FBI director continues cover-up of contacts with Boston bombing suspects

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In testimony before the US Senate Thursday, Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Robert Mueller continued the official cover-up of the advance warnings and extensive contacts between the FBI and other intelligence and security agencies and the suspects in the April 15 bombings at the Boston Marathon.

The detonation of two bombs in downtown Boston resulted in three deaths and the wounding of more than 160 runners and spectators. Tamerlan Tsarnaev, 26, was killed by police in a shootout four days after the bombings. His younger brother Dzhokhar is being held in a prison hospital in Massachusetts on charges of using a weapon of mass destruction.

The bombings were used as the pretext for an unprecedented police-military lockdown of Boston and its suburbs, in which civil liberties were effectively suspended and federal, state and local forces tested out techniques for dictatorial rule.

Mueller's appearance before the Commerce, Justice, Science Subcommittee of the Senate Appropriations Committee did nothing to shed light on the staggering and unexplained failure of the FBI, the CIA and the Department of Homeland Security to alert local and state police in advance of the marathon, an event that attracts tens of thousands from around the world, of their contacts with Tamerlan Tsarnaev and his family and multiple reports of his terrorist sympathies.

One week before Mueller's Senate appearance, the Boston police commissioner and a top Massachusetts Homeland Security official told the Homeland Security Committee of the US House of Representatives that the FBI never informed them that in 2011 it had conducted an investigation of the elder Tsarnaev brother for suspected jihadist sympathies, including the interrogation of Tsarnaev and his parents, after Russian authorities had warned the agency that Tsarnaev was a radical Islamist Chechen separatist. Nor did the FBI tell them that Tsarnaev had spent six months in Russia's North Caucasus in 2012.

Boston Police Commissioner Edward Davis also told the House committee that an officer of US Customs and Border Protection, a unit of the US Department of Homeland Security, who served on the Joint Terrorism Task Force in Boston and had knowledge of Tamerlan Tsarnaev's travels, did not inform any of the four Boston police officers assigned to the group.

Russian security officials also alerted the CIA about the elder Tsarnaev brother in November of 2011, and he was placed on at least two US terror watch lists. There are also reports that in November 2012, Russia gave the FBI a case file on Tsarnaev detailing his contacts with Islamist separatist militants during his stay in Dagestan, and that Saudi Arabian officials sent a report the same year to the Department of Homeland Security warning that Tamerlan Tsarnaev might be planning a terrorist attack.

At Thursday's hearing of the Senate subcommittee, nominally called to discuss the FBI's $8.4 billion 2013 budget request, Mueller offered no explanation for these ostensible security lapses, which recall those that occurred on his watch in connection with the events of September 11, 2001. Nor was there any desire on the part of committee members, Democratic or Republican, to press him.

In her opening statement, Chairwoman Barbara Mikulski (Democrat of Maryland) followed what has become the universal pattern of US politicians since the Boston bombings, hailing the lockdown of the city as a triumph of post-9/11 counterterrorism planning. “There were well-coordinated law enforcement resources—the police and the FBI—through the Joint Terrorism Task Force,” she said.

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Gingerly raising what she called "investigatory gaps," she echoed the official line that the failure to prevent the bombings was the result of Tamerlan Tsarnaev having "slipped through the cracks." She further promoted the official story by suggesting that the two suspects were "lone wolf" terrorists, with no connections to outside groups. She then suggested that the FBI needed broader powers to track and interrogate suspects and more money to keep "ahead of the bad guys."

She also announced that the morning hearing would recess at 11 AM and move to a classified session, "where we can talk more fully about Boston and other key national security threats like cybersecurity."

Knowing he had nothing to fear from the committee, Mueller nonchalantly defended the FBI's handling of the Tsarnaevs and its failure to alert state or local authorities. He declared, "As a result of this, I would say, thorough investigation, based on the leads we got from the Russians, we found no ties to terrorism."

Beyond this bald and implausible assertion, Mueller descended into double-talk and outright gibberish. "To the extent that we go back and look and scrub and see what we could have done better," he said, "this is an area where we're looking at and scrubbing it and doing better."

In his prepared remarks to the committee, the FBI director reiterated the official line of the Obama administration that the Boston bombing was the work of isolated terrorists with no ties to outside organizations. "It is increasingly likely," he said, while offering no substantiation, "that the Boston attacks may prove to be the latest example of homegrown extremism."

From the outset, the administration and the various intelligence and police agencies have promoted this line, evidently motivated by an eagerness to foreclose a serious investigation into the connection between the bombings, the Tsarnaevs and the domestic and foreign activities of the US government.

The official story—that the Tsarnaevs were "lone wolf" actors and the failures of US police and security agencies were merely the result of mistakes or inadvertence—is the least plausible of all explanations. It is far more likely that US intelligence agencies, including the FBI, were using, or planned to use, Tamerlan Tsarnaev to further their operations with Islamist separatist forces in Chechnya and Dagestan, with whom they have been working for years.

That the American state secretly maintains extensive relations with known or suspected terrorists was underscored on Thursday with the release of a public summary of a report by the Justice Department's inspector general on the handling of terrorists enrolled in the government's Witness Security Program. The report revealed that the US Marshals Service, a unit of the Justice Department that runs the witness protection program, has given scores of terrorists new identities over recent decades and shielded them from other state security agencies.

The report summary—the actual report remains classified and has not been shown to members of Congress—noted that the witness protection program did not turn over the new names of terrorist protectees to the FBI's Terrorist Screening Center. As a result, individuals who had been tagged in the past for extra scrutiny at airports or placed on the no-fly list were allowed to fly on commercial flights.

The report also noted that witness protectees included people known or suspected by the government to have been terrorists trained in aviation and the making of explosives, and individuals who plotted bomb attacks or conspired to murder US officials.

Another development points to the intensive and sinister involvement of the FBI and CIA with anti-Russian terrorist elements in the Caucasus. Last Monday, Russian authorities announced that they had caught a CIA officer attempting to recruit a Russian intelligence agent who specializes in the region that includes Chechnya and Dagestan.

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