

THE ONGOING TSARNAEV INVESTIGATION

There have been a number of interesting developments in the Boston Marathon bombing investigation. This post will mostly serve to collect them and comment on what they say.

The taxi cab full of pressure cookers

First, there's a nagging question I've got. Anonymous leaks to the press have claimed that Dzhokhar Tsarnaev told the FBI he and his brother assembled the pressure cooker bombs in Tamerlan's Cambridge apartment (which is one of the reasons authorities distrust Katherine Russell Tsarnaeva, leading her to hire Joshua Dratel to represent her).

But if it's true the brothers assembled the bombs in the apartment, then what was this cab ride all about?

Jim Duggan, 51, has been haunted since his close encounter with brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, thinking maybe he could have unwittingly thwarted the killer plot if he had just driven away.

He told the Daily News on Thursday that the brothers flagged him down April 14 outside a rapid-transit station in the Boston suburb of Malden.

"I tried to put their backpacks into the trunk, but they wouldn't let me touch them," Duggan said.

He drove the men to Cambridge, letting them out near Kendall Square – close to where they lived.

Duggan said the brothers gave him a \$2 tip on a \$38 fare. As he started to drive away, the the older brother,

Tamerlan, 26, began pounding on his car and yelling at him to get his attention.

The taxi driver said he immediately stopped and popped the trunk. Before the brothers could stop him, he removed one of the backpacks, which he now suspects held a homemade pressure-cooker bomb used in the attack.

"I said to them, 'That's the most packed backpack I ever picked up,'" said Duggan, guessing the bag weighed about 20 pounds.

I'm especially interested in this given Dzhokhar's reported claim that they were going to hit the July 4th celebration, but finished the bombs early and therefore decided to target the Marathon instead. What if they had picked up the bombs at some location on the commuter rail?

The pizza and pot murders

In 2011, a friend of Tamerlan's and two others were killed in a bizarre and brutal killing in Waltham. At the time, people thought Tamerlan's behavior was weird (for example, he didn't go the funeral, which Tamerlan's ultra conservative views might have prohibited). In the wake of the Boston attack, though, authorities now claim not just Tamerlan, but also Dzhokhar, might be tied to the killing.

In the wake of the Marathon bombings, Middlesex County began to probe a link between the elder Tsarnaev and Brendan Mess, one of the three men killed in the gruesome slaying on Sept. 11, 2011. Officials said Mess and two men were found in a Waltham residence with their throats slit and their bodies covered with marijuana. Tamerlan and Mess were once roommates and did boxing and martial arts training together.

Now law enforcement officials tell ABC News that some crime scene forensic

evidence provided a match to the two Tsarnaev brothers. The officials also said records of cell phones used by the Tsarnaevs appears to put them in the area of the murders on that date. Several officials confirmed the new findings but declined to be identified because they are not authorized to comment on the ongoing investigation.

[snip]

Then, Gerry's Italian Kitchen became a focal point again on April 24, nine days after the Marathon bombing, after investigators removed a Planet Aid charity donation bin from its parking lot. A driver had discovered discarded fireworks inside and law enforcement sources told ABC News the gunpowder had been removed from the cartridges.

Elsewhere, I've seen it claimed that Tamerlan worked for Gerry's Italian Kitchen at the time.

I'm really intrigued by this possibility – particularly since it looks like a mob killing more than an Islamic extremist one. But I also think it's possible that the brothers' DNA was at the scene because they, as friends, had been there. And what do authorities mean when they say their phones "put them in the area"? Is Cambridge the area, or just the Waltham neighborhood? Finally, while authorities might be really pushed to implicate Dzhokhar as well as Tamerlan, the piece notes that up to now they've believed there was just one killer.

They've got a real incentive to implicate Dzhokhar, who is around to be tried, unlike Tamerlan. So it's worth being skeptical about his implication, at least.

Wearing makeup to your militia debut

There are a number of interesting details about what FSB is saying about Tamerlan's trip to Russia (such as in this article; also note, as

far as I can tell, FSB is baby-sitting the FBI agents working this case, so it's important to remember much of this is being seen through their eyes).

But I'm particularly interested in this description of Tamerlan showing up in what I'll call jihad disguise, which made actual Salafists worried he would attract attention.

Mr. Tsarnaev, who a year later allegedly planted the Boston Marathon bombs with his brother Dzhokhar and died after a shootout with police, got a cool reception from some of the Islamists he hoped to bond with. He greased his hair with olive oil and wore dark eye makeup, apparently in an effort to affect contemporary jihadist fashion, according to Mohamad Magomedov, who struck up a friendship with him at the mosque. That look isn't popular in more-traditional Dagestan.

While Mr. Tsarnaev did find a circle of friends, some congregants at the Salafist mosque dismissed him as strange. Others said they feared his brashness would attract even more attention to them from Russian authorities.

"There are some people who take things too far," said one congregant. "Everyone is being watched."

[snip]

Tsarnaev's father, Anzor, said the style issues nearly boiled over into a fist fight after some congregants accused Tamerlan of playing dress-up.

It's not implausible that Tamerlan was over-dressing. He did the same while he was boxing, for example, with his leather pants and scarf. Though he had largely stopped dressing flamboyantly as he got more religious.

But it is worth noting he didn't exactly come in with the operational security an aspirational jihadist would have.

Nevertheless, he reportedly (again, this is all coming through FSB as far as we know) managed to connect with someone on the run from the FSB.

In Makhachkala, Mr. Tsarnaev met several times with Makhmud Nidal, a member of a rebel group that operated in the area, an official close to the situation said. Mr. Nidal was on the run from Russian police, but Mr. Tsarnaev managed to meet with him secretly at an apartment in the Separatory neighborhood of Makhachkala, said an official who saw the security-service dossier on Mr. Nidal.

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Nevertheless, in spite of alternating claims (this WSJ article debunks earlier ones) that Tamerlan had ties with two people who would be killed the following year (Makhmud Nidal, killed in May 2012 and William Plotnikov, killed in July 2012, though WSJ has his father reporting no ties with Tamerlan), and yet Russia didn't decide to arrest this guy they were purportedly following closely.

Though WSJ also reports Tamerlan skipped town, without the passport he had come for, shortly after Plotnikov was killed.

Tsarnaev's visit to Dagestan ended abruptly last summer. Just two days after the raid that killed Mr. Plotnikov, he departed Russia, leaving

behind a new Russian passport; acquiring the passport was one reason he had made the trip, his parents said.

It's all very ... showy.

The not-a-drone surveillance in Quincy

Finally, there's this: for the past two weeks or so (that is, starting 10 days after the Boston attack), a low-flying plane has been flying constantly over Quincy, MA. Residents have asked the FAA what it's about. But the Agency, which claims to know what it's about, won't tell them.