

Questions mount over government contacts with NYC bomb suspect

Patrick Martin
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Several federal agencies with responsibility for counterterrorism opened files two years ago on Ahmad Khan Rahami, the man facing charges for at least two bombings Saturday in New Jersey and New York, according to media reports. Neither the FBI nor Customs and Border Patrol added Rahami's name to the vast US government terrorism database, the agencies claimed.

Rahami was arrested Monday morning after an exchange of gunfire with police in Linden, New Jersey, after the owner of a local bar saw him sleeping in a doorway. He suffered gunshots to the shoulder and leg and was in critical but stable condition, and was expected to survive.

Several media outlets reported that Rahami's father, Mohammad Rahami, had called the FBI in 2014, complaining that his son was acting like a "terrorist." At the time, Ahmad Rahami had been arrested on suspicion of domestic violence after a series of altercations with his brother, sister and mother.

FBI officials claimed they ran a background check on the son, who had just returned to the United States after an extended stay in Pakistan. The bureau ultimately concluded that there was no security concern in a domestic dispute, which did not lead to formal charges. A grand jury declined to indict Ahmad Rahami after his sister recanted her accusation that he had stabbed her.

An official statement from the FBI declared, "In August 2014, the F.B.I. initiated an assessment of Ahmad Rahami based upon comments made by his father after a domestic dispute that were subsequently reported to authorities ... The F.B.I. conducted internal database reviews, interagency checks, and multiple interviews, none of which revealed ties to terrorism."

According to the agency, the same investigative process was applied to Rahami as to Tamerlan

Tsarnaev, one of the two brothers responsible for the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings, after Russian intelligence sources told their US counterparts he had links to Islamist terrorist groups in Daghestan, and to Omar Mateen, the gunman who killed 49 people at a gay bar in Orlando, Florida earlier this summer.

Rahami came to the United States in 1995 at the age of seven, several years after his father, who had sought asylum as a former soldier in the US-backed mujaheddin guerrillas who had fought the Soviet army and the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul. Ahmad Rahami became a naturalized US citizen in 2011, at the age of 23.

That same year, he returned to Afghanistan and went on to Pakistan, marrying a local woman. He returned again to Pakistan and Afghanistan from April 2013 until March 2014, as part of a protracted effort to get his wife an entry visa for the US. During much of this period Rahami and his wife lived in Quetta, a Pakistani border city that is home to hundreds of thousands of Afghan exiles, including the leadership of the Taliban.

According to US officials, Rahami was questioned every time he returned from Afghanistan or Pakistan, a standard procedure with travelers to that part of the world. He had extensive contact during this period with the Customs and Border Patrol unit of the Department of Homeland Security, which initially denied a visa to his wife because her Pakistani papers were out of date, and later because she became pregnant.

Rahami contacted the offices of his New Jersey congressman, Albo Sires, a Democrat, seeking assistance on the visa. The Pakistani woman, identified as Asia Bibi Rahami, ultimately did join Rahami in New Jersey with their child. She reportedly left the country a week before the bombings to make a visit to Pakistan, and was to return to the US later this week.

Asia Rahami was detained in Dubai—a frequent stopover point for flights between Pakistan and the United States—and has reportedly agreed to cooperate with the US investigation into the attacks in New Jersey and New York.

There were conflicting reports, all emanating from various police sources, about the sophistication of the bombs that wounded 29 people in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan and exploded without causing any injuries in Seaside, New Jersey, as well as the explosive devices that were found and disarmed in Chelsea and in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Some press reports claimed that the bombs were primitive and poorly constructed, suggesting that Rahami was an amateur using techniques gleaned from the Internet. Other reports claimed the bombs were well-constructed and suggested some training by a terrorist organization.

No group has claimed responsibility for the bombings in New Jersey and New York, or any ties to Rahami. The Afghan Taliban flatly denied any involvement, and the group is not known to have conducted any operations outside of its home territory in Afghanistan and Pakistan. ISIS was not active in that area until 2015, after Rahami's last visit there.

Police claim to have recovered a notebook in Rahami's possession when he was arrested, containing notes praising the Islamic fundamentalist preacher Anwar al-Awlaki, who was assassinated by a US drone missile in 2011, as well as references to the Boston Marathon bombing, which used a pressure-cooker device similar to the one found in Chelsea.

Meanwhile, the Chelsea bombing continued to be employed by both Democratic and Republican presidential candidates as a means of demonstrating that they were “tough” on terrorism and on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, although there is no evidence that Rahami had any connections to ISIS.

Republican Donald Trump continued to denounce the supposedly lax screening of immigrants and refugees, although no terrorist attacks in the United States have involved refugees or asylum-seekers. He called for the harshest possible interrogation of Rahami, including the use of “whatever lawful methods are available to obtain information”—a euphemism he has frequently used to describe torture techniques such as waterboarding.

He also expressed regret that Rahami might receive

decent medical care and legal representation, suggesting that these were privileges that no US citizen facing such charges should enjoy.

Democrat Hillary Clinton denounced Trump as a “recruiting sergeant” for ISIS because of his well-publicized anti-Muslim comments. “We’re going after the bad guys, and we’re going to get them, but we’re not going after an entire religion,” she said, adding, “We know that Donald Trump’s comments have been used online for the recruitment of terrorists.”

Both candidates chose to demonstrate their support for brutality, torture and state killing of prisoners—in the name of fighting “terrorism”—by holding private meetings with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who is in New York to address the UN General Assembly.

Trump hailed the Egyptian leader, who took power in 2013 in a brutal crackdown on the working class and youth, issuing a statement declaring “his strong support for Egypt’s war on terrorism, and how under a Trump administration, the United States of America will be a loyal friend, not simply an ally, that Egypt can count on in the days and years ahead.”

Clinton issued no statement, but it is well known that she was the last-ditch defender in the Obama administration of the former dictator Hosni Mubarak, al-Sisi’s predecessor, when mass protests led to the regime’s collapse early in 2011.



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