

## New York and New Jersey terrorist attacks, 17 September 2016

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### WHAT

On 17–18 September 2016, four separate but connected terrorist-related bomb incidents occurred in northeastern United States. Bombs were positioned at two sites in New York City and two in the state of New Jersey, with two of the four bombs detonated by the attackers. There were no fatalities, but 31 people were injured at the New York blast site. A 28-year-old Afghan-born American citizen, Ahmad Khan Rahami, was arrested after being linked to all four sites.

**Saturday 17 September 2016.** At approximately 9.35 am, a pipe bomb triggered by a mobile phone exploded along the route of a charity run held to support US Marine Corps veterans in Seaside Park, New Jersey. Runners were scheduled to be in the vicinity at the time of the blast, but the race was delayed. The bomb exploded in a rubbish bin, with no injuries.

At 8.30 pm, a shrapnel-packed pressure-cooker improvised explosive device (IED) exploded in a construction dumpster in Chelsea, in New York's Manhattan district, wounding 31 people. The shrapnel also damaged nearby buildings and vehicles.



Sunday, 18 September 2016, members of the FBI carry on investigations at the scene of Saturday's explosion on West 23rd Street and Sixth Avenue in Manhattan's Chelsea neighbourhood in New York. © Andres Kudackj/AP via AAP.

**Sunday 18 September 2016.** After midnight, a second bomb was identified and safely defused by New York Police Department (NYPD) four blocks from the primary blast site in New York. Police described the IED as a pressure cooker with wires and a flip-phone attached. It was rendered safe and componentry sent to the FBI forensic laboratory in Virginia, where authorities lifted a fingerprint, identified as Rahami's, from the device.

At 8.30 pm, five IEDs were found in a rubbish bin outside a train station in Elizabeth, New Jersey. The devices were bundled together in a bag and reported to authorities by passers-by who'd observed wires and a pipe protruding from the package.

**Monday 19 September 2016.** Around midnight, while a bomb disposal robot attempted to disarm the Elizabeth IED, the package exploded without causing injury.

At 8.00 am, the FBI issued a wanted poster for Rahami warning that the suspect 'should be considered armed and dangerous'. A supporting mobile phone alert was sent to New Yorkers via SMS using the national Wireless Emergency Alert system.

Three hours later, Rahami was apprehended in Linden, about 6 kilometres from where he previously lived in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Police were alerted to his whereabouts by a bar owner complaining that a man was sleeping in the vestibule of the building. Two police officers were shot and injured by Rahami, who was also wounded. Rahami was charged with federal offences of 'using weapons of mass destruction, bombing a place of public use, destruction of property by means of fire or explosive, and use of a destructive device during and in furtherance of a crime of violence'. He also faces five counts of attempted murder and firearms offences. Surveillance footage indicates potential accomplices may have been involved in supporting activities at the bomb sites.

## SO WHAT?

The Manhattan and Jersey shore attacks were relatively unsophisticated, using a series of homemade bombs that were placed without detection. Attempting four attacks at four sites in the same period demonstrates some level of attempted coordination. This demonstrates that low-level attacks can be planned and orchestrated with minimal signature, and terrorists with the will to attack may find the means to execute. In this case, the attacks only partly succeeded.

**Location.** All four sites were openly accessible thoroughfares. Enhanced security around public buildings and mass-gathering areas likely prevented the attacker from accessing more densely populated and more significant blast sites, with more lethal effect.

**Response capability.** Matching Rahami's fingerprints with those on a recovered IED enabled authorities to focus search efforts (the FBI manages a national fingerprint database). The NYPD Domain Awareness System—a surveillance analytics system with more than 8,000 cameras able to quickly synthesise information, including licence plate recognition, geo-location and cross-referencing against other databases—enabled authorities to link the suspect to all sites. A public alert system—generally used for natural disasters—notified the public of a potential terror suspect. The alert said, 'Wanted: Ahmad Khan Rahami, 28-yr-old male. See media for pic. Call 9-1-1 if seen.' This effective procedure helped authorities arrest the suspect within three hours of promulgating the alert.

The state of New York was quickly able to increase security following the attacks, deploying 1,000 additional state police as well as National Guard units around the city, including at the opening of the UN General Assembly, which was attended by many world leaders. This demonstrates that state authorities in the US don't hesitate to call upon the National Guard in times of crisis, although non-reserve US military supplementation wasn't used.

**Radicalisation and inspiration.** Authorities are investigating whether Rahami became radicalised during a number of trips to Afghanistan and Pakistan, with media reports that he became more religious since returning from one trip. He married and spent considerable time in Quetta, a known centre of violent extremism, as well as Kandahar, an Afghan Taliban stronghold, so it's possible he became radicalised overseas. The US has protocols for people travelling to and from high-risk countries, which were practised in this case. Rahami was questioned on recent returns from Afghanistan, but officials were satisfied with his explanation that he was visiting family. He wasn't known to authorities for extremist views or terrorism links and wasn't on any terror alert lists.

Rahami's journal indicates the attacks may have been planned since June, and includes an entry that 'the sound of bombs will be heard in the streets' and another indicating that his intent was martyrdom. The journal includes notes on pressure-cooker and pipe bombs, Osama bin Laden and US terrorists, including the Boston Marathon bombers and the 2009 Fort Hood shooter, Nidal Hasan. Two pressure-cooker IEDs were used in New York, with the unexploded IED similar to that used in the Boston Marathon bombing. This indicates that Rahami may have been inspired by other terrorists' actions and obtained IED instructions online or from contacts, rather than being directed by a larger group.

**Monitoring persons of interest.** Rahami was known to police in 2014 for allegedly attempting to stab one of his relatives. Rahami's father states that he told police then that his son was a terrorist. Rahami was arrested and detained for two months but not charged. The allegations against him, including by his father, were later recanted. While his criminal and overseas travel history may indicate some extremist connection, this didn't meet the threshold for a terrorist alert. US authorities are reviewing these factors to determine whether their processes and procedures were appropriate.

As Rahami is under arrest, authorities will seek additional information from him on his support network, source of IED materials, and path to radicalisation. This would likely identify further persons of interest.

**Weapons.** The IED components are readily available, and instructions to build a bomb are accessible online. While these types of IEDs are relatively easy to make, these events demonstrate that they don't always work. US authorities have stated that they believe Rahami bought IED componentry on eBay. The devices used flip-style mobile phones—also readily available—to trigger the explosives. The New York bombs were found to contain the homemade explosive hexamethylene triperoxide diamine (HMTD), which was also used in the 2005 London bombings.

## NOW WHAT?

**Location.** Australian governments, law enforcement agencies and private security companies are aware of the importance of risk assessments for public spaces and thoroughfares, and this is recognised in planning guidelines for major events and infrastructure management, including national guidelines for the protection of places of mass gathering and of critical infrastructure from terrorism. While enhanced security for special events and locations is critical, vulnerable areas should also be identified for possible risk mitigation.

**Response capability.** Australian law enforcement and emergency management agencies don't have a centralised and networked data analytics system harnessing CCTV surveillance, biometrics and telecommunications technology, such as the NYPD Domain Awareness System. Developing this type of capability could aid in identifying suspects and alerting the public to terrorist attacks or a manhunt in progress.

Australia has the Emergency Alert system to send messages to mobile phones and landlines in a designated area in case of emergencies. This system supports the states and territories and could be considered for use during a terrorist attack, including to find the attacker, as was done in New York.

The ADF already provides support to designated special events, such as the 2014 G20 Summit in Brisbane, and may be called upon to support state authorities in relation to terrorist acts and natural disasters. The ADF role in domestic counterterrorism (CT), including the provision of explosive ordnance disposal capabilities, is under review.

Strategic messaging such as that associated with the National Security Hotline should continue to highlight the likelihood of future attacks, as well as the requirement for our communities to work together, develop resilience and report suspicious activity, including unattended packages.

**Radicalisation and inspiration.** The perpetrator in this attack shares some characteristics with other terrorists in Western countries, including Australia. These include holding increasingly radical views, travelling to countries known to be terrorist hotspots, becoming socially withdrawn and having some criminal history. Australia's continued military involvement in Afghanistan and the Middle East is important to deny safe havens to terrorists. Within Australia, at-risk communities are actively involved in seeking to identify disenfranchised and isolated individuals who are potentially inspired by violent Islamist extremism and vulnerable to radicalisation. This needs to continue, with a focus on how to educate and re-engage individuals and, if required, seek additional assistance. Consideration should also be given to expanding awareness of countering violent extremism activities to the wider community.

**Monitoring persons of interest.** While some elements of Rahami's background indicate radicalisation, this didn't meet the threshold for investigation. Australian authorities should continue to review thresholds for investigation and available resources. But this must be accompanied by clear public messaging on the role of CT authorities and the role of the public. Ongoing monitoring of persons of interest places demands on limited CT resources and must be balanced with community expectations and legal requirements for privacy and what is reasonable. Not every person of interest can be watched all the time, and not every person with radical associations and indicators reaches the threshold for investigation. The community has an important role to play in identifying potentially violent extremist views and behaviours and alerting authorities.

**Weapons.** The Australia – New Zealand Counter-Terrorism Committee provides the mechanism for authorities to work together on terrorist threats from IEDs, including the *Improvised Explosive Device Guidelines for Places of Mass Gathering*. Member agencies should review existing arrangements, guidelines and educational materials on dual-use materials with reference to the US bombings and, using these attacks as a case study, work with private industry and small business to update education on risks associated with manufacturing or selling dual-use items.

## CONCLUSION

The Manhattan and Jersey shore attacks demonstrate the ongoing threat of random terrorist attacks by Islamist extremists. While these attacks were multifaceted and cross-jurisdictional, they were relatively unsophisticated and lacked synchronisation. The attacks were mostly unsuccessful: while people were injured at one site, no-one was killed and the devices at the other three sites

were neutralised. Rahami didn't inflict the intended mass casualties or achieve 'martyrdom', so the overall propaganda value for Islamist extremists is limited.

However, the attacks are a timely reminder that terrorists will strike when and where they can. Further attacks are inevitable, so we need to be prepared to recover quickly, learn lessons and move forward. These events demonstrate the role of ordinary citizens in the community as being best placed to detect and report radicalised individuals.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Australian Government and state and territory governments should conduct regular **multijurisdictional end-to-end CT exercises** directly involving decision-makers, including the Prime Minister, premiers, chief ministers and cabinets, to test command and control arrangements in addition to first-responder capabilities.
2. A strengthened **CT strategic communications plan** will better communicate countering violent extremism initiatives at the local level, as well as the need for community resilience and 'citizen watch' responsibilities.
3. Australian CT authorities should consider **harnessing technology**, including surveillance systems and the Emergency Alert system, to identify and potentially track suspects, as well as to alert the public.

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