

Case 18: Hudson River Tunnels

John Mueller

February 21, 2014

Beginning in 2003, after the American invasion of Iraq, a deeply-religious, drug-addicted professor of economics at Lebanese International University in Beirut (he taught business ethics and human resources), aged 28, began visiting militant Islamist websites and chat rooms. Together with seven people he met in virtual space, he eventually concocted a scheme to go to Canada, obtain explosives, and then journey south to set them off on a PATH commuter train as it traveled under the Hudson River in New York.

By 2005, the FBI had uncovered the plot (and possibly participated in it). The bureau tipped the Lebanese police, and the professor was arrested in 2006. It is said that he confessed to the deed, but the confession has never been made public. After 26 months in solitary confinement, he was released and then, on television, denied all the charges against him. In 2012, he was convicted and sentenced to time served. Two of the other conspirators were also arrested. One, a Canadian, was soon released for lack of evidence; what happened to the other, a Syrian, remains, like so much in this case, unknown. As Zachary Karabatak notes, the way the plot was portrayed may owe more to “domestic Lebanese politics than hard evidence”: it was in the Lebanese government’s interest “to convince the United States that it had foiled a major terrorism case” because it was seeking at the time “to consolidate relations with the United States in order to gain leverage over Syria and its Lebanese allies.”

Unusually for the cases in this book, officials in the United States did not leap to publicize it. Indeed, concerned that it might somehow upset cooperation with other governments, they were keeping it quiet and only came forward when it was leaked to the press. The lead FBI official explained that the conspirators were “about to go into a phase” in which they would “attempt” to surveil the target, figure out “a regimen of attack,” and acquire explosives. It was, he said, “the real deal.” Other officials, however, anonymously suggested to reporters that the plot was essentially “aspirational” and characterized by “jihadi bravado.” But, as one put it, “somebody talks about tunnels, it lights people up.” And, indeed, New York was quick to see the light: it immediately used the disclosure to try to get more funding from the federal government.¹

It is frequently claimed by officials that there are many terrorist plots out there in addition to the ones that have entered the courts and the public record like those examined in this book. Although these plots have been thwarted, it is said, information about them cannot be disclosed for various reasons. In working on an extensive report about how U.S. intelligence efforts (and budgets) were massively increased after September 11, the *Washington Post*’s Dana Priest says that she frequently heard this claim. In response, she says she “asked them to share with us anything they could, plots that were foiled that we could put in the paper because

¹ Spencer S. Hsu and Robin Wright, “Plot to Attack N.Y. Foiled: Transit Tunnels to N.J. Called Targets,” *Washington Post*, July 8, 2006.

we didn't have many examples. We said give us things, just in generalities." But "we didn't receive anything back."²

The experience with this plot may be helpful in assessing the claim. Information about it was indeed held back but, once it was forced out by a leak to the newspapers, it proved to be, on examination, far—perhaps hopelessly so—from consummation. Also, if there are so many undisclosed plots out there, why have so few come to public attention by the media which, by congenital necessity, are always on the lookout for things that “light people up”?

Finally, the internet obviously played a major role in this plot. Indeed, in an important sense the plot *only* existed on the internet—the conspirators never actually met in person and, while they were able to google tunnels in New York, they never actually made it into the country to have a look at one in three dimensions. In addition, although the professor was “radicalized” toward terrorism by the US invasion of Iraq, it may be the case, as Karabatak suggests, that his proclivities were then further enhanced by the information he sought out on line—though it remains likely that it was the information that was significant, not the method by which it was transferred.

But while the internet may have importantly enabled would be terrorists to find others of like mind on the world wide web, experience in this case suggests that it also facilitates, by its very openness, the ability of policing and intelligence agencies to uncover the conspirators—and even to join the plot. Indeed, there are quite a few cases in this book in which lonely would be terrorists foolishly and naively reached out on the web only to arouse the attention of police operatives. This case is clearly among them. On balance, it seems likely that the internet aids the police far more than it does the terrorists.

² Talk of the Nation, National Public Radio, July 19, 2010, transcript.

Case 18: Hudson River Tunnels

Zachary Karabatak

February 21, 2014

1. Overview

After the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003, a Lebanese man, Assem Hammoud, began frequenting militant Islamic websites, becoming more deeply involved as time went on.¹ Later in the year, Hammoud met with a Syrian vegetable vendor and al-Qaeda affiliate known as Abu Jamil, who took him to Ain al-Hilweh, the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon.² In the camp, Hammoud practiced the use of weapons.³ This training appears to have been the only in-person contact Hammoud had with al-Qaeda.

While it is impossible to say exactly when Hammoud began seriously talking about attacking the U.S. in militant Islamist chat rooms, both Lebanese and American officials indicated that they had been monitoring Hammoud for over a year before his arrest, which occurred in April 2006.⁴ At some point during this time, Hammoud formulated a specific plot and was able to recruit other participants for his proposed terrorist attack.

The plot involved blowing up New York City's Port Authority Trans-Hudson Corporation rail system which connects Manhattan Island with New Jersey via the Hudson River (initial reports erroneously indicated that the Holland Tunnel was the target).⁵ There are five of these tunnels running underneath the Hudson River, and authorities did not name which of the PATH tubes was the target.⁶ The plotters discussed using explosives carried in backpacks, to breach the tunnel lining, flooding the PATH tunnel, underground stations in Lower Manhattan, and possibly other below-sea-level tunnels.⁷ An anonymous source in the New York Police Department's intelligence Division indicated that the terrorists were hoping to cause a major flood in Lower Manhattan, which the plotters believed would shut down the Financial District.⁸

The FBI eventually discovered the plot by monitoring email traffic and internet chat rooms on Islamist websites.⁹ The plotters used the internet for all communication, and they never actually met one another (Abu Jamil was not one of the plotters). They discussed at length the amount of explosive material necessary to breach the tunnel lining in the PATH system, and this caught the eyes of FBI monitors.¹⁰

¹ Mohamad Bazzi, "The new 'Prince' of terrorism," *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 9, 2006.

² Leila Hatoum, "Students thought terror suspect was 'a drug addict'," *Daily Star*, July 11, 2006.

³ Hatoum, "Students thought terror suspect was 'a drug addict'."

⁴ Bazzi, "The new 'Prince' of terrorism."

⁵ Jim Kouri, "Exclusive: Terrorist plot to bomb New York's Holland Tunnel uncovered," *renewamerica.com*, July 8, 2006.

⁶ Kelli Arena, "FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot," *CNN*, July 7, 2006.

⁷ Brian Michael Jenkins and Joseph Trella, "Carnage Interrupted: An Analysis of Fifteen Terrorist Plots Against Public Surface Transportation," *Mineta Transportation Institute*, April 2012, 45.

⁸ Kouri, "Exclusive: Terrorist plot to bomb New York's Holland Tunnel uncovered."

⁹ Michel Young, "The Strange Case of Professor Hammoud," *reason.com*, July 13, 2006.

¹⁰ Jenkins and Trella, "Carnage Interrupted," 45.

Hammoud was arrested on April 27, 2006 in the Mosseitbeh district of Beirut (this date is disputed by some Lebanese sources, which indicate that the arrest occurred in early May).¹¹ The arrest apparently occurred two days before Hammoud had planned to travel to Pakistan for al-Qaeda training.¹² At the time of his arrest, Hammoud had been teaching a course at Lebanese International University. His students, seemingly unaware of Hammoud's religious extremism, attributed any of his odd behavior to drug abuse--indeed, many of his students believed that Hammoud was finally arrested for using illegal drugs.¹³

Ultimately, of the seven other alleged members of Hammoud's terrorist cell, only two were arrested.¹⁴ A Syrian man was seized in Libya and another was seized in Canada.¹⁵ The Canadian suspect was released very soon after his arrest for lack of evidence, while the fate of the Syrian man is unclear.¹⁶ As for Hammoud, he was ultimately convicted of involvement in the plot by a Lebanese court in February 2012, which sentenced him to two years in prison.¹⁷ Because he had already served over two years in prison, he was subsequently released.¹⁸

Hammoud never faced any charges in the United States, meaning he could not be extradited to the United States from Lebanon.¹⁹ Even if Hammoud faced charges in the United States, however, he could not be extradited because no extradition treaty exists between the U.S. and Lebanon.²⁰

The plot to bomb the PATH tunnel under the Hudson River seems to have had little chance of materialization or success. No one involved in the plot ever set foot in the United States, no bomb materials had ever been acquired, and no reconnaissance had ever been conducted by anyone involved in the plot.²¹ In fact, as noted, none of the plotters even met each other.²² The idea of an explosion in the tunnel somehow flooding Lower Manhattan's Financial District also seems preposterous, with the Financial District being well above the water table of the Hudson River.

2. Nature of the adversary

There were allegedly eight "principal players" in the plot, of which only three had been taken into custody and only one ever charged.²³ Little to nothing is known about the plotters, save for the self-professed ringleader of the plot, Assem Hammoud, who also went by the pseudonym Amir Andalousi (which means

¹¹ Young, "The Strange Case of Professor Hammoud."

¹² Alison Gendar and Bill Hutchinson, "Assem Hammoud, suspect in alleged New York tunnels plot, released on bail in Lebanon," *New York Daily News*, March 18, 2009.

¹³ Hatoum, "Students thought terror suspect was 'a drug addict'."

¹⁴ Gendar and Hutchinson, "Assem Hammoud."

¹⁵ Young, "The Strange Case of Professor Hammoud."

¹⁶ Young, "The Strange Case of Professor Hammoud."

¹⁷ Gendar and Hutchinson, "Assem Hammoud."

¹⁸ Gendar and Hutchinson, "Assem Hammoud."

¹⁹ Arena, "FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot."

²⁰ Gendar and Hutchinson, "Assem Hammoud."

²¹ John O'Neil, "New York Plot is Uncovered in Early Stage," *New York Times*, July 7, 2006.

²² Eric Lipton, "Recent Arrests in Terror Plots Yield Debate on Pre-emptive Action by Government," *New York Times*, July 9, 2006.

²³ O'Neil, "New York Plot is Uncovered in Early Stage."

Prince Andalus). His pseudonym is a reference to the Sunni Muslim empire of Al-Andalus, which ruled much of Spain until the 15th century. Hammoud was born on July 6, 1975. He grew up in an affluent Sunni Muslim Lebanese family and appeared to live a relatively normal life.²⁴

Hammoud was no stranger to Western culture. He began studying at Concordia University in Montreal in 1995, ultimately graduating with a bachelor's degree in commerce in 2002.²⁵ Until his arrest, Hammoud also maintained a relationship with his Canadian girlfriend, who lives in Montreal and holds a Canadian passport.²⁶ He regularly traveled to Canada and was involved in the party scene there with his girlfriend and her friends.²⁷ After graduating from Concordia, Hammoud worked as a professor of economics at the Lebanese International University in Beirut.²⁸ Specifically, he taught classes on business ethics and human resources.²⁹

Despite appearing like a typical young, secular Lebanese man, Hammoud was allegedly a religious extremist.³⁰ According to Lebanese authorities, Hammoud was a playboy poseur, allegedly following al-Qaeda advice to parade a party lifestyle in order to cover up his extremism.³¹ This practice of deception (called *taqiyah* in Arabic) is recommended in the al-Qaeda training manual, which Hammoud was able to acquire via militant Islamic websites.³² With no criminal history and no history of involvement with militant groups, Hammoud was an ideal candidate for this strategy, able to live far from any suspicion.³³ In fact, even after public knowledge of his arrest was made, many of Hammoud's students were surprised and did not think that he looked or acted like a fanatic.³⁴ His students attributed any of Hammoud's odd behavior to him being drug addict.³⁵ After Hammoud's arrest and subsequent disappearance from his business ethics course, his students often speculated that he had finally been caught for using illegal drugs.³⁶

Hammoud's shift from religious extremism to terrorism occurred after the U.S. invaded Iraq. Around this time, he began visiting militant Islamic websites and participating in Islamist chat rooms.³⁷ During his frequent visits to these terrorist Internet sites, forums, and chat rooms, Hammoud learned jihadi tactics

²⁴ Gendar and Hutchinson, "Assem Hammoud."

²⁵ Judi McLeod and Beryl Wajzman, "Al Qaeda goes to ground in Montreal," canadafreepress.com, July 10, 2006.

²⁶ Debbie Schluskel, "Schluskel Exclusive: NYC Tunnel Qaeda Plotter Had Strong Detroit Hezbollah, Palestinian Ties," debbieschluskel.com, July 9, 2006.

²⁷ Schluskel, "Schluskel Exclusive: NYC Tunnel Qaeda Plotter."

²⁸ McLeod et al, "Al Qaeda goes to ground in Montreal."

²⁹ Hatoum, "Students thought terror suspect was 'a drug addict'."

³⁰ Bazzi, "The new 'Prince' of terrorism."

³¹ Arena, "FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot."

³² Schluskel, "Schluskel Exclusive: NYC Tunnel Qaeda Plotter."

³³ Bazzi, "The new 'Prince' of terrorism."

³⁴ Hatoum, "Students thought terror suspect was 'a drug addict'."

³⁵ Hatoum, "Students thought terror suspect was 'a drug addict'."

³⁶ Hatoum, "Students thought terror suspect was 'a drug addict'."

³⁷ Bazzi, "The new 'Prince' of terrorism."

and met others who shared his feelings towards the United States.³⁸ He met a Syrian al-Qaeda member (not one of the plotters) in person to receive weapons training in the Ain al-Hilweh Refugee Camp, which was located in Syria-controlled Lebanon at that time.³⁹ At some point, he began to use the sites as forums to discuss possible ideas for inflicting harm against the United States. Federal officials indicated that Hammoud had posted about the possibility of setting wildfires in California, bombing the Holland Tunnel, and attacking the Golden Gate Bridge in California before finally settling on the PATH tunnels as his target.⁴⁰

The nature of the terrorist group Hammoud assembled appeared to be self-organizing and ad hoc.⁴¹ While Lebanese authorities indicated that he appeared to be reaching out to al-Qaeda, Hammoud came up with the idea for the tunnel plot and contacted many others through Internet communication, independent of al-Qaeda's organization.⁴² None of the group members had ever met each other and all communication between them occurred over the internet.⁴³

During his interrogation by the Lebanese authorities, Hammoud openly claimed to be an al-Qaeda member and the plot's ringleader.⁴⁴ He allegedly also professed his loyalty to Osama bin Laden.⁴⁵ There remains some speculation about whether Hammoud was actually the leader of the terrorist network, however.⁴⁶ Some Lebanese sources previously indicated that the actual head of the gang was a "Palestinian with European nationality."⁴⁷ No other evidence corroborates these reports, with the overwhelming majority of open source intelligence on the plot indicating that Hammoud was entirely responsible for its inception.

3. Motivation

While very little is known about the motivation of the plotters, it appears that at least Hammoud was motivated by the U.S. invasion of Iraq. This line of motivation follows the territorial ambition of other al-Qaeda associates, who seek to recover lands that they believe were lost to Islam in the fifteenth century. Hammoud's chosen pseudonym, which refers to the conquered Islamic empire in Spain, also points to the significance of specific territorial grievances shared with other militant Islamists. Because he believed that America's actions in Iraq were unjust, he became involved with militant Islamist websites and frequented militant chatrooms.⁴⁸

³⁸ Douglas Hagmann and Judi McLeod, "A Detailed Overview of the 2006 New York Tunnel Bombing Plot," canadafreepress.com, July 11, 2006.

³⁹ Arena, "FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot."

⁴⁰ Hatoum, "Students thought terror suspect was 'a drug addict'."

⁴¹ Spencer S. Hsu and Robin Wright, "Plot to Attack N.Y. Foiled: Transit Tunnels to N.J. Called Targets," *Washington Post*, July 8, 2006.

⁴² Hsu and Wright, "Plot to Attack N.Y. Foiled."

⁴³ Lipton, "Recent Arrests in Terror Plots Yield Debate."

⁴⁴ Arena, "FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot."

⁴⁵ Arena, "FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot."

⁴⁶ Young, "The Strange Case of Professor Hammoud."

⁴⁷ Young, "The Strange Case of Professor Hammoud."

⁴⁸ Bazzi, "The new 'Prince' of terrorism."

4. Goals

None of the plotters appeared to have a clear goal in mind, other than racking up a high body count and striking a symbolic blow against the U.S. by flooding Manhattan's financial district.⁴⁹ The plotters viewed their actions as part of al-Qaeda's global jihad against the United States.⁵⁰

5. Plans for violence

The basic plot was to detonate a large amount of explosives inside of the PATH tunnel—a train tunnel connecting Manhattan and New Jersey—with the intent of blasting a hole in the tunnel and killing everyone traveling in it. According to initial reports on the plot, which cited unnamed FBI leakers, the plotters also thought that the blast would create a large flood in Lower Manhattan and the Financial District.⁵¹

First, the plotters planned to travel to Canada and then cross the Canadian border into the United States.⁵² Next, they planned to board PATH trains with backpacks full of explosives.⁵³ Once the trains were passing through a tunnel under the Hudson River, the plan was to detonate these explosives, killing everyone onboard the trains and possibly breaching the tunnel lining. Authorities indicated that it was slated to take place in October or November of 2006.⁵⁴

The scale of Hammoud's plans for violence is widely disputed and the evidence needed to settle the dispute is largely classified. For instance, according to an anonymous NYPD intelligence official, part of the investigation revealed that these same terrorists were looking at other targets, like subways, bridges and other tunnels, including that the "tunnel bomb plot may be merely part of a massive, multi-target attack that would shut down transportation into and out of Manhattan Island."⁵⁵ While such claims seem a bit grandiose and probably beyond the capabilities of the terrorist network in question, the material necessary to corroborate or contradict the claims—namely all chat room and email communication between the plotters—remains classified.

In early 2006, the FBI discovered that Hammoud had planned a trip to Pakistan, where he was to undergo four months of training with al-Qaeda.⁵⁶ On April 27, two days before this planned trip, the FBI coordinated a sting operation with the Lebanese Interior Security Forces and arrested Hammoud in his Beirut apartment. The exact date of his arrest has been contested by a Lebanese judicial

⁴⁹ Jenkins and Trella, "Carnage Interrupted," 3.

⁵⁰ Jenkins and Trella, "Carnage Interrupted," 45.

⁵¹ David Michaels and Kathleen Carroll, "PATH terror foiled," *freerepublic.com*, February 11, 2007. While the goal of flooding Lower Manhattan and the Financial District did not appear to come from Hammoud's ISF interrogation statement, no Lebanese or American officials ever disavowed these details.

⁵² Arena, "FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot."

⁵³ Arena, "FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot."

⁵⁴ Arena, "FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot."

⁵⁵ Kouri, "Exclusive: Terrorist plot to bomb New York's Holland Tunnel uncovered."

⁵⁶ Arena, "FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot."

source, who insisted that the arrest did not occur until early May.⁵⁷ However, the FBI only revealed Hammoud's arrest on July 7, 2006, in response to a news report that had leaked details about the plot.⁵⁸ According to the then Lebanese Premier, Fouad Siniora, his arrest was not announced until July 7, 2006 for "security reasons."⁵⁹ Lebanon's Internal Security Forces (ISF) indicated that Hammoud's arrest was due to a collaborative effort between the American Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Lebanese ISF, and Danish police.⁶⁰

Investigators in the FBI believed that the plot was about to enter a phase where the suspects would assess targets and obtain the material necessary to create the explosive devices for the attack.⁶¹ At the time of his arrest, Hammoud had been teaching a business ethics at Lebanese International University (LIU).⁶² Shortly after his arrest, which had not initially been made public, Lebanese ISF confiscated all computers in the LIU business department, including Hammoud's.⁶³ On his laptop, authorities discovered preliminary plans for attack and maps pinpointing the Hudson River train tunnels.⁶⁴

It is difficult to tell how serious this plot was, as it never advanced beyond talk and none of the plotters, including Hammoud, ever set foot inside the United States.⁶⁵ The plotters also never met each other outside of email and internet chatrooms.⁶⁶

If the plotters did carry out an attack like the one talked about, it could have caused considerable, but not catastrophic, damage. After the plot was foiled in 2006, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey commissioned the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute to assess the vulnerability of the PATH train tunnels to a bomb attack. The analysis in the report indicated that the four PATH tunnels were structurally more fragile than previously thought.⁶⁷

Unlike most underwater tunnels, which are bored through bedrock, the PATH Hudson River tubes lie in soft riverbed.⁶⁸ While silt has built on top of the 90 year old tubes, they do not have the security of being encased in bedrock and thus are more vulnerable to being flooded from an explosion.⁶⁹ In fact, according to the report, it would only take six minutes for a PATH tube to flood, even if the

⁵⁷ Young, "The Strange Case of Professor Hammoud."

⁵⁸ O'Neil, "New York Plot is Uncovered in Early Stage."

⁵⁹ Mayssam Zaaroura and Meris Lutz, "Lebanese arrest suspect in New York bomb plot," *The Daily Star*, July 8, 2006.

⁶⁰ Zaaroura and Lutz, "Lebanese arrest suspect in New York bomb plot."

⁶¹ Arena. "FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot."

⁶² Hatoum, "Students thought terror suspect was 'a drug addict'."

⁶³ Hatoum, "Students thought terror suspect was 'a drug addict'."

⁶⁴ Gendar and Hutchinson, "Assem Hammoud."

⁶⁵ Graham Rayman, "Bloomberg, Kelly say NYPD Foiled 14 Terror Plots; Not So, Article Counters," *villagevoice.com*, July 11, 2012.

⁶⁶ Lipton, "Recent Arrests in Terror Plots Yield Debate."

⁶⁷ William K. Rashbaum and William Neuman, "PATH Tunnels Seen as Fragile in Bomb Attack," *New York Times*, December 22, 2006.

⁶⁸ Rashbaum and Neuman, "PATH Tunnels Seen as Fragile in Bomb Attack."

⁶⁹ Rashbaum and Neuman, "PATH Tunnels Seen as Fragile in Bomb Attack."

bomb detonated was not very large.⁷⁰ The bomb, which could be easily carried aboard a train, could blow a 50-square-foot hole in the tube, with 1.2 million gallons of water pouring into the tunnel every minute.⁷¹ With 230,000 people riding the PATH system every weekday, and potentially around 900 people aboard a single crowded train, such an attack could have had a high casualty count.⁷² Such an attack would not, however, flood the financial district in Manhattan, which lies a couple of feet above the Hudson River's water table.⁷³

The detailed communication between all of the plotters over chat rooms and email indicates that all of the suspects involved were well aware of what was going on.⁷⁴ Assuming all the plotters were aware of the plot, they were also likely aware that suicide seems to be an inevitable outcome.⁷⁵ Once on the trains, the terrorists planned to detonate the explosives in their backpacks, to be made from triacetone triperoxide, killing themselves and everyone onboard.⁷⁶

Hammoud was prosecuted in a military court, but was temporarily released in June 2008 on a bail of 1 million Lebanese pounds (about \$667), pending a verdict. At the time he was released, Hammoud had already spent 26 months in solitary confinement. The release was kept quiet by Lebanese authorities until Hammoud appeared in an interview with Al-Arabiya Television, in which he denied all of the charges against him. After the release became public, Lebanese officials indicated that, according to Lebanese law, Hammoud had spent the maximum time in custody for the charges against him. Finally, on February 17, 2012, Hammoud was convicted of involvement in the plot. However, he was only sentenced to two years in prison, which he had already served.⁷⁷

6. Role of informants

There seem to be no informants involved in finding out about this particular plot. The FBI allegedly discovered Hammoud's plans by monitoring internet chat rooms, subsequently tipping off Lebanese ISF, which identified and later arrested Hammoud.

7. Connections

Although Hammoud openly reached out to al-Qaeda, Lebanese authorities indicated that Hammoud did not appear to have been assigned a specific mission by the group; instead, Hammoud independently came up with the idea and contacted other would-be plotters over the internet.⁷⁸ While there is very little clarity about the relationship between the plotters and al-Qaeda central, there were widespread allegations that the plot received a pledge of financial and tactical

⁷⁰ Rashbaum and Neuman, "PATH Tunnels Seen as Fragile in Bomb Attack."

⁷¹ Rashbaum and Neuman, "PATH Tunnels Seen as Fragile in Bomb Attack."

⁷² Rashbaum and Neuman, "PATH Tunnels Seen as Fragile in Bomb Attack."

⁷³ "Surging Sea Report: Lower Manhattan Especially Vulnerable to Rising Sea Level," newyork.cbslocal.com, March 15, 2012.

⁷⁴ Gendar and Hutchinson, "Assem Hammoud."

⁷⁵ Jenkins and Trella, "Carnage Interrupted," 12.

⁷⁶ Hagmann and McLeoni, "A Detailed Overview."

⁷⁷ Gendar and Hutchinson, "Assem Hammoud."

⁷⁸ Hsu and Wright, "Plot to Attack N.Y. Foiled."

support from Jordanian associates of the well-known terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, prior to Zarqawi being killed in Iraq.⁷⁹ However, there is no evidence to indicate that Hammoud had any sort of direct or personal link to Zarqawi.⁸⁰ Regardless of any actual connections, the plotters viewed themselves as part of al-Qaeda's global jihad against the United States.⁸¹

There were some allegations of Hammoud also being a member of Hezbollah. Other than some cigarette smugglers accused of funding Hezbollah, who happen to share the same last name (a very common one in Lebanon), there seems to be little evidence to support this claim.⁸²

8. Relation to the Muslim community

While Hammoud was raised in a moderate Sunni Muslim family, the Muslim community in Beirut and beyond did not appear to have any knowledge of the plot. In his alleged strategy of deception, Hammoud deliberately lived an anti-Islamic lifestyle to cover his extremism, making the Muslim community completely unaware of his true religious leanings or plans.

9. Depiction by the authorities

There were two different narratives among U.S. officials in the immediate aftermath of the plot being made public. The first narrative came from an FBI statement after the story broke, which indicated that the threat was the “real deal.”⁸³ According to the statement, made by FBI assistant director for New York, Mark Mershon, the plotters were about to “surveil targets, establish a regimen of attack and acquire the resources necessary to effectuate the attacks.”⁸⁴

The second narrative, coming from U.S. counterterrorism and Homeland Security officials, gave a much less dire assessment of the plot. Two anonymous U.S. counterterrorism officials were quoted in numerous media sources as saying that the plot was “more aspirational in nature” and that the threat was simply “jihadi bravado” with little activity to back up the talk. Publicly, Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff indicated that there “was never a concern that this would actually be executed.”⁸⁵

American authorities also used the plot to highlight the need for the New York City area to receive a greater portion of Department of Homeland Security funds.⁸⁶ According to a number of lawmakers who made speeches after the plot was uncovered, the plot shows why the New York City area is at greater risk to terrorism due to its symbolic landmarks.⁸⁷

⁷⁹ Jenkins and Trella, “Carnage Interrupted,” 45.

⁸⁰ Spencer Hsu and Robin Wright, “Tunnel Plot Suspects Linked to Al-Qaeda,” *Washington Post*, July 11, 2006.

⁸¹ Jenkins and Trella, “Carnage Interrupted,” 45.

⁸² Schlüssel, “Schlüssel Exclusive: NYC Tunnel Qaeda Plotter.”

⁸³ Hsu and Wright, “Plot to Attack N.Y. Foiled.”

⁸⁴ Arena, “FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot.”

⁸⁵ Hsu and Wright, “Plot to Attack N.Y. Foiled.”

⁸⁶ Hsu and Wright, “Plot to Attack N.Y. Foiled.”

⁸⁷ “FBI Busts ‘Real Deal’ Terror Plot Aimed At NYC-NJ Underground Transit Link,” FoxNews.com, July 7, 2006.

Among Lebanese authorities, the plot was depicted as a significant, alarming, and credible threat. Indeed, the only sources of Hammoud's supposed admission of guilt are Lebanese officials, without any independent confirmation of what he supposedly divulged during his interrogation. In Hammoud's very first chance to speak publically about his role in the plot, which occurred on Al-Arabiya, he denied any wrongdoing. The overwhelming seriousness with which the plot was depicted might have had more to do with domestic Lebanese politics than hard evidence. In reality, it was in the Lebanese government's interest to convince the United States that it had foiled a major terrorism case. The ISF, which conducted the investigation of Hammoud in Lebanon, was then headed by a key ally of Saad Hariri. During the time of the investigation, Hariri's party was attempting to consolidate relations with the United States in order to gain leverage over Syria and its Lebanese allies.⁸⁸ While Hammoud is almost certainly not innocent, it appears at least plausible that the ISF exaggerated details of the plot for Hariri's political gain.

10. Coverage by the media

The initial story about the plot only broke when someone leaked the story to the *New York Daily News*.⁸⁹ The authorities in the United States openly expressed their frustration with media coverage surrounding the plot.⁹⁰ Specifically, the FBI indicated that the leak hurt its relationship with foreign intelligence services that participated in the investigation.⁹¹ The plot's exposure also came during the first anniversary of the London Underground bombings that involved four suicide bombers killing 52 people on the London Underground and on a bus.⁹²

It is clear that either media sources jumped to a number of wrong conclusions or the leaker was relatively uninformed about the actual nature of the plot. For instance, the first press reports on the terrorist plot erroneously indicate that the plot's target was the Holland Tunnel.⁹³ Most of these sources cite the original *New York Daily News* report for their information, which has since been taken down from the newspaper's website.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the media's coverage of the plot is that, despite the rather "flimsy, internally contradictory and fantastic character of the plot," the media uncritically accepted almost all government claims.⁹⁴ One explanation might be the difficulty of finding evidence to question government claims. Most of the information that officials used to draw their conclusions is classified or relies on unconfirmed admissions of guilt by Hammoud, during his interrogation by Lebanese authorities.⁹⁵

⁸⁸ Young, "The Strange Case of Professor Hammoud."

⁸⁹ Arena, "FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot."

⁹⁰ Arena, "FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot."

⁹¹ Arena, "FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot."

⁹² Barry Grey, "Plan to attack New York tunnels: Yet another dubious 'terror plot'," infowars.net, July 10, 2006.

⁹³ Kouri, "Exclusive: Terrorist plot to bomb New York's Holland Tunnel uncovered."

⁹⁴ Grey, "Plan to attack New York tunnels."

⁹⁵ Young, "The Strange Case of Professor Hammoud."

11. Policing costs

The investigation of the plotters began in early 2005, meaning that the investigators followed the plot for about a year before taking any action.⁹⁶ While the exact monetary amount of policing costs involved in the plot is unknown, it is believed to be quite high. Surveillance of the suspects lasted “several months” and, in a televised interview referring to the investigation, Representative Peter T. King, the chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security, indicated that “an extraordinary amount of money” had been spent by the New York City Police Department on the plot.⁹⁷ The number of agencies and countries that participated in the investigation is remarkable. In addition to the NYPD and FBI in the US, intelligence and investigative agencies in Lebanon, Canada, Pakistan, and Iraq were involved.⁹⁸

As there were no charges brought against Hammoud in the United States, there were no court or prison costs incurred by the U.S. government. Hammoud’s arrest and imprisonment occurred entirely in Lebanon.

12. Relevance of the internet

The internet was key in both the planning of the plot and its subsequent foiling by Lebanese and American authorities. First, Hammoud used it to acquire detailed maps of the PATH system.⁹⁹ Second, he used it to announce his idea and contacted other plotters by email and through chat rooms.¹⁰⁰ Because the plotters never met in person, the internet was the only form of communication the plotters had.¹⁰¹ The role of the internet in this particular plot was especially concerning to authorities.¹⁰² Hammoud was able to use it to recruit members and to identify targets without ever having to travel or have in-person meetings.¹⁰³ These tactics reinforce the notion of the internet and chat rooms becoming the new habitat for al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

The discovery and consequent foiling of the plot was widely cited as another success resulting from internet monitoring and intelligence gathering. The FBI, which was able to track the bomb plot by monitoring militant chat rooms, tipped off Lebanese ISF, which was able to identify Hammoud through the internet protocol address he was using to access Islamist websites. The ISF then monitored Hammoud’s internet activity and phone calls for several months prior to his arrest in April 2006.¹⁰⁴

Most critical, and perhaps most frightening, was the role the internet played in Hammoud’s radicalization. The internet—specially the terrorist sites that Hammoud frequented—provided Hammoud with the tools to transition from

⁹⁶ Rashbaum and Neuman, “PATH Tunnels Seen as Fragile in Bomb Attack.”

⁹⁷ O’Neil, “New York Tunnel Plot is Uncovered in Early Stage.”

⁹⁸ Arena, “FBI: Three held in New York tunnel plot.”

⁹⁹ Hagmann and McLeon, “A Detailed Overview.”

¹⁰⁰ Hsu and Wright, “Plot to Attack N.Y. Foiled.”

¹⁰¹ Lipton, “Recent Arrests in Terror Plots Yield Debate.”

¹⁰² Hsu and Wright, “Plot to Attack N.Y. Foiled.”

¹⁰³ Hsu and Wright, “Plot to Attack N.Y. Foiled.”

¹⁰⁴ Bazzi, “The new ‘Prince’ of terrorism.”

a religious extremist to a terrorist. While the U.S. invasion of Iraq infuriated and radicalized Hammoud to a certain extent, it was the internet that connected Hammoud with like-minded individuals and jihadist teaching material. The internet also provided Hammoud with a sounding board for his ideas as well as a network of terrorists to put his violent plans into action.

13. Are we safer?

Taking into account fairly recent improvements in the PATH tunnels, it would be hard to deny that we are significantly safer from a plot similar to Hammoud's today. In 2006, after the Port Authority got wind of the foiled plot, it authorized a \$900 million project to install reinforced metal plates along the interior walls of the PATH tunnels, as well as massive flood-prevention gates on both ends of the main PATH lines, which run between the World Trade Center and the West Village to Jersey City.¹⁰⁵ In 2010, the PA lowered reinforced "blankets" over the top of the PATH tubes. While it is unclear what these blankets are made of, they would reduce the amount water that would flow into the tunnels in the event of an explosion.¹⁰⁶

Along with improvements to the physical stability of the tunnels, safety has been improved by screening. PATH security personnel now conduct increased patrols and bag searches on the system.¹⁰⁷ In addition, a new screening system called the Passive Millimeter Wave was added to all stations in June 2009. The system analyzes energy waves to detect hidden explosive devices.¹⁰⁸ Presumably, this system can detect explosive devices like the ones Hammoud and the other plotters planned to use.

The case might have also motivated overall increases in the attention paid to security of the New York City area. The timing of the Department of Homeland Security's announcement to boost funds to protect rail and transit lines in the New York City area on July 7, 2006—the same day as the disclosure of the PATH tunnel plot—seems like more than coincidence.

Despite these improvements, security, at times, remains a problem in the PATH system. On May 8, 2011, Reymundo Rodriguez was able to slip into a PATH tunnel in Manhattan and walk all the way to New Jersey before telling a Port Authority contractor that he left a bomb on the tracks. While there was no bomb on the tracks, the ease with which Rodriguez could enter the tunnel without anyone noticing seriously questions the security of the system.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Tom Namako, "PATH tunnels get \$600M ring of steel," *New York Post*, November 30, 2010. These safety additions follow the recommendations of a report done by the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory and the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 2006. See Rashbaum and Neuman, "PATH Tunnels Seen as Fragile in Bomb Attack."

¹⁰⁶ Tom Namako, "Security blankets," *New York Post*, December 27, 2010.

¹⁰⁷ Rashbaum and Neuman, "PATH Tunnels Seen as Fragile in Bomb Attack."

¹⁰⁸ Laura Batchelor, "New security to get test with New York rail commuters," *CNN*, June 10, 2008

¹⁰⁹ Larry Celona, "Two tunnel security breaches cause scare in city," *The New York Post*, May 9, 2011.

14. Conclusions

Unlike most of the cases presented in this book, the PATH tunnel plot and subsequent arrest of suspects occurred entirely overseas. Due to this complication, as well as to a relative lack of transparency by Lebanese and American authorities, much about this case remains unknown. There continue to be numerous discrepancies in the details disclosed by American and Lebanese officials.¹¹⁰

On the one hand, the PATH plot represents the ultimate nightmare for U.S. security officials: a group of ideologically driven extremists, who have never met in person and appear relatively normal to their family and friends, plan a massive terrorist attack on an insecure target. Public transportation presents an easy target for would-be terrorists. Security tends to be very lax—usually nothing beyond some closed circuit television coverage and a few routine police patrols—due to concerns for efficiency of riders.¹¹¹

On the other hand, so much about this plot appears unlikely or unrealistic, with no plotter ever entering the United States, let alone conducting reconnaissance on the target or collecting materials necessary to make a bomb. Even if the plotters actually were able to enter the United States and acquire the necessary bomb material, patrols on the PATH were increased in the wake of the terrorist attacks on rail and transit systems and Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005.¹¹² Presumably, most, if not all, of the plotters would need to be on the same train in order to produce an explosion large enough to breach the PATH tunnel lining. In order to rack up the most casualties, the plotters would also presumably need to strike the tunnels during the evening rush hour. It would be hard for the sizable security personnel presence on the system (including a large number of security cameras) during rush hour not to notice a large group of Middle Eastern men, with large backpacks, pushing to get on the same train.

With so many obvious holes in Hammoud's plot, Hammoud's public statements of innocence, and the fact that no charges were ever brought against him in the United States, it is plausible to think that some exaggeration occurred on the part of the ISF in Lebanon. The political incentives for the Hariri camp in Lebanon to sensationalize the plot make this scenario even more likely. Hammoud never authenticated his interrogation statement, which was sent by the ISF to the FBI, nor did a legal representative confirm his alleged confession.¹¹³ On the other hand, if Hammoud was truly loyal to al-Qaeda and the mastermind of a major and credible terrorist attack, it seems strange to think that he is a free man in Lebanon today.

Appendix: "Daylight" and Underwater Tunnel Terror

The idea of breaching the lining of underwater tunnels is frightening prospect and has captivated the imagination of terrorists and screenwriters alike. The Sylvester Stallone action film "Daylight," which opened December 6, 1996,

¹¹⁰ Young, "The Strange Case of Professor Hammoud."

¹¹¹ Jenkins and Trella, "Carnage Interrupted," 16.

¹¹² Jenkins and Trella, "Carnage Interrupted," 46.

¹¹³ Young, "The Strange Case of Professor Hammoud."

depicts the fictional Manhattan Tunnel flooding and collapsing when a tractor-trailer filled with gas explodes. The movie has prompted the New York City Port Authority to examine the feasibility of “Daylight” becoming a blueprint for real-life incidents.¹¹⁴ The authorities at the PA concluded that, “...no explosion short of a missile warhead...could flood either the Holland or Lincoln Tunnel the way the tunnel in ‘Daylight’ begins to fill with water...spilling water would simply run out the ends of the tunnel.”¹¹⁵ Perhaps it was these images that the initial reporters on the plot had in mind when they erroneously cited the Holland tunnel as the target of Hammoud’s plot.

Appendix: Map of the PATH Tubes



¹¹⁴ Nick Charles, “Tunnel Terror: Could it happen here?” *New York Daily News*, December 3, 1996.

¹¹⁵ Charles, “Tunnel Terror: Could it happen here?”