

Toronto Terrorism Investigation Started Online

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They say it started in the autumn of 2004 in an online chat room. It ended on Saturday with the arrest of twelve adults and five minors by police and security services across southern Ontario. In a massive show of brute force and imaginative investigative cooperation between law enforcement agencies, Canadian security officials shut down a homegrown group of terrorists allegedly planning one or more attacks similar to the one that destroyed the Federal Building in Oklahoma City eleven years ago.

Information beyond the names and addresses of those arrested is obviously difficult to obtain at this time though media speculations suggests one of the intended targets was the office complex beside the Metro Toronto Convention Center, the location of the annual Toronto Search Engine Strategies Conference, which houses the Toronto branch of CSIS (Canadian Security Intelligence Service) and the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police).

According to a story running in the Toronto Star, though the group was capable of carrying out a devastating attack, the Canadian public was never actually at risk. Police and security services here and around the world had been actively monitoring the group both online and offline for over 18-months.

The alleged plot involved three tons of ammonium nitrate, a volatile fertilizer used by farmers around the world and the same substance used in the horrific 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. By comparison, the truck that leveled the Alfred P. Murrah Building contained only one ton of ammonium nitrate. When law enforcement officials noticed the group had placed a large order for ammonium nitrate, they contacted the shipping company and replaced the explosive fertilizer with a non-reactive, benign substance. Officers accompanying the delivery made the first arrests, which were quickly followed by a series of well-planned and coordinated arrests throughout the Greater Toronto Area and surrounding districts.

Perhaps the most frightening aspect of the story is the age and background of the alleged plotters. Most are in their late teens or early twenties with only one of those arrested being noted as over the age of 40. They were, by and large, well educated and had enjoyed a typical Canadian middle-class upbringing of street hockey, roller blading and basketball. While each had recently adopted a highly ridged interpretation of Islam, none of them fit the stereotypical image of a terrorist. In both cases where the media was able to interview members of the suspects' families, their parents expressed what appeared to be genuine surprise and very obvious sorrow at the choices their children had made.

The Internet, like the real world, can be a dangerous place and has several unsavory neighbourhoods. The police say it started in a chat room dedicated to discussion of Islam. It would appear the bewildered parents of the wannabe Jihadists were not monitoring their children's online activities. Perhaps if they had, their children would not have ended up in jail.