

Friend of Boston Marathon bombing suspect found guilty of obstructing justice

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On Monday, jurors found Azamat Tazhayakov, a friend of Boston Marathon bombing suspect Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, guilty of one charge of obstructing a federal investigation and conspiring to destroy evidence. Tazhayakov was one of several friends of the bombing suspect accused of entering the latter's dorm room and removing items after receiving text messages from Tsarnaev instructing them to do so.

Jurors deliberated for nearly 15 hours before coming to the guilty verdict. Tazhayakov, a Kazakh national, could receive up to 25 years imprisonment for agreeing to remove several items, including a laptop, fireworks casings, a backpack and a jar of Vaseline.

"I think any 20-year-old sometimes gets themselves way over their heads, and that could have come into play. But that's not the way we weighed this case," said juror Daniel Antonino. Tazhayakov is due to be sentenced on October 16.

During the trial, prosecutors insisted that Tazhayakov had sought to confiscate all evidence connecting his friend to the bombings. Typical was the claim of US Attorney Stephanie Siegmann that Tazhayakov and others had acted "to protect their friend Dzhokhar Tsarnaev for one reason—because they had learned their friend was the marathon bomber."

Lawyers for the defendant called the verdict "somewhat surprising," attributing it to the trial's location near the city of Boston, where the bombing had occurred, as well as the prosecutors' constant evocation of the April 15, 2013 tragedy. "If you want to find a conspiracy, you probably can because you're letting the enormity of what happened in this town affect you," said defense attorney Matthew Myers.

The trial of Tazhayakov was the first of a number of trials of acquaintances of Boston Marathon bombing suspects Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and his older brother

Tamerlan Tsarnaev. In the aftermath of the bombing, which took the lives of 3 people and injured more than 260 others, the city of Boston and its surrounding area were placed under de facto martial law. Residents were ordered to "shelter in place" as police armed with military-grade weapons conducted warrantless house-to-house searches for the suspects, while armored vehicles and helicopters patrolled the streets and the sky above.

Other friends of Tsarnaev slated to be tried in the coming months are Dias Kadyrbayev and Robel Phillipos. The former is charged with conspiring alongside Tazhayakov to obstruct the federal investigation into the bombing. The latter is accused of giving misleading statements to authorities when questioned about his association with the younger Tsarnaev.

Another acquaintance of the Tsarnaevs, Khairullozhon Matanov, a Kyrgyzstani national, faces up to 44 years in prison for "altering, destroying and falsifying records, documents and tangible objects" relevant to the investigation. According to officials, Matanov failed to disclose that he had interacted with the two bombing suspects in the days after the marathon, and had deleted certain files from his computer before handing it over to the authorities.

The severe charges brought against these associates of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, who are not accused of any direct role in the bombing itself, comes as Tsarnaev himself faces capital charges for over 30 felonies relating to the bombing. There is reason to believe that the hard line being taken against these peripheral figures is designed to set the tone for the trial of the bombing suspect, perhaps with the aim of pressuring Tsarnaev to enter into a plea agreement and forego a trial altogether. There is ample evidence of connections between the Tsarnaev family and Tamerlan Tsarnaev,

in particular, with US intelligence and police agencies, which the government has reason to fear could get wide circulation in a public trial.

Tsarnaev's lawyers have asserted that Tamerlan Tsarnaev, who was killed in a shootout with police in the days after the bombing, had previously been approached by the FBI and asked to become an informant within the Muslim community. Authorities have admitted to having carried out a threat assessment of the older brother as early as 2011, when Russian officials sent a number of memos to the FBI and CIA asking that an investigation be conducted into Tamerlan's affiliations with extreme Islamic separatists in Russia's North Caucasus. The Tsarnaevs are ethnic Chechens.

Months later, the threat assessment was closed down, with the FBI claiming to have found nothing incriminating on the suspect. Tamerlan Tsarnaev was then permitted to travel to Dagestan and attempt to establish ties with Islamic extremists.

This occurred despite FBI officials having specified that Tamerlan Tsarnaev be detained and that a lookout duty officer at the National Counter-Terrorism Center be called "immediately" should he attempt to leave the country. Last year, Boston Police Commissioner Edward Davis told Congress that the suspect had been unknown to his agency, despite the Boston Police Department being a member of the Boston Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF), which also includes the FBI and the federal Homeland Security Department.

A close acquaintance of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, Ibragim Todashev, also a Chechen, was shot to death while being interrogated by FBI and other federal officials in his Orlando, Florida home in May of last year. Both Todashev and Tamerlan Tsarnaev were, according to statements by the FBI after the marathon bombing, suspected of having participated in a triple murder in the Boston suburb of Waltham on September 11, 2011.

The apparent state murder of Todashev, who may have had knowledge of ties between Tamerlan Tsarnaev and US police/intelligence agencies, has been covered up by the government and the media. The name of the FBI agent who killed Todashev has never been released. Both the federal government and the Florida state government have issued reports absolving the killer of any criminal liability, and the press has barely reported the case.

The Tsarnaev brothers also had family connections to both Chechen rebels and the US intelligence apparatus through an uncle, Ruslan Tsarni. For years, Tsarni ran an organization that funneled funds and equipment to Islamist separatists in Russia's Caucasus region. Tsarni based his operation in the home of Graham Fuller, former vice-chairman of the US National Intelligence Council and ex-CIA station chief in Kabul, Afghanistan.



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