

New York Muslim village calls for justice after plot against it is foiled

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by [Aysha Khan](#) in the [February 27, 2019](#) issue

Islamberg, a predominantly black Muslim community in upstate New York, was in shock after police arrested alleged conspirators targeting the small village.

Residents of the beleaguered village learned in mid-January that four young men had allegedly planned to attack their community with homemade explosives and guns. If carried out, analysts say, it would have been the deadliest attack on U.S. soil since 9/11.

“Just imagine waking up and having to tell your children about this plot, that their lives are in danger,” said Rashid Clark, mayor of Islamberg, a 70-acre gated homesteading community in the Catskill Mountains that has been home to about 200 African American Muslims for nearly 40 years.

According to police, the plot to attack Islamberg unraveled when students at a high school in Greece, New York—about 200 miles northwest of Islamberg—reported a troubling comment by their 16-year-old classmate. The investigation found that the youth was communicating with three other people, identified as fellow Boy Scouts, on the chat service Discord to coordinate an attack.

Together, they had stockpiled 23 legal firearms and built three homemade bombs using Mason jars, duct tape, black powder, and projectiles like BBs and nails, according to police.

Police arrested Brian Colaneri, 20, Vincent Vetromile, 19, and Andrew Crysel, 18, along with the 16-year-old, who is being prosecuted as an adolescent offender. All four are charged with three counts of criminal possession of a weapon and one count of conspiracy. Authorities noted that the investigation continues and more arrests may be made.

New York governor Andrew Cuomo said that state troopers were increasing patrols around Islamberg “out of an abundance of caution” and that the state police Hate Crimes Unit would assist in the investigation.

“In New York, we stand with the Muslim community, and we will hold those behind this thwarted plot responsible to the full extent of the law,” Cuomo said.

In a statement, Islamberg residents thanked God, law enforcement officials, and the high school tipsters for thwarting the “heinous plot.” But they say they want more to be done. For more than a decade, Islamberg has been a focus of right-wing conspiracy theories and has found itself the target of anti-Muslim white supremacist attacks as a result.

For example, in 2017 a Tennessee man named Robert Doggart was sentenced to nearly 20 years in prison for plotting to burn down a mosque, cafeteria, and school in Islamberg. Doggart, a 65-year-old white Christian minister who once ran for U.S. Congress, was inspired by claims promoted on Fox News and several right-wing websites that Islamberg was a terrorist training camp. In wiretapped calls, he said he planned to recruit a militia to travel to Islamberg and would be willing to kill children.

The Muslims of America, an organization set up in 1980 and headquartered in Islamberg, describes itself as an “indigenous American Muslim organization” made up primarily of black Sunni Muslims. It operates a network of 22 small communities in rural areas around North America, including Islamville in South Carolina, Islamville in Tennessee, and Red House in Virginia. (Other TMOA villages have faced similar anti-Muslim threats and scrutiny.)

A decade ago, a documentary produced by Martin Mawyer, founder of the Christian Action Network, *Homegrown Jihad: The Terrorist Camps around the U.S.*, accused TMOA of running terrorist training camps around the country. TMOA and law enforcement officials dismissed the claim. Mawyer said in a statement that the Christian Action Network stands behind its film and a book that accused TMOA of being a terrorist group. Yet he also condemned anyone who planned to harm the

community.

TMOA chief executive Hussein Adams emphasized that “after 30 years there have been no instances where members of our community have done anything related to these accusations.”

Aminah Al-Deen, a professor of Islamic studies at DePaul University, said of TMOA communities, “They’re quiet, they’re peaceful, they’re just trying to keep their kids out of trouble.”

Zain Abdullah, a Temple University professor who has researched black Muslims in New York, described TMOA as part of a larger movement of black Muslims throughout the 20th century who created small, isolated communities where they could live out their faith, much in the way that other groups have.

“Creating these enclaves was a way to safeguard their identity and community,” he said. “Especially for African American Muslims, their identity seems to constantly be under attack.”

After the Doggart case, in which Doggart was released to his family on \$30,000 bail, TMOA officials were shocked to learn that domestic terrorism is not always considered a federal crime, and they are now pushing for a change in policy.

“Domestic terrorism should be recognized as a federal crime and include a stiff penalty,” said Islamberg attorney Tahirah Clark. “In fact, there should be no bail set for anyone being investigated for such a serious crime.”

The 16-year-old has been arraigned, and the three adult suspects are being held in Monroe County Jail on \$50,000 bail.

To Afaf Nasher, executive director of the New York chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, that bail amount is low and “indicate[s] that the potentially deadly plot is not viewed as a serious offense.” —Religion News Service

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