

46: Model Planes

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In December 2010, Rezwan Ferdaus, a 27-year-old Muslim—a college graduate of Bangladeshi origin who had been raised in an upscale neighborhood of Boston—asked a man in his mosque about contacting al-Qaeda. The man tipped off the FBI, and over the next several months three FBI operatives claiming to be from al-Qaeda formed a cooperative and encouraging terrorist cell around Ferdaus.

During that period, he enthusiastically spun out a series of increasingly elaborate terrorist plans for his fellow cell-mates who obligingly provided him with several thousand dollars of financing that he had no capacity to amass on his own. The plans mostly centered around the notion of attacking the Pentagon (conspiratorially designated as “the P-building” in his planning documents) with explosives-bearing model airplanes. At one point the explosives were to be grenades whose pins would apparently be pulled out by a “high-torque servo motor.” Later plans included as well a “ground assault” by several co-conspirators armed with AK-47s who would shoot at people as they fled the air-bombed P-building. He also envisioned using nine pounds of explosives to blow up surrounding bridges. By September 2011, when he was arrested, Ferdaus’ “Order of Actions” contained fifteen separate phases.

Ferdaus was out the “change the world.” Impressed with “how evil” America was, he determined to “terrorize” the country and wanted to “decapitate” its government’s “military center” thereby severely disrupting “the head and heart of the snake.” Notes Ruxton McClure, he was especially excited by the prospect of gunning down politicians. Given dozens of opportunities by his cell mates to drop out of the enterprise, he refused.¹

As McClure further notes, model-aircraft enthusiasts point out that “it would be nearly impossible to inflict large-scale damage using model planes” and found the plan to be “kind of a joke, actually.” Even under the highly unlikely assumption that the explosives-laden planes would have been able to get off the ground, the added weight would throw them off balance and make them uncontrollable, a key defect in that, to do any serious damage, they would have to be flown into windows, and at high speed.

Ferdaus had showed distinct signs of mental illness for some time: there was, for example, a police report describing how he once “stood in the road not moving and appeared to have wet his pants.” His defense did not ask for a mental exam however, and settled in a plea bargain for 17 years in prison—he could have gotten 35. The court deemed Ferdaus to be “a significant danger to the community,” not because his plot would have worked or because he had the means to carry it out, but, as it emphasized in italics, because he had a “*strong desire to see his plan carried out.*”

¹ Jess Bidgood, “Massachusetts Man Gets 17 Years in Terrorist Plot, *New York Times*, November 2, 2012.

Case 46: Model Planes

Ruxton McClure

March 15, 2014

1. Overview

A twenty-seven year old Muslim man planned to plant explosives in remote controlled model airplanes and fly them into the Pentagon and the U.S. Capitol building.¹ In December 2010, Rezwan Ferdaus approached an individual at his mosque requesting help getting in touch with al-Qaeda. The individual, a government informant, introduced Ferdaus to FBI agents posing as al-Qaeda operatives.² Ferdaus met with the undercover agents numerous times, on several occasions handing over a number of cellphones rigged to detonate improvised explosive devices, for use in Afghanistan and Iraq.³ Through early to mid-2011, Ferdaus introduced the undercover agents to his plan to attack the Pentagon and the Capitol buildings using remote controlled airplanes.⁴ His plan changed to incorporate a ground assault on the Pentagon, using AK-47s and grenades, as well as using the remote controlled planes as a diversion. Finally in mid-2011 Ferdaus requested the assistance of the phony al-Qaeda operatives in providing explosives and firearms, as well as financial assistance in purchasing the planes.⁵ The undercover agents did give him money, and provided Ferdaus with dud weapons, grenades, and explosives.⁶ After taking possession of the dud explosives and weapons in September 2011, Ferdaus was arrested.⁷

In a plea bargain, he received a seventeen year prison sentence followed by ten years of supervised release.

2. Nature of the adversary

According to authorities, Ferdaus “masterminded everything himself,” and no other parties played a role in creating the plot.⁸ While he may not have turned out to be a brilliant “mastermind,” at the very least we can presume that the plot was entirely his own. Ferdaus is a U.S. citizen who grew up in Massachusetts, lived in Ashland, Massachusetts, and holds a physics degree from Northeastern University, Boston.⁹ At his eventual sentencing, the judge noted the support shown by Ferdaus family, including a “letter from his parents that contained photographs chronicling their son’s life ... [which painted] ‘a portrait of a much-loved son.’”¹⁰ This leads one to believe that Ferdaus at least for some time had an

¹ “Mass. man sentenced in model airplane terror plot,” CBS News, November 1, 2012.

² “Ashland Man Agrees to Plead Guilty to Plotting Attack on Pentagon and U.S. Capitol and Attempting to Provide Material Support to Terrorists,” Department of Justice, July 10, 2012.

³ “Ashland Man Agrees to Plead Guilty.”

⁴ “Ashland Man Agrees to Plead Guilty.”

⁵ “Ashland Man Agrees to Plead Guilty.”

⁶ “Ashland Man Agrees to Plead Guilty.”

⁷ “Ashland Man Agrees to Plead Guilty.”

⁸ “Rezwan Ferdaus held over Pentagon and Capitol bomb plot,” BBC News, September 29, 2011.

⁹ “Mass. man sentenced in model airplane terror plot,” CBS News.

¹⁰ Brian Ballou, “Rezwan Ferdaus of Ashland sentenced to 17 years in terror plot; plotted to blow up Pentagon, Capitol,” Boston.com (accessed November 20, 2012).

ostensibly stable family life. However, the judge also noted that “there was a point in which his life turned darker.”¹¹

Ferdaus’ defense lawyer asserted that at least a month prior to his arrest, Ferdaus was seeing a psychiatrist for “depression and anxiety.”¹² His lawyer also suggested that the FBI had “ignored signs of mental illness . . . while investigating him.”¹³ Apparently, an FBI agent noted during a bail hearing that Ferdaus had acknowledged to undercover agents that he was “anxious and depressed.”¹⁴ Furthermore, FBI officials were made aware of a police report describing an incident when Ferdaus “stood in the road not moving and appeared to have wet his pants.”¹⁵ Ferdaus’ parents also wrote to the District Judge on the case, describing how Ferdaus “slipped into a depression during his senior year at Northeastern, which led to mental illness that was ‘obviously visible’ to his family [from] late 2009.”¹⁶ They attempted to “get him to see a doctor but he would not.”¹⁷

However, the defense didn’t request any mental examination of Ferdaus, and prosecutors responded to questions about his mental health by citing “Ferdaus’ composed responses to the judge’s questions and the judge’s comment that Ferdaus is ‘obviously an intelligent and well-educated young man.’”¹⁸ In the hearing on a Government Motion for Detention, the defense counsel did, however, argue that

[T]here [was] no evidence that his plan would have worked, . . . that without modifications it likely would not have worked, . . . that because the FBI provided the financing and components of Ferdaus’s plan, including the rifles and explosives, his plan could not have been brought to fruition, . . . that [he] never was actually in contact with any terrorist organization, . . . [and his plan was] a ‘fantasy’ *fueled by his mental illness*.¹⁹

The Court noted in response that Ferdaus had “carefully researched and wanted to carry out his plan.”²⁰ The Court focused on Ferdaus’ intent, stating that what made “Ferdaus a significant danger to the community [was] not whether his plan would have worked or whether he had the means to implement it, *but that it was his strong desire to see his plan carried out*.”²¹

Ferdaus pled guilty to six charges: attempting to damage and destroy a federal building by means of an explosive; attempting to damage and destroy national defense premises; receipt of explosive materials; receipt of possession of

¹¹ Ballou, “Rezwan Ferdaus of Ashland sentenced to 17 years.”

¹² “Mass. man sentenced in model airplane terror plot,” CBS News.

¹³ “Mass. man sentenced in model airplane terror plot,” CBS News.

¹⁴ “Mass. man sentenced in model airplane terror plot,” CBS News.

¹⁵ Denise Lavoie, “Rezwan Ferdaus Admits Guilt In Plot To Blow Up Pentagon And U.S. Capitol,” Huffington Post, July 20, 2012.

¹⁶ “Mass. man sentenced in model airplane terror plot,” CBS News.

¹⁷ “Mass. man sentenced in model airplane terror plot,” CBS News.

¹⁸ Lavoie, “Rezwan Ferdaus Admits Guilt In Plot To Blow Up Pentagon And U.S. Capitol.”

¹⁹ Decision on Government Motion for Detention, United States of America v. Rezwan Ferdaus, Criminal Action No. 11-10331-RGS 17 (November 28, 2011), 17 (emphasis added).

²⁰ Decision on Government Motion for Detention, 17.

²¹ Decision on Government Motion for Detention, 17 (emphasis original).

non-registered firearms (six fully automatic AK-47 assault rifles and three grenades); attempting to provide material support to terrorists; and attempting to provide material support to al-Qaeda.²²

In a plea bargain, prosecutors and defense attorneys agreed to recommend a seventeen year prison sentence, followed by ten years of supervised release.²³ The plea bargain was accepted by the District Judge.²⁴ He could have faced up to thirty-five years in the absence of the plea bargain.²⁵

3. Motivation

According to prosecutors, Ferdaus was inspired by “jihadi websites and videos that said America is evil.”²⁶ At one point he told undercover agents, “I just can’t stop; there is no other choice for me.”²⁷ The FBI Supervisory Special Agent overseeing the undercover operation and the arrest noted that Ferdaus was “planning to commit violent ‘jihad’ against the United States, which he considers an enemy of Allah.”²⁸

When Ferdaus was asked about his motivation for building the cellphone detonator devices, he responded that he “want[ed] to hit the kafir [non-believer] armies and [kill] as many people as possible.”²⁹ Regarding his plan to hit the Pentagon and the Capitol, Ferdaus told the undercover agents that he had realized [f]rom viewing jihadi websites and videos ‘how evil’ America was and that jihad is the solution. As a result he decided to, in his own words, ‘terrorize’ the United States by attacking Washington, D.C. Ferdaus indicated that by so doing, he wanted to ‘decapitate’ the U.S. government’s ‘military center’ and to ‘severely disrupt the head and heart of the snake.’ Ferdaus further envisioned causing a large ‘psychological impact’ by killing Americans, including women and children, whom he referred to as ‘enemies of Allah.’ Ferdaus also expressed excitement at the prospect of gunning down politicians at the Capitol Building. [He also] confided that he ha[d] no interest in ‘making money;’ his only desire [wa]s, in his own words, to ‘change the world’ using the skills Allah ha[d] given him to strike the ‘infidels’ by carrying out his planned attacks and building bomb components to kill the ‘kafir armies.’”³⁰

²² “Ashland Man Agrees to Plead Guilty.”

²³ “Mass. man sentenced in model airplane terror plot,” CBS News; “Ashland Man Agrees to Plead Guilty.”

²⁴ “Mass. man sentenced in model airplane terror plot,” CBS News; “Ashland Man Agrees to Plead Guilty.”

²⁵ Ballou, “Rezwan Ferdaus of Ashland sentenced to 17 years.”

²⁶ “Mass. man sentenced in model airplane terror plot,” CBS News.

²⁷ “Massachusetts Man Charged with Plotting Attack on Pentagon and U.S. Capitol and Attempting to Provide Material Support to a Foreign Terrorist Organization,” FBI, September 28, 2011.

²⁸ Affidavit of Gary S. Cacase in Support of Criminal Complaint, United States of America v. Rezwan Ferdaus, Case No. 11-mj-4270-TSH, 2011 WL 7656054, at 5 (filed September 28, 2011).

²⁹ Affidavit in Support of Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 7.

³⁰ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 9-10.

Many of Ferdaus' conversations with the cooperating witness reveal similar motifs and themes when he was asked about his motivations for creating violence.³¹

4. Goals

Ferdaus had as his goals, "terrorizing the United States, decapitating its "military center," and killing as many non-believers as possible."³² The Assistant District Attorney prosecuting the case said that "Ferdaus told them [that] his plan 'ought to terrorize' and 'ought to result in the downfall of this entire disgusting place.'"³³ Ferdaus also told undercover agents that his plan "envisioned causing a large "psychological" impact by killing Americans, including women and children, who he referred to as "enemies of Allah."³⁴

5. Plans for violence

Ferdaus originally desired to contribute to *jihad* simply by designing and delivering modified cellphone detonation devices for improvised explosives devices which would have been used to kill U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.³⁵ He "allegedly supplied 12 mobile phones each of which had been modified to act as an electrical switch for an IED to FBI undercover employees, who he believed were members of or recruiters for al Qaeda."³⁶ Indeed, when the undercover agents posing as al-Qaeda agents and accepting the detonators later misinformed Ferdaus that his devices had been used successfully he allegedly became "visibly excited" and stated, "That was exactly what I wanted."³⁷

The cellphone devices he built were determined by the FBI Explosives Unit to be functional, working components of an IED, which could be used as "electrical switches" by transmitting an electrical current through the phones' wiring when dialed, thereby activating and detonating the explosive components of IEDS.³⁸ Ferdaus did note to undercover agents, however, that his cellphone detonator devices "might require an additional power source such as a 9 volt battery to cause an explosion."³⁹ He also created a training video showing how one can design and build the types of cell phone detonators he was creating.⁴⁰

It is unclear how Ferdaus gained the technical skills required to build these detonators, but it seems plausible that his physics degree may have given him some basic knowledge, and online manuals and guides also contributed. Additionally, during one meeting with the cooperating witness, Ferdaus indicated that he "'used to be into robotics' and enjoyed 'exploration – taking stuff apart, trying to do electronics, learning on my own. I learned a lot of stuff on my own ...

³¹ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 10-17.

³² "Ashland Man Agrees to Plead Guilty."

³³ Lavoie, "Rezwan Ferdaus Admits Guilt In Plot To Blow Up Pentagon And U.S. Capitol."

³⁴ "Massachusetts Man Charged with Plotting Attack," FBI.

³⁵ "Mass. man sentenced in model airplane terror plot," CBS News.

³⁶ Ashland Man Agrees to Plead Guilty."

³⁷ Lavoie, "Rezwan Ferdaus Admits Guilt In Plot To Blow Up Pentagon And U.S. Capitol."

³⁸ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 6-7.

³⁹ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 28.

⁴⁰ "Massachusetts Man Charged with Plotting Attack," FBI.

from doing it and reading, too.”⁴¹ He also, however, indicated his willingness to undergo specialized training abroad, as well as potentially to assist al-Qaeda by teaching physics or “making something with technology” while abroad.⁴² In mid-2011, once Ferdaus had come to fully trust the undercover agents and, after they falsely informed him that the devices had been sent to Iraq and Afghanistan where they had been used to kill Americans, Ferdaus offered to up his production of the devices to around 20 or 30 devices per week.

In May and June 2012, Ferdaus handed over to the undercover agents whom he believed to be al-Qaeda operatives “two thumb drives containing plans for the attack, including step-by-step instructions on how he would strike the Capitol and the Pentagon.”⁴³ The thumb drives contained a plan of attack that was, according to the FBI Supervisory Special Agent, “detailed, well-written, and annotated with numerous pictures ... and diagrams.”⁴⁴ The first thumb drive contained a written document prepared and sectionalized extremely efficiently (almost professionally) into the various components of his plan. For instance, under the subheading “Location,” Ferdaus “included highlighted maps, diagrams and photographs of the Pentagon and the Capitol Building as well as the launch site.”⁴⁵ He also visited Washington in May 2012 and photographed the target sites, as well as potential areas at East Potomac Park from which he could launch the planes.⁴⁶

As the first thumb drive revealed, Ferdaus intended to launch three military-jet replicas from the park near the Pentagon and Capitol and guide them into the buildings.⁴⁷ The planes he chose were small replicas of F-4 Phantoms and F-86 Sabre jets, each plane being around “5 to 7 1/2 feet long, guided by GPS devices and capable of speeds over 100 mph.”⁴⁸ In terms of flying the planes, he suggested in his thumb drive plan that the planes “can come fully assembled, and with a gps” and can run “on programmable software that can execute such modes as autopilot where it can fly the aircraft to already entered gps coordinates.”⁴⁹

Originally when researching for model planes, Ferdaus suggested to the cooperating witness that he had found a website where he could purchase a remote controlled aircraft that could fly up to 100 miles per hour and carry a maximum payload of 50 pounds.⁵⁰ Before submitting the thumb drive, Ferdaus planned to fill the planes with up to 10 grenades each, and fly using a built-in GPS system.⁵¹ According to Ferdaus, he “planned to detonate the remote controlled aircraft by hooking up a cell phone to a rocket motor, which would

⁴¹ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 13.

⁴² Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 16-17.

⁴³ Chris Dolmetsch, “Massachusetts Man Charged With Plotting Airborne Pentagon Attack,” Bloomberg News, September 29, 2011.

⁴⁴ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 23.

⁴⁵ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 24.

⁴⁶ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 8.

⁴⁷ “Could model airplanes become a terrorist weapon?” CBS News, September 29, 2011.

⁴⁸ “Could model airplanes become a terrorist weapon?” CBS News.

⁴⁹ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 24.

⁵⁰ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 16.

⁵¹ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 16.

contain explosive powder and could be used as the ‘preliminary boom.’”⁵² It would appear that a combination of the rocket motor and explosive powder was intended to perhaps generate an explosion which would subsequently detonate the grenades. However, in his thumb drive plan Ferdaus suggested that the planes would have a “payload capacity of 10-12 lbs” which would enable placement of up to 16 grenades within each plane.⁵³ In this plan the grenades would be detonated via a “high-torque servo motor.”⁵⁴ A servo motor is a form of rotary actuator, a mechanical device designed to produce rotation or angular movement, meaning that perhaps the servo motor was intended to pull the pins from the grenades, thereby initiating the explosions.⁵⁵ The details of how exactly the servo motor would function aren’t perfectly clear, however, or even whether or not it would have worked the way Ferdaus imagined.

On June 9, 2011, Ferdaus met with the undercover agents following a reconnaissance trip he’d undertaken to Washington D.C. Ferdaus claimed to have done extensive research, even walked in a restricted area of the Pentagon, and that based on his research he needed to expand his plan. Thus the aerial assault on the Pentagon would now be accompanied by a ground assault consisting of six people including Ferdaus himself.⁵⁶ Under his new plan, he wished to use the “aerial assault ... [to] effectively eliminate key locations of the P-building [and] then ... add to it in order to take out everything else and leave one area only as a squeeze where the individuals will be isolated, they’ll be vulnerable and we can dominate.”⁵⁷ The new plan was included on a new thumb drive which he also gave to the undercover agents. It included an “Order of Actions” which Ferdaus “divided into fifteen separate phases ... detailing what actions would occur during each phase of the attack.”⁵⁸

The plan continued to evolve over the next several months. Instead of grenades, he now wanted to place 5 pounds of C-4 plastic explosive within each of the replica jets, and guide them by remote control into the Pentagon and the U.S. Capitol (specifically the dome of the Capitol building).⁵⁹ After requesting funds from the undercover operatives in exchange for several new cellphone detonator devices, between May and September 2011, Ferdaus “researched, ordered, and acquired (with the financial assistance of the UCEs) necessary components for his attack plans, including one remote controlled aircraft (F-86 Sabre), 25 pounds of C-4 explosives, 6 fully-automatic AK-47 assault rifles (machine guns), and grenades.”⁶⁰ He intended to purchase three planes in total, and place 5 pounds of C-4 plastic explosive on each plane. He planned to use the

⁵² Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 15.

⁵³ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 27.

⁵⁴ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 27.

⁵⁵ “Rotary Actuator,” Wikipedia (accessed November 20, 2012).

⁵⁶ “Massachusetts Man Charged with Plotting Attack,” FBI.

⁵⁷ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 30.

⁵⁸ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 32.

⁵⁹ “Could model airplanes become a terrorist weapon?” CBS News.

⁶⁰ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 8-9.

“remaining 9 pounds of explosives to blow up the bridges surrounding the Pentagon.”⁶¹

To make these purchases, he created a PayPal account under a false name, Dave Winfield, and when purchasing the plane (using the money given to him by the undercover agents) informed “representatives of a Florida distributor that he was purchasing the plane for his son.”⁶² He granted one of the undercover agents access to the Paypal account, ostensibly so that the undercover agent could ensure that the funds were being spent on the intended purpose. In June 2011 he rented a storage facility in Framingham, Massachusetts, “under a different false name, to use to build his attack planes and maintain all his equipment.”⁶³ It’s also interesting to note that when initially asking the cooperating witness for his assistance in planning and preparing the attack, Ferdaus asked the CW if he had “a connection that would be able to gather ... some material where we can build some of the explosive enough to take out a target that’s like three football fields, say a radius, of one or two blocks?”⁶⁴ In short, Ferdaus was nothing if not ambitious (or crazy).

However, according to counterterrorism experts and model-aircraft enthusiasts, “it would be nearly impossible to inflict large-scale damage using model planes.”⁶⁵ Greg Hahn, a technical director at the Academy of Model Aeronautics, stated that “The idea of pushing a button and this thing diving into the Pentagon is kind of a joke, actually.”⁶⁶ Another expert, a former Navy helicopter pilot and senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, explained that in order to inflict any serious damage, Ferdaus would have had to fly the replica jets into a window, which would have been near impossible at high speed. He stated that “flying a remote-controlled plane isn’t as easy as it actually looks, and then to put an explosive on it and have that explosive detonate at the time and place that you want it add to the difficulty of actually doing it.”⁶⁷

Furthermore, even if Ferdaus had managed to guide the planes into the right spot, an explosives and anti-terrorism expert noted that “getting a stable explosive like C-4 to blow up at the right time would have been hugely difficult.” Half a pound of C4 is sufficient to blow up a car, so had the plot gone 100 percent according to plan, the five pounds in each replica jet could have done a little damage. However, both the Pentagon and the Capitol are “undoubtedly hardened to withstand explosions.”⁶⁸ Furthermore, the planes would only have been able to carry a maximum of two pounds before malfunctioning. Most likely the planes simply would have been incapable of lifting off, or if capable of getting off the ground, the weight would have thrown the plane off balance making control extremely difficult.

⁶¹ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 37.

⁶² Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 9.

⁶³ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 9.

⁶⁴ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 12.

⁶⁵ “Mass. man sentenced in model airplane terror plot,” CBS News.

⁶⁶ “Could model airplanes become a terrorist weapon?” CBS News.

⁶⁷ “Could model airplanes become a terrorist weapon?” CBS News.

⁶⁸ “Could model airplanes become a terrorist weapon?” CBS News.

6. Role of informants

In December 2010, Ferdaus approached an individual at his mosque requesting help getting in touch with al-Qaeda. The individual, a government informant, tipped off the FBI and, in January 2011, introduced Ferdaus to an cooperating witness (CW) posing as an al-Qaeda operative.⁶⁹ The CW “met with and engaged in consensually recorded conversations with Ferdaus,” and then, starting in March 2011, two FBI undercover employees (UCEs) joined the plot.⁷⁰ These three individuals were critical in dismantling Ferdaus’ plans. Presumably the purpose of using the undercover agents was to learn as much as possible about the plot, and investigate the extent of the threat.

Between December 2010 and April 2011, the CW met with Ferdaus numerous times, the majority of which conversations were “consensually” recorded (although what exactly is meant by “consent” is unclear).⁷¹ During these conversations, Ferdaus informed the CW of his plans to use remote controlled planes, and asked the CW about prices for AK-47 assault rifles, grenades and explosives.⁷² Amongst other tasks, Ferdaus asked the CW to perform research on, and procure, weapons, and explosives.⁷³ He also requested and was given financial assistance with his plan.⁷⁴ This included \$450 to rent storage space in Framingham, Massachusetts, \$4000 in initial cash for the order of a model F-86 Sabre, and subsequently a further \$3500 to pay off the balance on the model plane.⁷⁵ Without this financial assistance it is unlikely Ferdaus would have been able to purchase the plane.

Little detail is known about the cooperating witness, although a cryptic reference in the Court Decision on the Government’s Motion for Detention is rather interesting: the Judge noted in passing that “the CW’s character and credibility is questionable, at best....”⁷⁶ What the Judge meant by this is unclear. Furthermore, the CW was apparently “sent to the mosque by the FBI for the purpose of initiating a meeting with Ferdaus.”⁷⁷ This raises a curious question about why and how the FBI knew about Ferdaus’ intentions beforehand. One possibility is that the CW himself had already previously met Ferdaus and had informed the FBI about his plans. Another possibility is another informant, perhaps a friend of Ferdaus who’d been told about the plan and then told the FBI. Alternatively, National Security Agency electronic surveillance may have picked up something from Ferdaus’ web browser or perhaps his hard drive. Whatever the case, it is unclear exactly why the FBI “sent” the CW to meet Ferdaus.

⁶⁹ “Ashland Man Agrees to Plead Guilty to Plotting Attack on Pentagon and U.S. Capitol and Attempting to Provide Material Support to Terrorists,” Department of Justice, July 10, 2012.

⁷⁰ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 7.

⁷¹ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 10.

⁷² Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 11.

⁷³ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 12-16.

⁷⁴ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 14.

⁷⁵ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 32, 36, 40.

⁷⁶ *United States of America v. Rezwana Ferdaus*, United States District Court, District of Massachusetts, Criminal Action no. 11-10331-RGS, 15 (decided on November 28, 2011).

⁷⁷ Decision on Government Motion for Detention, 3.

In early March 2011, in response to a request from Ferdaus to meet al-Qaeda representatives, the CW introduced Ferdaus to two FBI undercover agents, telling Ferdaus the two men were “‘brothers’ who were ‘down with the cause.’”⁷⁸ These undercover agents, referred to in court documents as “posed as al-Qaeda operatives in multiple subsequent meetings with Ferdaus. Over the course of several months, Ferdaus evolved and elaborated his plan, always informing his supposed co-conspirators of his adaptations. On April 18 the plan involved flying one plane into the Pentagon and one plane into the Capitol building, stating that the “plan is to have a fast model airplane with a GPS system stuffed with handhelds [grenades] and it’s on a timer and it ... has the coordinates of the targets ... All it has to do is crash into the target.”⁷⁹ Throughout this period the UCEs advised Ferdaus that, “You don’t have to do this” to which Ferdaus consistently responded that he was committed to jihad, on one occasion stating that he wanted “to contribute to victory for the sake of Allah.”⁸⁰

Through June, July and August, the UCEs “assisted” Ferdaus with his preparations by accepting his cellphone detonator advices, providing him with funds to purchase the remote controlled planes, inspecting his various plans, and advising him against certain courses of action (such as building homemade explosives to place on the planes). On September 28, 2011, pursuant to Ferdaus’ explicit request, the UCEs provided Ferdaus with 25 pounds of C-4 explosives, 3 grenades, and 6 fully automatic AK-47 assault rifles. The weapons and armaments were always under the control of the UCEs, but they allowed him to inspect the items and take possession of the items promptly before they arrested him.⁸¹

7. Connections

Ferdaus did not have any direct connection with any terrorist organization.⁸² He had hoped to make contact with al-Qaeda and he believed that he had done so, but no such connection ever actually occurred. The only substantive connection to any terrorist group was the inspiration for starting his own private *jihad*, which apparently stemmed from terrorist propaganda published on the internet, including videos and articles.⁸³

8. Relation to the Muslim community

Ferdaus did start attempting to liaise with al-Qaeda operatives through making enquiries at his mosque. However, prosecutors on the case were careful to avoid casting any shadow on the Muslim community, making a public statement that, “In addition to protecting our citizens from the threats and violence alleged yesterday, we also have an obligation to protect members of every community, race and religion against violence and other unlawful conduct.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, it

⁷⁸ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 15.

⁷⁹ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 18-19.

⁸⁰ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 16, 21.

⁸¹ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 41.

⁸² “Rezwan Ferdaus held over Pentagon and Capitol bomb plot,” BBC News.

⁸³ “Rezwan Ferdaus admits US model plane explosives plot,” BBC News, July 20, 2012.

⁸⁴ Chris Dolmetsch, “Massachusetts Man Charged With Plotting Airborne Pentagon Attack.”

seems that the CW may have been a member of the mosque, inclining one to think that at least one member of the “Muslim community” was willing to work with federal authorities to apprehend Ferdaus.

9. Depiction by the authorities

Representative John Mica, Chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, suggested that excessive regulation of the model plane market would not help matters, when he “said recent advances in model airplane technology could make them [model planes] more attractive to terrorists. But he said the answer is better intelligence, not trying to regulate hobbyists and their toys.”⁸⁵

Representative Peter King, Chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, noted Ferdaus’ background when he stated that ““The fact that Ferdaus is a very well-educated physicist should serve as a reminder to us that that the threat of Islamic terrorism transcends socioeconomics and does not only emanate from the poor and underprivileged.”⁸⁶

10. Coverage by the media

Media coverage tended to be uniform, and almost invariably based their accounts on the FBI press release. In addition to the initial reports covering the arrest of Ferdaus and the FBI release, follow-up reports were generally limited to the sentencing of Ferdaus. A few accounts explored the ramifications of Ferdaus’ activity, as well as his potential of success, but in a fairly limited way. By and large, these accounts were neither antagonistic (to Ferdaus’ intentions) nor sympathetic (to Ferdaus’ possibility of mental illness) but rather repeated the facts as presented in the FBI press release. Coverage of the event was particularly high in Boston, Massachusetts, but national media outlets also covered the event.

11. Policing costs

In addition to the undercover employees, the “FBI also conducted physical surveillance and obtained Ferdaus’ phone and e-mail records, which documented [his] efforts to procure components for his attack plans.”⁸⁷ Taking into account that the operation ran from January right up until September, 2011, the policing costs must have been significant. Maintaining Ferdaus under constant surveillance most likely would have been a significant drag on FBI resources. Furthermore, the “FBI agent in charge of the operation said that more than 30 federal, state and local agencies worked with the FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Force on this arrest.”⁸⁸ Such coordination and concerted effort would doubtless have increased expenses significantly.

⁸⁵ “Could model airplanes become a terrorist weapon?” CBS News.

⁸⁶ Chris Dolmetsch, “Massachusetts Man Charged With Plotting Airborne Pentagon Attack.”

⁸⁷ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 8.

⁸⁸ “The jihadist drummer: Muslim musician held over plot to attack Pentagon with remote-controlled toy plane packed with explosives,” *Daily Mail*, September 29, 2011.

12. Relevance of the internet

Ferdaus was apparently inspired by *jihadist* videos and webpages that he browsed on the internet.⁸⁹ Additionally, Ferdaus used the internet to search for sellers of remote controlled planes, at one point using an internet café in New York.⁹⁰ Ferdaus also planned to use Google Earth to locate the correct target coordinates to put into the GPSs he intended to use to guide the planes.⁹¹

13. Are we safer?

There are three separate elements to consider when looking at Ferdaus' activity and the dangers it posed. Firstly, in terms of the attempted aerial assault it seems that his chances of inflicting human damage were low. Certainly he may have damaged the Pentagon and Capitol building, but as addressed above, the likelihood of Ferdaus actually harming or even killing anybody with the remote controlled planes was negligible.

Secondly, with regard to his intended ground assault, it is plausible that Ferdaus could have done some damage, possibly killing a number of people (obviously only if he had not unwittingly ended up working with the FBI). If he *had* managed to get together six willing and capable individuals from either al-Qaeda or (more unlikely) from amongst similarly-minded acquaintances, armed them with AK-47s and grenades, and coordinated such an attack, he may have inflicted significant damage. The extent of this damage would have been greater had the aerial assault gone off effectively (by pushing people out of the Pentagon, towards his ground team). Regardless of the success of the aerial assault, he may have been able to at least take some lives. All of that being said, it is still probable that Pentagon security personnel would have neutralized such a threat *extremely* quickly. While Ferdaus could have taken some lives, it is hard to imagine that casualties would have been very high before he and his cohorts were either apprehended or (as is more likely) killed. That said, the probability of Ferdaus being able to actually pull together six people *and* get the team armed *and* create the diversion using the model planes is *extremely* low.

Finally, the detonator devices that Ferdaus built presented a real and substantial threat, not by themselves, but certainly when combined with the other required components of an IED. As described above, FBI experts working on the cellphone detonators determined that they could have been combined with other components to trigger IEDs.⁹² On this level, lives could definitely have been saved through the actions of the FBI.

However, all three of the above-presented threats would still have required Ferdaus' cooperation with al-Qaeda (or other terrorist) elements. He required financing in order to get the remote controlled planes and the explosives. He needed help to get the AK-47s and required an additional five people to join him in the ground assault. He would have needed a contact in the Middle East to whom he could "safely" send the detonator devices. This requirement of

⁸⁹ "Rezwan Ferdaus admits US model plane explosives plot," BBC News.

⁹⁰ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 16.

⁹¹ Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 21.

⁹² Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, 6-7.

assistance or cooperation meant that Ferdaus would have encountered significant difficulties in realizing his aims. Indeed, this obstacle was the exact issue that enabled the FBI to conduct their sting operation.

All of that said... yes, we are safer. However inept Ferdaus may have been, he still posed a threat to the safety of American citizens in the continental USA (through his model plane plot) and Americans serving in the armed services abroad (through his detonator devices). Even if Ferdaus had been unable to put together his ambitious, almost fantastical, scheme, all the evidence about his state of mind suggests that Ferdaus was so committed to the idea of *jihad* that he would have committed some other, possibly far more realistic, act of terrorism. Taking into account the possibility of his mental illness only entrenches this notion, since any mental instability may have only propelled him further down the path of violence. Regardless of whether or not he should be in a mental institution, for the time being, the US is safer.

Having received a rather light sentence of only 17 years (reached via plea bargain) the next question is what Ferdaus will be like upon emerging from incarceration. Whether he will continue to harbor a certain hatred for the US, or whether his time in incarceration will rehabilitate him... only time will tell. Indeed, it is probable that upon his release, federal authorities will continue to keep an eye on him, “just in case.” For the meantime however, he is not in a position to hurt anybody (except at the prison).

14. Conclusions

The Ferdaus story reveals a couple of insights into the threat posed by domestic terrorists, as well as the steps taken by federal authorities to prevent domestic acts of terrorism. Domestic “would-be” terrorists face a number of problems in implementing their plans, all of which emanate from the same basic source: it is very difficult to implement large-scale destruction without assistance.

It would have been relatively straightforward and easy for Ferdaus to purchase a firearm and kill a few people like the Fort Hood shooter. However, Ferdaus didn’t just simply want to kill people but to send a message. As he himself put it, he wanted to have a “psychological” impact on the US citizenry. He thus created a rather grandiose plan (in this case perhaps *too* grandiose). Indeed, any such grand scheme of destruction is thus going to require an element of sophistication which is difficult for the average man on the street to achieve alone. Ferdaus needed plastic explosives, money to purchase the remote controlled planes, contacts to whom he could send his detonator devices, and accomplices with whom he could perform his “ground assault.”

This problem for Ferdaus – namely, how to get in contact with likeminded people who could help him with the project – created an opportunity for the FBI to take control of the situation. The manner in which they did so is also illuminating. The FBI operation was not limited to gathering evidence about Ferdaus’ intentions, but rather was conducted over a period of seven months and involved the undercover agents actually helping to facilitate Ferdaus’ plans. They did this through the acquisition of weapons and explosives, as well as giving Ferdaus money with which to purchase at least one remote controlled plane.

Indeed, without such assistance it is doubtful Ferdaus would have been able to even come close to implementing his plan.

This method of gathering evidence, while tantalizingly close to entrapment (at least subjectively, if not legally), is understandable in light of the government's pursuit of as much information as possible about terrorist plans, capabilities and connections. The need for assistance with such grand plans was exploited in this case, and has been consistently exploited by the authorities in bringing a stop to terrorist activities. Indeed, almost all al-Qaeda "operatives" in the US since 9/11 appear to have been FBI operatives.

Finally, it is worth noting the ambiguities over Ferdaus mental state of mind, and the fact that while he may have suffered from certain significant mental problems he will now be spending up to the next seventeen years in prison, where any assistance with his possible mental problems will be significantly limited. It is in some sense a sad outcome, that a young man with a college degree and an ostensibly stable family life, should firstly have so rabidly pursued these nefarious ends, and secondly, will now be spending significant time in prison. This is not to suggest that the District Court got it wrong, or that society is not safer with Ferdaus behind bars. However it is still unfortunate that these events should have occurred at all. Indeed, the victims of fundamentalist terrorism may not be limited to the intended targets, the American public, but can include the mediums through whom the fundamentalists mean violence to be created: namely those naïve, twistedly idealistic individuals who choose to pursue acts of terrorism.