

Congressional report whitewashes government's role in Boston Marathon bombing

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A report released last week by the House Committee on Homeland Security pinpoints what it presents as failures of state, local and federal authorities to communicate and share information that could have prevented the Boston Marathon bombings last April 15.

By attributing to mere mistakes or oversights numerous unanswered questions relating to government contacts with and knowledge of the terrorist sympathies of one of the alleged bombers, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the report serves the political function of promoting the most innocent—and least plausible—explanation for the failure of intelligence and police agencies to stop the perpetrators.

Dzhokhar Tsarnaev is charged along with his deceased older brother Tamerlan with detonating two bombs near the finish line of the marathon, killing three people and wounding 264 others. Tamerlan was killed in a shootout with police four days after the bombings. Dzhokhar is facing trial on capital charges in Massachusetts.

In the aftermath of the bombings, authorities locked down Boston and its suburbs and imposed virtual martial law, forcing citizens to “shelter in place” while armed police conducted warrantless searches of homes and National Guard troops with armored vehicles and helicopters occupied the city.

The Committee on Homeland Security's document notes that in the initial period of its investigation, the committee was stonewalled by federal agents, with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) dismissing attempts to gather information as “non-oversight activities” and refusing to comply. The report states that in December of last year, the committee met with “representatives of the executive branch” to discuss the

report's “classification level and to provide comments ... and recommendations.”

“As such,” the report notes, “certain portions have been redacted to preserve the integrity of the sensitive and classified evidence provided to the committee throughout this investigation.”

In fact, the 38-page report is heavily redacted, with large sections of text dealing with the most critical issues blacked out.

According to the report, after the FBI was initially warned by Russian authorities about Tamerlan Tsarnaev, an ethnic Chechen, in early 2011, the Boston Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF), which is overseen by the FBI, conducted a threat assessment of Tsarnaev. This entailed tracking his telephone conversations, online activities and associations with potential terrorist suspects, as well as holding face-to-face interviews with the suspect and his parents.

Claiming to have found no derogatory information, the FBI closed the case several months later, but entered Tsarnaev's name in the Treasury Enforcement Communications System (TECS), along with a request that the agent in charge of his case be alerted should he attempt to leave the US.

In October of 2011, Tsarnaev's name was reentered in the TECS database after officials received a second request from Russian authorities that an investigation be carried out. A comment was attached to Tsarnaev's file calling for customs agents to “Detain, isolated and immediately call the lookout duty officer at NTC [National Counter-Terrorism Center] (24X7),” should the suspect attempt to leave the country. The note further said that such a call would be “mandatory whether or not the officer believes there is an exact

match” with the suspect.

Despite these explicit directions, no attempt was made to detain Tamerlan Tsarnaev at any time after both US and Russian officials had requested notice of his movements. In 2012, Tsarnaev took a six-month trip to Dagestan in Russia’s Northern Caucasus region, where he sought to establish connections to radical jihadists, attending mosques known to be frequented by Islamic militants. No attempts were made to hinder his flight to Russia or question him upon his reentry into the US.

Upon Tsarnaev’s return, the influence of his interactions with extremists could be seen in his behavior, as he began cultivating a pro-jihadist persona on social media web sites. A joint comment published in the *Boston Globe* by Texas Republican Michael McCaul and Massachusetts Democrat Bill Keating, both authors of the report, stated, “Had even a simple Internet search been performed, Tsarnaev’s increased posting of radical propaganda would have been uncovered.”

Though the report has been presented in the media as a “damning indictment” of the counter-terrorism agencies’ actions in the lead-up to the bombings, the authors manage to omit far more than they reveal. The most critical passages—those pertaining to the 2011 investigation conducted by the FBI into Tsarnaev and the failure to detain him at the airport as he attempted to leave the country in early 2012—have been heavily redacted.

Last week, lawyers for Dzhokhar Tsarnaev submitted legal papers alleging that the FBI attempted to recruit Tamerlan as an informant and requested that the FBI turn over relevant documents. The FBI has denied the allegation and is opposing the release of documents to the defendant’s legal team (see: “New evidence of US intelligence links to Boston Marathon bomber”).

The connection of the Tsarnaev family to Chechen radicals and the US are well documented. Ruslan Tsarni, an uncle of Dzhokhar and Tamerlan, ran an organization that supplied materials to Chechen rebels from the suburban Washington DC home of Graham Fuller, former vice-chairman of the US National Intelligence Council and ex-CIA station chief in Kabul, Afghanistan.

The committee report raises suspicions about the

official handling of a September 11, 2011 triple homicide case in Waltham, Massachusetts, in which Tamerlan Tsarnaev has since been implicated by the FBI. At the time, the authorities said the victims—Brendan Mess, Erik Weissman and Raphael Teken—all of Jewish origin, were suspected of dying in a drug-related crime.

The report notes that investigators at the time suspected a religious motive in the killings. Tsarnaev, a martial arts enthusiast, had trained at a local gym with one of the victims and is on record as referring to him as his “best friend.” The date of the homicides would place the crime within days of the second alert US authorities received from Russian officials about Tsarnaev’s extremism.

The House Committee on the Homeland Security report fails to answer a number of crucial questions:

- * Why was Tsarnaev given a clean bill of health by the FBI?

- * Why was he allowed to travel out of the country unhindered after both US and Russian officials had demanded to be notified of his movements?

- * Why did the FBI keep local and state officials in the dark about their contacts with Tsarnaev, who lived in metropolitan Boston, and the warnings about his terrorist connections in the lead-up to the Boston Marathon, a widely attended international event?

The explanation offered by the committee, that there was simply a failure to “connect the dots,” repeats the discredited, all-purpose disclaimer used to avoid a serious accounting for previous unexplained failures of government agencies to prevent terror attacks, from the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington DC, to the attempted 2009 Christmas Day bombing over Detroit Metro airport.



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