawadi would provide a backpack with the bomb
- Elshafay would dress like Orthodox Jewish man and deliver bomb in a Macy’s bag
- Siraj would assist with planning and support

Police response:

- Citizen phoned in tip after becoming concerned with Siraj's increasingly violent rhetoric (NYPD established terrorist tip line, which NY City Police Foundation helps to market)
- After confirming Siraj should be monitored (due to his extreme anti-American viewpoint shared with only those he trusted), police employed an undercover informant named Dawadi
- Dawadi spent a year undercover; the first 6-7 months dedicated to gaining Siraj's trust
- Dawadi met Elshafay in April 2004, by June Siraj and Elshafay's rhetoric crossed line between expression and conspiracy; Dawadi began wearing a wire to record their conversations
- Police monitored the three men as they conducted reconnaissance of subway station
- Arrests made week following reconnaissance mission and week prior to Republican Convention

Lone wolves:

- Siraj and Elshafay were "lone wolves", a different breed of terrorist that pose tougher challenges
- Act independent of larger cell/organization; typically operate alone or with 1 or 2 trusted accomplices
- Indirectly further the goals of diverse groups like al-Qaeda or domestic militia groups
- Individuals following the ideals of a larger cause call themselves "leaderless resistance"
- Less likely to conduct large scale attacks than networked terrorists, due to lack of expertise in countersurveillance, reconnaissance, bomb building, etc. and lack of support and sympathy
- Target selection, while smaller scale, will aim to inflict maximum punishment
- Inspired by jihadi rhetoric and blame certain groups, government agencies or policies for their misfortune and act out of personal frustration
- In effort to prevent 9/11-scale attack, lone wolves are easy to overlook
- Elshafay and Siraj not linked to al-Qaeda or any known terrorist group, but were representative of disenfranchised young Muslim men who expressed hatred for America and became radicals by listening to sermons preaching jihad
- Other examples: Timothy McVeigh, Eric Rudolph, William Krar, Stephen Jordi, Sean Gillespie



Implications for law enforcement:

- Initial tip generated through effective public awareness campaign, which is aided by public-private partnership with NY City Police Foundation
- Early investigation did not reveal criminal conduct; other behavior dictated decision to monitor Siraj’s activities; **police must make tough decision whether to monitor people engaged in largely protected conduct—consider establishing guidelines to avoid being arbitrary**
- Violent anti-American rhetoric, talk of jihad, and selective airing of views all signs of trouble; background investigation revealed prior criminal record and status as illegal immigrant
- Patient undercover work and thorough background checks highlighted investigation
- Federal government not likely to focus on homegrown or lone wolves
- Painstaking effort made to rule out connection to international terrorism



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