

U.S. MASS SURVEILLANCE HAS NO RECORD OF THWARTING LARGE TERROR ATTACKS, REGARDLESS OF SNOWDEN LEAKS

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Photo: DHS

Despite the intelligence community's attempts to blame NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden for the tragic attacks in Paris on Friday, the NSA's mass surveillance programs do not have a track record — before or after Snowden — of identifying or thwarting actual large-scale terrorist plots.

CIA Director John Brennan [asserted on Monday](#) that “many of these terrorist operations are uncovered and thwarted before they're able to be carried out,” and lamented the post-Snowden “handwringing” that has made that job more difficult.

But the reason there haven't been any large-scale terror attacks by ISIS in the U.S. is not because they were averted by the intelligence community, but because — with the possible exception of one that was foiled by local police — none were actually planned.

And even before Snowden, the NSA wasn't able to provide a single substantiated example of its surveillance dragnet preventing any domestic attack at all.

The recent history of terror arrests linked to ISIS is documented in an internal unclassified Department of Homeland Security [document](#) provided to *The Intercept* via [SecureDrop](#). It shows that terror arrests between January 2014 and September 2015 linked to ISIS were largely of people trying to travel abroad, provide material support, or plan attacks that were essentially imaginary.

The document, dated before the Paris attacks, includes a list and map of 64 U.S. persons arrested on terror-related charges over the course of nine months who were “assessed to be inspired by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,” or ISIS.



The document assigns six categories to types of arrests made in the given time period: a foiled attack, “aspirational” planning, “advanced attack plotting,” failed travel, travel, or material support.

The only foiled attack [involved](#) the arrests of Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi, who traveled from Arizona to Garland, Texas, bearing assault weapons and body armor, intending to shoot up an art contest involving the drawing of cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad. Both attackers were shot by local police officers.

There are just five instances of what the report's authors call “advanced attack plotting” — two of which involve the FBI providing assistance in planning or acquiring supplies for an attack before making an arrest.

[Harlem Suarez](#), a 23-year-old from Florida, had been posting on Facebook about his support for ISIS when an undercover FBI agent started communicating with him, eventually about a “timer bomb” he wanted to construct and detonate on a public beach in Key West. Suarez asked the undercover agent if he knew how to assemble a bomb, and the agent agreed to get what he needed, subsequently goading him by asking if he was “true to the Islamic State” or “just playing games.” Suarez paid the FBI agent for the materials to assemble the bomb, and the agent taught him how to detonate it. When he tried to carry out the attack, he was arrested. His attorneys described him as “troubled and confused” in a statement.

An FBI agent also [provided](#) a fake explosive device to John T. Booker, a 20-year-old Kansas man who was indicted for attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction.

Christopher Cornell, a 20-year-old from Ohio, started posting on Twitter under an alias about his support for ISIS when someone in contact with Cornell agreed to be an FBI informant. Cornell talked about attacking the U.S. Capitol. But [his father said](#) it was the FBI that was “taking him somewhere, and they were filling his head with a lot of this garbage.”

Munther Omar Saleh, a New York college student, [was arrested](#) after trying to stab federal officers executing a search warrant at his home. The FBI said he and a co-conspirator discussed setting off a pressure-cooker bomb in New York, but no such charge was filed.

[Usamah Rahim](#), a 26-year-old Boston man, was killed by police officers when he was stopped for questioning after allegedly threatening them with a knife. He had been posting ISIS-inspired social media messages, and had threatened to kill Pamela Geller, the host of the Garland, Texas, Muhammad cartoon contest. Law enforcement sources called that plot a “fantasy,” but said his second plan, to kill cops, was more believable.

There were 12 examples of “aspirational” plots, or even less advanced plans to commit attacks.

There were 30 arrests involving people who were trying to travel to join up with ISIS, most of whom failed, and 15 of people attempting to provide some sort of “material support.”

That’s hardly a record of averting major ISIS attacks on the homeland.

In fact, there’s no evidence that the NSA’s extraordinary surveillance dragnet, as revealed by Snowden, has disrupted any major attack within the U.S. ever.

The U.S. government initially responded to Snowden’s disclosures in 2013 by suggesting that he had irreparably damaged valuable, life-saving capabilities. Two weeks after the media first reported on Snowden’s leaks, President Barack Obama [said](#) that the NSA “averted ... at least 50 threats ... because of this information,” gathered through communications collection in the United States and abroad.

Members of Congress and the administration alike subsequently repeated that claim, upping the total to 54 attacks thwarted.

But only 13 of the 54 cases “had some nexus to the U.S.,” Senator Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., said in a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing in October 2013. And they were not all terror “plots”; a majority involved providing “material support,” like money, to foreign terror organizations.

Then-NSA Director Keith Alexander was forced to dial back the rhetoric, eventually saying only that the intelligence programs “contributed to our understanding” and “helped enable the disruption of terrorist plots.”

The only incident the NSA has ever disclosed in which its domestic metadata collection program played a key role involved a San Diego man who was convicted of transferring \$8,500 to al Shabaab in Somalia — the terror group responsible for a mass shooting at a mall in Kenya. And the metadata program is the only one that has been reigned in since the Snowden disclosures.

The three other terrorism cases the NSA cited as warrantless surveillance success stories were debunked. Either the government [could have gotten a warrant](#), or it received a tip from [British intelligence](#), or it was a case of [fraud, not terrorism](#).

A White House panel [concluded](#) in December 2013 that the NSA’s bulk collection of Americans’ telephone information was “not essential in preventing attacks.” A member of the panel took it one step further, when he told NBC News that there were no examples of the NSA stopping “any [terror attacks] that might have been really big” using the program.

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