

The State Journal-Register

September 25, 2009

Good police work, public awareness keys to anti-terrorism effort, experts say

Alert police work led to the arrest of an alleged would-be federal building bomber in Springfield Thursday, but the incident also demonstrates that the public must remain vigilant to help avoid terrorism, experts said Thursday.

Michael Finton, 29, of Decatur, is accused of trying to bomb the Paul Findley Federal Building in downtown Springfield. He was arrested just after the abortive attempt on Wednesday.

"It's somewhat reassuring that we've got police and FBI operatives in the field scanning these possibilities and actually intervening before something seriously damaging happens," said Ed Kolodziej, director of the Center for Global Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He has written books on international security.

"No one can predict when excessive action will be taken," Kolodziej said.

While federal officials say Finton converted to Islam in prison, Kolodziej said there are "always among us... people that take outrageous actions and aren't even connected with Islam." He mentioned as an example the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, for which American Timothy McVeigh was executed in 2001.

"Does that mean we shouldn't go about our daily business?" Kolodziej asked. "Does that mean we should begin constraining civil liberties? I don't think that is a conclusion I would draw, though some people might."

Bruce Liebe, a retired Illinois State Police officer who teaches a class on terrorism as a law-enforcement challenge at the University of Illinois Springfield, agreed that Finton's arrest shouldn't prevent anyone from going about their normal routine.

"But I think it definitely heightens the message that's been put out by the FBI and other law enforcement that people need to remain diligent and observe ... people or persons or things that may be out of place and report those to the appropriate authorities," Liebe said.

There are "a host of people out there that have animosities toward the government," Liebe added.

Liebe said he found it interesting that Finton reportedly had a "prison conversion."

"That's actually a fairly common recruiting method," Liebe said. "Typically, what they will do in the prison system is either try to sway moderate Muslims to a more hard-line stance, but they will also try to convert those of other faiths to a hard-line, radical Islam stance."

Liebe also praised authorities for "keeping tabs on this individual," possibly averting a real bombing.

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