

**Case 28: Zazi**

John Mueller

June 4, 2011

When Najibullah Zazi's plot to explode bombs on the New York subway was disrupted with his arrest on September 19, 2009, terrorism analysts and officials called it the "most serious" terrorism plot uncovered in the United States since 2001 and one that elevates the domestic terrorism threat to a "new magnitude."<sup>1</sup> Bruce Riedel, an Obama administration terrorism adviser, proclaimed that the plot was evidence that "al-Qaeda was trying to carry out another mass-casualty attack in the United States" like 9/11 and that the group continues to pose a threat to the country that is "existential."<sup>2</sup>

However, information about the Zazi plot suggests the existence of the United States is unlikely to be expunged anytime soon.

Recalls his step-uncle affectionately, Zazi is "a dumb kid, believe me." A high school dropout, Zazi mostly worked as a doughnut peddler in Lower Manhattan, barely making a living.<sup>3</sup> Somewhere along the line, he foolishly decided to abandon his day job and ventured to Pakistan with two friends intending to help in the Taliban's fight against American forces there. The men were recruited by al-Qaeda, and they agreed to return to carry out a "martyrdom operation" in the United States—the only one in the country since 9/11 except for those originating in Europe (Cases 1, 20, and 33 and possibly 9). In preparation, Zazi received explosives training and emailed nine pages of bombmaking instructions to himself.

FBI Director Robert Mueller asserted in testimony on September 30, 2009 that this training gave Zazi the "capability" to set off a bomb.<sup>4</sup> That, however, seems to be a substantial overstatement because, upon returning to the United States, Zazi spent the better part of a year trying to concoct the bomb he had supposedly learned how to make. In the process, he, or some confederates, purchased bomb materials using stolen credit cards.<sup>5</sup> This bone-headed maneuver all but guaranteed that red flags would go up about the sale and that surveillance videos in the stores would be maintained rather than routinely erased. Moreover, even with the material at hand, Zazi *still* apparently couldn't figure it out, and he frantically contacted an unidentified person for help several times. Each of these

---

<sup>1</sup> David Johnston and Scott Shane, "Terror Case Is Called One of the Most Serious in Years," *New York Times*, September 25, 2009. Kevin Johnson, "Weakened al-Qaeda is Still a Threat," *USA Today*, September 8, 2009. Talk of the Nation, NPR, September 28, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Lehrer NewsHour, PBS, 16 October 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Wilson, "From Smiling Coffee Vendor to Terror Suspect," *New York Times*, September 26, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Terry Frieden, "Top U.S. security officials share Afghan-Pakistan border concerns," *cnn.com*, September 30, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Ivan Moreno and P. Solomon Banda, "Prosecutor: Terror Plot Focus was 9/11 Anniversary," *Associated Press*, September 26, 2009.

communications was "more urgent in tone than the last," according to court documents.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, and quite crucially, as Justin Hellmann documents, there was really no danger at any time because communications between Zazi and al-Qaeda leaders was being monitored even before he began to try to construct his bombs. Apparently neither Zazi nor the crafty people running al-Qaeda have learned that there are people trying to spy on them. The plot, in other words, could be closed down at any time and certainly before any bombs went off—assuming Zazi could ever have successfully fabricated them. There are those who think he could, but as Heilmann notes, Zazi was able to destroy all their makings before he was arrested, so we may never know.

Clearly, if Zazi was able eventually to bring his aspirations to fruition and if he was undisrupted by the police, he could have done some damage, though, given his capacities, the person most in existential danger was likely the lapsed doughnut peddler himself. Heilmann notes that he was trying to build the same kind of bombs used on the London transportation system by suicide terrorists on July 7, 2005. Those four explosions killed 52—a tragedy, but hardly the 9/11 replication suggested by Riedel or the prospective 200-500 fatalities of the “expert” estimates quoted by Heilmann. The bombings on trains in Madrid in 2004 did kill nearly 200, but that was accomplished with 10 bombs, not the four the Zazi group was planning. It might be added that four additional bombs were planted on the London underground on July 21, 2005, and all proved to be duds. Moreover, the Manchester plot that, as Heilmann notes, has been connected to the same authors as Zazi’s, failed as completely as his did.

Heilmann makes a strong argument for the kind of information sharing among policing and intelligence agencies that led to the surveillance of Zazi. However, he also notes that when the FBI shared information with the New York Police Department, the NYPD blunderingly took measures that allowed Zazi to know he was being tailed, and this, in turn, led him to destroy the evidence.

Interestingly, Zazi, like Bryant Neal Vinas (Case 24), is apparently “cooperating” in custody, abruptly abandoning his formerly suicidal commitment to the cause and thus, from al-Qaeda’s perspective, effectively acting as a CIA mole. Although “martyrdom” operations have the distinct disadvantage from the perspective of the perpetrators that their human asset—in this case a rare and special American one—is lost in the explosion. However, the Zazi venture turned out even worse for them: instead of dying, he becomes a traitor to the cause.

And there is an additional wrinkle in this case which may give the al-Qaeda leaders even less enthusiasm for recruiting Americans: the authorities are in position get the captured American operative to talk not only by putting pressure on him, but on his family.

---

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, “Weakened.” Dina Temple-Raston, “Terrorism Case Shows Range Of Investigators' Tools,” NPR, October 3, 2009.

## Case 28: Zazi

Justin Heilmann

June 4, 2011

typographical and other minor corrections December 14, 2011

### 1. Overview

Najibullah Zazi, a legal resident of the United States, was born in, and remains a citizen of, Afghanistan. On August 28, 2008, he and two of his friends, Adis Medunjanin and Zarein Ahmedzay, traveled from New York to Pakistan intending to join the Taliban in their fight against the United States military.<sup>1</sup> In Pakistan, however, they were recruited by al-Qaeda and received training on many different weapons systems. While in the training camps, al-Qaeda leaders approached Zazi and his friends about returning to America to carry out a “martyrdom attack” against the United States.<sup>3</sup> When Zazi agreed, he was moved to a different camp, where he received training on building explosives. His training there was very brief, and focused on the construction of a triacetone triperoxide (TATP) explosive as used by the shoe bomber (Case 1) and in the London subway bombings of 2005.<sup>4</sup> Zazi e-mailed himself nine pages of handwritten notes containing directions on the construction of the explosive. He and the al-Qaeda leaders discussed potential targets, and they decided to target the New York City subway system.<sup>2</sup>

Zazi returned to the United States in January 2009 and moved to a suburb of Denver, Colorado, with his aunt and uncle. In June of 2009 he accessed his notes on constructing explosives for the first time and began researching where he could purchase the chemicals necessary.<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, British intelligence intercepted e-mails between Zazi and an al-Qaeda leader discussing the construction of the explosives.<sup>3</sup> It alerted authorities in the United States of the threat, and the FBI was monitoring Zazi's e-mail and phone lines even before he began to construct the bombs. Accordingly, the authorities were in a position to close down the plot at any time.

After purchasing large amounts of hydrogen peroxide, Zazi checked into a motel on August 28 and soon began experimenting with the chemicals. His plan was to construct the same chemical explosive that had been used in the 2005 London subway bombings and by the shoe bomber (Case 1).<sup>4</sup> However, he was having considerable difficulties. On September 9, 2009, Zazi drove from Denver to New York City where he planned to finish the construction of the explosives and carry out the attack, most likely on September 14, 2009. When he first got to New York he was pulled over for a “random drug search” before authorities allowed him to go on. Later, his car was towed and his laptop, containing his notes on how to construct the explosives, was found by the police. Zazi was also notified by a local imam (through his father) that police had been asking questions

---

<sup>1</sup> “Zazi Pleads Guilty to Charges,” Press Release, U.S. Department of Justice, February 22, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> “Zazi reveals chilling details on al-Qaeda training and plot to blow up subways,” *New York Daily News*, February 23, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> “British Spies help prevent attack,” *Telegraph*, November 9, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Bobby Ghosh, “An Enemy Within: The Making of Najibullah Zazi,” *Time*, February 23, 2010.

about him. Now aware that authorities knew of his plan, he aborted the mission, got rid of the detonators and explosives, and flew back to Denver on September 12, 2009.<sup>5</sup>

In Denver, Zazi agreed to voluntarily meet the FBI to be interviewed as a person of interest. During the first interview Zazi denied all involvement, but later admitted to constructing explosives and receiving training in Pakistan. Sources say the admission came about when he was threatened with the possibility that his parents might face conspiracy charges.<sup>6</sup> On September 19, 2009, Zazi was arrested and charged with “making false statements in a matter involving international or domestic terrorism.” On September 23, the charges were dropped and he was indicted on a charge of “conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction.”

On February 22, 2010, Zazi pled guilty to this charge as well as to additional charges of conspiracy to commit murder and providing material aid to a terrorist organization.<sup>7</sup> He faces possible life sentences for the two conspiracy charges, and up to an additional 15 years for providing aid, computers, and money to al-Qaeda. Since agreeing to plead guilty, Zazi has been cooperating with authorities.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Nature of the adversary

Najibullah Zazi was born in Afghanistan and moved to Pakistan with his family in 1992. At age 14, his family of six moved to New York City and became legal residents of the United States. Economically, Zazi and his family grew up poor. His family lived in a small apartment in Queens, and his dad worked as a cab driver. Zazi struggled as a student at Flushing High School in Queens, later dropping out.<sup>9</sup> He then operated a vending cart, selling coffee and pastries. Zazi was never in jail, and there is no evidence to suggest drug use at any time. Zazi and his family attended a mosque that was “pro-global-jihad.” He was very religious and enjoyed listening to an Indian Muslim televangelist who is an expert in comparative religion and theology.<sup>10</sup>

In 2006, he married a woman in Afghanistan in an arranged marriage, and had two children. Zazi worked to raise money, sending it to his wife and children in Afghanistan. He hoped to bring them to the United States in the future.<sup>11</sup> He opened many different credit card accounts, built up a debt of over fifty thousand dollars, and eventually declared bankruptcy.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> John Marzuli, “Zazi, al-Qaeda pals planned rush-hour attack on Grand Central, Times Square subway stations,” *New York Daily News*, April 11, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Tsai, “Timeline of events in NYC terror probe,” Associated Press, September 21, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Benton Campbell, “United States of America v. Najibullah Zazi: Conspiracy to use weapons of Mass Destruction,” United States Department of Justice, September 24, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> “Zazi reveals chilling details,” *New York Daily News*, February 23, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Wilson, “From Smiling Coffee Vendor to Terror Suspect,” *New York Times*, September 25, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Samantha Gross, David Caruso, Michael Rubinkam, “Radical Influences all around NYC terror suspect,” *Omaha World-Herald*, September 25, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Ghosh, “An Enemy Within,” *Time*, February 23, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Tsai, “Timeline.”

### 3. Motivation

In 2008, Zazi and two friends flew to Pakistan with the intent of joining the Taliban in their fight against the United States. They were motivated by their unhappiness with United States military actions in Afghanistan. At the time, the United States was expanding the war there and sending in additional troops. At this point, it was not Zazi's goal to carry out a terrorist attack in America or harm civilians.<sup>13</sup> The three men were not actively recruited; they were self motivated to seek out the Taliban and to offer their assistance.<sup>14</sup>

### 4. Goals

Although Zazi's goal was to join the Taliban and fight against the American forces, while in Pakistan he was recruited by al-Qaeda and offered the opportunity of attending their camps to get training on many different weapons systems before joining the fight against the American troops. His time with al-Qaeda changed his goals. When presented with the opportunity, Zazi agreed to the al-Qaeda request to return to America and carry out a suicide terrorist attack.<sup>15</sup> He claims that the American media had forgotten about the war in Afghanistan and continued to ignore it even as it was expanding.<sup>16</sup> His goal for this terrorist attack was not for revenge or out of anger, he says, but to “bring attention to the actions of the United States military in Afghanistan.”<sup>17</sup>

It seems unlikely that he would have gone to this extreme if it had not been for his recruitment by al-Qaeda. Zazi had respect for the leaders, and his sense of belonging to the group as well as not wanting to let them down may have made a contribution to his motivation. He was also required, obviously, to abandon his goal of bringing his family to America.

### 5. Plans for violence

Zazi and his two friends planned to construct backpack bombs very similar to those used in the suicide attack against the London subway system. They would then be carried onto New York subway lines during rush hour and detonated as part of a “martyrdom attack.” The New York subway was chosen for them by the al-Qaeda leaders, and Zazi was responsible for picking the sites and times that would cause their attack to have the biggest effect.

Zazi experimented with the construction of the explosives in a motel room in Colorado, before driving to New York City where he planned to finish constructing the explosives and scout the subway areas for the most effective times and places to carry out the attack. Tipped off by British intelligence which had intercepted e-mails between Zazi and an al-Qaeda leader discussing the construction of the explosives,<sup>18</sup> the FBI was monitoring Zazi's e-mail and phone

---

<sup>13</sup> Adam Goldman, “NYC subway bomb plotter’s cooperation could lead to expansion of case, charges against others,” *New York Daily News*, February 24, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> “Criminal Complaint; US v. Zazi,” September 19, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> “Zazi Pleads Guilty,” Press Release, Department of Justice, February 22, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> “Queens Imam Involved in Terror Plot Appears in Court,” *NYI News*, March 4, 2010.

<sup>17</sup> “Zazi reveals chilling details,” *New York Daily News*, February 23, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> “British Spies help prevent attack,” *Telegraph*, November 9, 2009.

lines even before he began to construct the bombs. As it happened, Zazi had trouble. In the days leading up to the planned day of the attack, September 14, 2009, he made many phone calls to an al-Qaeda leader in Pakistan, seeking assistance in order to construct the explosives, with “each communication more urgent than the last.”<sup>19</sup>

It is unknown if Zazi was ever successful at building explosives powerful enough to carry out their attack. Zazi claims that they were successfully built, however they were dismantled and the evidence destroyed by Zazi and his friends when they realized that the authorities were on to them. Since the explosives were never recovered, it cannot be known for certain whether or not they would have been effective. Zazi was the only one of the three who was trained on the construction of explosives, and his training was brief. All he had on hand were the nine pages of handwritten notes he had e-mailed to himself from the training camp.<sup>20</sup>

Because authorities knew of the planned attack and because of the constant surveillance of Zazi and his friends, it is very unlikely that they would have been allowed the opportunity to carry out the attack even if the explosives had been constructed to perfection. The subway lines may be vulnerable, but complications with the explosives and the FBI's knowledge of the attack prevented the conspiracy from ever being a truly dangerous threat.

Zazi and his friends were certainly committed to their cause and ready to carry out the attack, but it is not clear they had the ability to construct an effective explosive. In addition, of course, they blew their cover by constantly communicating with al-Qaeda members in Pakistan. And then, when Zazi's car was towed, the laptop recovered inside contained the plans for the bomb.

## 6. Role of informants

Insofar as informants were used in the case, they essentially aided Zazi.

When the FBI knew that Zazi had begun traveling to New York City to carry out his attack against the subway system, they alerted the New York City Police Department, ordering (or requesting) them to be on the lookout for Zazi and his friends, but not to confront him or use any informants to gain information.<sup>21</sup> The FBI wanted the NYPD to have warning of the attack, but they didn't want Zazi to know that the authorities had been monitoring him and that they knew of his planned attack.

However, the NYPD ignored the request, and two New York City detectives in the intelligence division asked Imam Ahmad Wais Afzali to identify and provide information about four men.<sup>22</sup> The police department had used Afzali as an informant before and considered him a reliable source. Afzali provided the identification for three of the men, including Zazi, and told police that he had not

---

<sup>19</sup> Philip Mudd, “Evaluating the Al-Qa`ida Threat to the U.S. Homeland,” *CTC Sentinel*, August 2010.

<sup>20</sup> “Zazi Pleads Guilty,” Press Release, Department of Justice, February 22, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Brian Ross, “FBI Arrests Three Men in Terror Plot that Target New York; Documents Alleged NYPD Informant Went Bad, Tipped Off Subjects to Surveillance,” ABC News, September 22, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Ghosh, “An Enemy Within,” *Time*, February 23, 2010.

seen or heard from them in many years.<sup>23</sup> After the police left, Afzali called Zazi's father and told him that "they" had shown up and asked questions about Zazi.<sup>24</sup> Zazi's father informed his son about this and told him to talk to Afzali and to get a lawyer if necessary. Before Zazi went to talk to Afzali, his car was towed. When he told Afzali about this, Afzali asked him if there was "any evidence in the car?" Zazi said no, even though his laptop, containing the bomb plans, was in the car.<sup>25</sup> With the information from Afzali, Zazi destroyed the evidence and fled back to Denver.

Afzali was later arrested for lying to federal agents in a matter of terrorism on two separate occasions when he denied tipping off Zazi to their investigation.<sup>26</sup> He initially pled not guilty, but later reached a plea agreement and apologized for his actions. Under the conditions of his plea, Afzali will voluntarily leave the country within 90 days of being released from any prison sentence imposed by the judge. Prosecutors agreed to request no jail time for Afzali as an arrangement of his plea deal.<sup>27</sup> As a felon Afzali will not be allowed back into the United States. Zazi's father, uncle, and friends were also indicted on conspiracy charges.<sup>28</sup>

## 7. Connections

Zazi and his friends made the decision to join the Taliban in their fight against the United States military on their own accord; they were not recruited by that organization. However, they were instead recruited by al-Qaeda, and their plans were changed. Zazi and his friends accepted a terrorist mission against the United States and received training to carry it out. Zazi spent six months with al-Qaeda, and before leaving he supplied al-Qaeda with computers and money.<sup>29</sup> Without al-Qaeda's recruiting and training, they probably would not have returned the United States or carried out a terrorist attack. Instead they likely would have carried out their initial goals of joining the Taliban and fighting against the United States military in Afghanistan.

Recently, it has been revealed that Zazi's plot to conduct a suicide attack on the New York subway system is believed closely related to a similar plot to conduct a suicide attack in Manchester in the United Kingdom.<sup>30</sup> United States authorities allege that the same senior al-Qaeda leaders that are responsible for the recruiting of Zazi are also responsible for the attempted attack in Manchester. Neither attack was successful, largely because communications between the

---

<sup>23</sup> "Letter from Ronald Kuby to Hon. Frederic Block re US v Afzali," December 11, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> "Filed under Seal; Complaint & Affidavit in Support of Arrest Warrant; US v Afzali," September 29, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> Steven Paulson, "FBI: Notes on the bomb-making in Zazi's handwriting," Yahoo News, September 20, 2009.

<sup>26</sup> "NYC Terror Suspect Held Without Bail in Connection to Alleged Transit Bomb Plot," Fox News, September 21, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Amir Efrati, "Imam Pleads Guilty in new York Terror Case," *Wall Street Journal*, March 4, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> "Two charged with Terror Violations in Connection with New York Subway Plot," *Euro Weekly*, March 1, 2010.

<sup>29</sup> "Zazi Pleads Guilty," Press Release, Department of Justice, February 22, 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Mudd, "Evaluating the Al-Qa`ida Threat."

would-be terrorists and the al-Qaeda leaders were intercepted, providing authorities with intelligence.

This experience shows that the core leaders of al-Qaeda are still functioning, even with the increase in troops in Afghanistan and with the increase of drone attacks, and that they are still recruiting, training, and planning attacks against the United States and around the world. While the attacks are not nearly as complex or ambitious as the attacks on 9/11, these planned attacks prove that al-Qaeda's core is still a threat to the United States.

## **8. Relation to the Muslim community**

While living in New York City, Najibullah Zazi and his family had strong ties to the Muslim community. They lived in a neighborhood that was predominantly Muslim, and Zazi attended high school with many teenagers in situations similar to his.<sup>31</sup> Many of the other students in his class had relocated to the United States from Middle Eastern countries. It is clear that Zazi developed at least some close friendships within the Muslim community because two of his high school friends traveled with him to Pakistan in order to join the Taliban.

Zazi also had close ties to Saifur Halimi, a pro-global jihadist imam at the mosque that Zazi and his family attended. The Zazi family lived in the same apartment building as Halimi and developed a close relationship with him.<sup>32</sup> Halimi and the Zazi family were among a small group in the Muslim community that left their mosque because the imam spoke out against the Taliban.<sup>33</sup> Halimi's pro-global-jihad stance and close ties with the Zazi family are very likely strong contributing factors to the decision Zazi made to travel to Pakistan and join the Taliban. Halimi also had connections to Zazi's two friends who accompanied him to Pakistan.<sup>34</sup>

Thus the sense of community and the influences that were presented to him as a teenager directly influenced Zazi's decision to join the Taliban and fight against the United States, starting the chain of actions that ended in his plotting a terrorist attack against the United States.

Zazi's ties with the Muslim community are also responsible for allowing him to learn that the authorities were monitoring him in the days leading up to the planned date of his attack against the subway system.

## **9. Depiction by the authorities**

The authorities in this case seemed to have a very reasonable, realist approach to what the plot truly was. The authorities did a good job portraying this attempted attack because they knew from the beginning what they were handling and were never given anything to be surprised about. They knew that Zazi was planning on constructing explosives, they knew the target was in New York City, and they knew the relative time frame during which the attack was scheduled to take place. The extensive intelligence gathered in this case allowed the authorities

---

<sup>31</sup> Wilson, "From Vendor to Terror Suspect," *New York Times*, September 25, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Gross et al., "Radical Influences all around NYC Terror Suspect."

<sup>33</sup> Ghosh, "An Enemy Within," *Time*, February 23, 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Gross et al., "Radical Influences all around NYC Terror Suspect."



to do their jobs, and quietly and uneventfully arrest Zazi after he surrendered himself for interview with the FBI in Denver.

In interviews and press conferences after the attack, authorities may have exaggerated the true level of threat that we faced. Several authorities called Zazi's plan for violence the "largest terrorist threat" since 9/11, and the attorney general of the United States stated that this attack had the potential to be "even larger" than the Madrid subway bombings in 2004 that killed nearly 200 people.<sup>35</sup> Experts also estimate that this attack could have killed anywhere between 200-500 people if Zazi and his friends had been successful with all four explosives.<sup>36</sup>

These claims are possibly exaggerated because of the level of security and intelligence gathered about Zazi and his friends and because of the fact that Zazi was apparently never able to build the explosives necessary to carry out this large scale attack.

Since we now know that it is unlikely that Zazi was able to construct the bombs, it appears that the threat against our nation was not as significant as it originally appeared to be.<sup>37</sup> However, with more skill or training, an attack of this nature could have been pulled off. We cannot always rely on terrorists to be unskilled and untrained. In that sense, the threat that we faced as a nation was very real, and the response by the authorities was appropriate.

## **10. Coverage by the media**

When the story of Najibullah Zazi's arrest initially broke, the news reporting was alarmist and irresponsible. The media made it look like New York City faced an imminent terrorist threat and that we were lucky to avoid such an attack. They failed to report that all along authorities knew of the plan and had surveillance on the suspects. Even with perfect explosive devices, Zazi would not have been able to successfully attack the New York subway system because of the intelligence gathered on him by the FBI over the course of the investigation. The threat was minimal because the FBI knew almost exactly what Zazi was planning to do. The initial media response was an overreaction, but much of what was reported was corrected in later reports once the authorities began giving out the facts of the case.

As time went on, the level of panic in the media quickly dropped as it became apparent that the authorities had the situation under control. Many of the media's stories praised the actions of the authorities in this case, restoring confidence in the authorities' ability to keep the public safe.

## **11. Policing costs**

The policing costs of this case appear to be higher than average. The FBI spent months listening in on all of Zazi's phone calls and gathering intelligence. The NYPD was also involved in the investigation once Zazi made his move to New York City. Two detectives in the NYPD's intelligence division spent weeks gathering intelligence, talking to informants, and investigating after Zazi fled New

---

<sup>35</sup> "Justice Department Oversight – Part 1 – Newsflash," Associated Press, April 14, 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Tom Hays, "Feds: Terror suspects' mingling fed NYC threat," KIDK.com, September 26, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> Mudd, "Evaluating the Al-Qa`ida Threat."

York.<sup>38</sup> Investigators were required to collect evidence from many different locations: Zazi's Denver home, the Denver motel where Zazi experimented with explosives, the house where Zazi stayed in New York, and the rental car Zazi drove from Denver to New York.<sup>39</sup>

The court costs from this case appear to be very large as well. Zazi, his two accomplices, his father, uncle, and the imam Afzali were all arrested and faced charges in this case. An unidentified man connected to this case has been arrested in Pakistan and is still waiting to be extradited to the United States, where he will be charged. While most of those arrested have pled guilty to charges and made plea arrangements, one of Zazi's accomplices continues to plead not guilty, and Zazi's sentencing is not scheduled to take place until June 2011.<sup>40</sup>

## 12. Relevance of the internet

While the internet was not used for recruiting in this case, Zazi did (unwisely) use e-mail to communicate directly with al-Qaeda leaders, and he e-mailed himself the notes he took in al-Qaeda's training camp on explosives.<sup>41</sup> Zazi also used the internet to do research on constructing the explosive and on the use of hydrochloric acid, and to scout locations to buy products containing the chemicals necessary for the explosives.<sup>42</sup> He also used the internet to plan the most effective time and place for the attack to occur.

The authorities used the internet to gather intelligence to prevent this attack from taking place, to intercept the e-mails between Zazi and an al-Qaeda leader discussing the construction of the bombs, and to monitor Zazi's e-mail and phone lines in order to collect intelligence, leading to the downfall of the plot.

## 13. Are we safer?

After the arrests and the guilty pleas from almost everyone in this case, I do not feel that we as a nation are any safer because of the outcome. Najibullah Zazi was a threat to the United States and justice is being served with his guilty plea, however there will always be another like him willing to conduct terrorist attacks against the United States. Our security measures have not been increased due to this case, and the only possible way we can consider ourselves safer now is if authorities use this case as an example and learn from the tactics that were successful.

While Zazi was the lead man in this attack, to al-Qaeda he was nothing more than a pawn that they used to carry out one of their attacks. Central al-Qaeda leadership is truly responsible for planning this attack; Zazi just accepted the mission and sought to carry out the work.<sup>43</sup> As long as there are people like Zazi willing to carry out missions that al-Qaeda leaders innovate we will not be any safer. This case proves that central al-Qaeda leadership is still a viable threat to

---

<sup>38</sup> Ghosh, "An Enemy Within," *Time*, February 23, 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Harvey Morris, "Afghan admits NY subway bomb plot," *Financial Times*, February 23, 2010.

<sup>40</sup> "Zazi Pleads Guilty," Press Release, Department of Justice, February 22, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> "Zazi Reveals Chilling Details," *New York Daily News*, February 24, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> "Zazi Pleads Guilty," Press Release, Department of Justice, February 22, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Adam Goldman, "NYC Bomb Plotter Plea Deal," ABC News, February 24, 2010.

this nation and cannot be ignored. One of the lessons learned through this case should be that we need to take the fight to the al-Qaeda leaders. Al-Qaeda leaders clearly still have enough structure to train terrorists and motivate them to conduct terrorist attacks against the United States.<sup>44</sup>

Another important lesson that can be learned that would make the public safer is in information sharing. The original tip for the threat came from the international sharing of intelligence.<sup>45</sup> Intelligence sharing is something that we have a problem with between agencies in this country, and it is clear that it is an important factor in stopping terrorist attacks. If we continue to share intelligence with other nations and among our own agencies, the public will be safer from the threat of a terrorist attack.

Arresting Zazi does not alone make us any safer as a nation. To al-Qaeda, Zazi was a disposable asset, and the fact that his terrorist attack failed cost them very little. Al-Qaeda will have very little trouble in finding more people just like Zazi that are more than willing to conduct suicide missions against United States. We will not be free of al-Qaeda as a threat until their core leadership has been completely dismantled, and even then their message of advocating terrorism will always pose a threat from any individual who hears it and chooses to act on their own.

#### **14. Conclusions**

Terrorists are clearly learning and adapting to what needs to be done to conduct a successful attack. After 9/11, security measures have been heightened so it is much more difficult for terrorists to enter the country. Therefore it makes sense for terrorists to make use of people who are legal residents of the United States as they did with Zazi. Terrorist networks like al-Qaeda are able to learn from, and adapt to, security measures that are put in place to stop them. Our most effective strategy to deter them should rely on intelligence gathering because we cannot possibly afford to provide adequate security at every possible target.

Najibullah Zazi's terrorist plot against the New York subway system provides us with an example of the nature of the terrorist attacks that threaten our nation from al-Qaeda. Zazi was self-motivated to join the Taliban in response to the actions of the U.S. military in Afghanistan; however it took al-Qaeda's training and ideas to motivate him to return the United States to conduct a terrorist attack. Although our efforts in Afghanistan have done a lot of damage to al-Qaeda's core leadership, the group is still able to recruit and train terrorists. Therefore they still present a viable threat to the security of the United States. The plots won't be as extravagant as 9/11, but a simple plot, like a subway bombing, can prove to be effective if properly carried out, even though Zazi was unsuccessful due to a lack of proper training and to the communications intercepts.

---

<sup>44</sup> Mudd, "Evaluating the Al-Qa`ida Threat."

<sup>45</sup> "British Spies help prevent attack," *Telegraph*, November 9, 2009.