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The JFK Plot: Similarities and Differences with Global Terrorism

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New York City was once again rattled by a plot against its aviation interests. Four Muslim men – from Guyana, Trinidad, and the US – had plotted to destroy John F. Kennedy International Airport by bombing the airport’s fuel system. The JFK plotters intended to introduce explosives into the fuel distribution system which would have destroyed the above ground tanks as well as the sub-surface distribution system. They also thought the attack would spread the destruction far beyond the airport as the pipelines supplying JFK run beneath much of the surrounding borough of Queens. Fortuitously, the plotters did not realize the security procedures in practice a decade ago had been overhauled and the distribution system is designed to contain damage caused by fire or explosion. Hence, while the plot would not have had the desired outcome if it had been conducted, it still would have succeeded in killing perhaps several thousand people while also badly shaking the international civil aviation system.

The JFK plot is interesting for several reasons. The attack not only illustrates the jihadi communities’ continuing fascination with aviation, but it also bolsters particular emerging trends in global terrorism while challenging others.

First, this group appears to conform to the common, self radicalized, supported, and operationalized cells that are all too common across the world. While it is possible that an Al-Qaeda connection could emerge, it is very unlikely. This appears to be a totally independent operation, conforming to the existing trends.

One trend the JFK plot challenges is the emerging trend where the jihadi community is fostered from within the host community. This is a situation when the second or third generation of immigrants become radicalized to a degree where they attack their host. This has been seen primarily in Europe but is now emerging in Australia and other Asian countries as well. The JFK plot contradicts this trend. While one of the plotters was indeed a US citizen, all were foreign-born Muslims who do not seem to have any long term connection to the United States. Moreover, as more information becomes public, we will be better able to appreciate how these individuals became connected although it does not currently appear that it was through the immigrant community. This seems to support the recent Pew survey showing how well integrated the American Muslim community is in comparison to those in Europe. Thus, at least for the time being, the American Muslim community appears to be more resistant to the call of radical jihad.

The JFK cell also appears to challenge the emerging trend of operational simplicity. This new approach has emerged from the restrictive operational environment facing terrorist today. The increased security, reduced access to funds as well as materials and intellectual capacity to

conduct spectacular operations has forced cells to reduce their focus. Thus, instead of hijackings and large scale bombings, one sees attacks against the mass transportation, the leisure industry, or, as was seen in Birmingham England, the targeting of individuals. Contra the trend of operational simplicity, the JFK plotters returned to large scale iconic attacks. Certainly the plotters were using what they thought was local knowledge – one of the plotters had worked in the fuel farm at JFK more than a decade ago – to increase their probability of success, but it was still contrary to recent trends.

Lessons from the JFK Plot

There is no doubt the disruption of this plot and the earlier one at Fort Dix New Jersey have been victories in the ongoing struggle against Al-Qaeda and their acolytes. Three critical lessons may be drawn here.

First, in each case, information provided by alert citizens played a key role in foiling the terrorist plot. In the case of the JFK plot, it was a drug dealer turned informant that proved the critical intelligence to the security services. Underscoring the belief that communities do not have to passively succumb to terrorism and extremism, these alert citizens demonstrate how the general populace can play an active part in protecting and preventing terrorism.

The second lesson is that cooperation works. The FBI, Port Authority of New York (which runs JFK airport and other transportation assets in the New York area) and other services all collaborated in disrupting this plot at a very early stage. This is an example of how cooperation can work and that some of the lessons on the need for greater inter-agency cooperation from 9/11 are being implemented.

Finally and most critically, the plot demonstrates that we are in engaged in a conflict on a global scale and the enemy is looking to attack at anytime and at any place. They will attempt to exploit the smallest vulnerability to cause maximum damage. This does not mean we should live in constant fear but it does show how we must accept the reality of the conflict at hand and act accordingly. The United States and New York City faced that stark reality this weekend, the rest of the world needs to heed that lesson before it is too late.

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