

Bomb Suspect Influenced By Mysterious Radical

BY ADAM GOLDMAN, ERIC TUCKER
 AND MATT APUZZO
 Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In the years before the Boston Marathon bombings, Tamerlan Tsarnaev fell under the influence of a new friend, a Muslim convert who steered the religiously apathetic young man toward a strict strain of Islam, family members said.

Under the tutelage of a friend known to the Tsarnaev family only as Misha, Tamerlan gave up boxing and stopped studying music, his family said. He began opposing the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. He turned to websites and literature claiming that the CIA was behind the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and Jews controlled the world.

"Somehow, he just took his brain," said Tamerlan's uncle, Ruslan Tsarni, who recalled conversations with Tamerlan's worried father about Misha's influence. Efforts over several days by The Associated Press to identify and interview Misha have been unsuccessful.

Tamerlan's relationship with Misha could be a clue in understanding the motives behind his religious transformation and, ultimately, the attack itself. Two U.S. officials say he had no tie to terrorist groups.

Throughout his religious makeover, Tamerlan maintained a strong influence over his siblings, including Dzhokhar, who investigators say carried out the deadly attack by his older brother's side, killing three and injuring 264 people.

"They all loved Tamerlan. He was the eldest one and he, in many ways, was the role model for his sisters and his brother," said Elmira Khozhugov, 26, the ex-husband of Tamerlan's sister, Ailina. "You could always hear his younger brother and sisters say, 'Tamerlan said this,' and 'Tamerlan said that.' Dzhokhar loved him. He would do whatever Tamerlan would say."

"Even my ex-wife loved him so much and respected him so much," Khozhugov said. "I'd have arguments with her and if Tamerlan took

my side, she would agree: 'OK, if Tamerlan said it.'"

Khozhugov said he was close to Tamerlan when he was married and they kept in touch for a while but drifted apart in the past two years or so. He spoke to the AP from his home in Almaty, Kazakhstan. A family member in the United States provided the contact information.

Tamerlan Tsarnaev was killed in a police shootout Friday. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was charged Monday with using a weapon of mass destruction to kill, and he could face the death penalty if convicted.

"Of course I was shocked and surprised that he was Suspect No. 1," Khozhugov said, recalling the days after the bombing when the FBI identified Tamerlan as the primary suspect. "But after a few hours of thinking about it, I thought it could be possible that he did it."

Based on preliminary written interviews with Dzhokhar in his hospital bed, U.S. officials believe the brothers were motivated by their religious views. It has not been clear, however, what those views were.

Men Arrested In Terror Plot Appear In Court

TORONTO (AP) — A suspect accused of plotting with al-Qaida in Iran to derail a train in Canada said Tuesday authorities were basing their conclusions on mere appearances. Iran, meanwhile, denied any involvement.

Canadian investigators say Raed Jaser, 35, and his suspected accomplice Chiheb Esseghaier, 30, received "directions and guidance" from members of al-Qaida in Iran. Iran said it had nothing to do with the plot, and groups such as al-Qaida do not share Iran's ideology.

Charges against the two men include conspiring to carry out an attack and murder people in association with a terrorist group. Police — tipped off by an imam worried about one of the suspects' behavior — said it was the first known attack planned by al-Qaida in Canada.

In a brief court appearance in Montreal, a bearded Esseghaier declined to be represented by a court-appointed lawyer. He made a brief statement in French in which he called the allegations against him unfair.

"The conclusions were made based on facts and words which are only appearances," he said in a calm voice after asking permission to speak.

Charges Dropped In Ricin-Laced Letters Case

TUPELO, Miss. (AP) — Charges of sending ricin-laced letters to President Barack Obama and others were dropped Tuesday against an Elvis impersonator from Mississippi who has said since his arrest last week that he had nothing to do with the case.

Meanwhile, in Tupelo, numerous law enforcement officers converged on the home of another Mississippi man, Everett Dutschke, including some in hazmat suits. No charges have been filed against him and he hasn't been arrested. Both men say they have no idea how to make the poisonous ricin and had nothing to do with sending them to Obama, U.S. Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi and a state judge.

Referring to officials' questions for him about the case, "I thought they said rice and I said I don't even eat rice," 45-year-old Paul Kevin Curtis said after he was released from custody Tuesday afternoon. "I respect President Obama. I love my country and would never do anything to pose a threat to him or any other U.S. official."

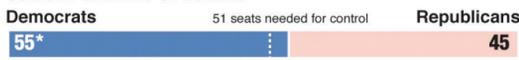
A one-sentence document filed by federal prosecutors said charges against Curtis were dropped, but left open the possibility they could be re-instated if authorities found more to prove their case. Prosecutors were not immediately available for comment.

The dismissal is the latest twist in a case that rattled the country already on edge over the Boston Marathon bombing last week.

Tough road for Democrats?

With six retiring senators among the 21 Democratic Senate seats up for election in 2014, it could be difficult for Democrats to retain control of the chamber. Seven of the seats are in states won by GOP presidential nominee Mitt Romney in 2012.

Current balance of Senate

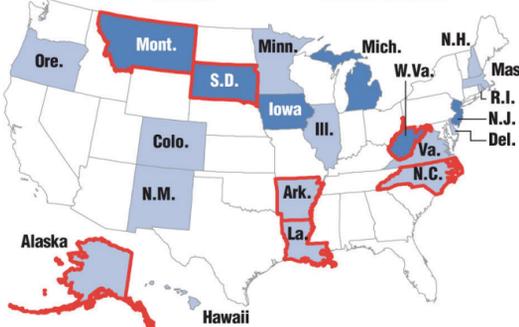
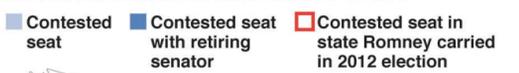


*Two Independents caucus with the Democrats; neither seat is up for election

Senate seats to be contested in 2014 election



Contested Democratic Senate seats in 2014



Source: Almanac of American Politics

Graphic: Chicago Tribune

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Montana Democrat Baucus Rules Out 7th Senate Term

BY DAVID ESPO AND MATT GOURAS
 Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus of Montana announced plans Tuesday to retire at the end of his term after a career of enormous power and notable independence, producing both collaboration and conflict with fellow Democrats on major tax and health care legislation.

"I don't want to die here with my boots on. There is life beyond Congress," the 71-year-old Baucus said in a telephone interview with The Associated Press.

He became the eighth senator to announce retirement plans for 2014, and the sixth Democrat. One public poll recently suggested he would have faced a difficult challenge if he had sought a seventh term.

Republicans must gain six seats in 2014 to win a majority, and they said the retirement enhanced their prospects.

Yet Democrats were cheered when former Democratic Gov. Brian Schweitzer, who recently stepped down after two terms, swiftly expressed interest in the race.

In a brief statement, President Barack Obama said Baucus "has been a leader on a broad range of issues that touch the lives of Americans across the country."

Sen. Chuck Grassley, an Iowa Republican and Baucus' frequent legislative partner, was complimentary, too. "We ran the Finance Committee for 10 years together, and every bill except for three or four was bipartisan," he said in a statement. "The Senate will be worse off as a deliberative body when Senator Baucus leaves."

In a written statement, Baucus sketched an ambitious agenda for the rest of his term, topped by an overhaul of the tax code.

"Our country and our state face enormous challenges - rising debt, a dysfunctional tax code, threats to our outdoor heritage and the need for more good-paying jobs," he said, adding several Montana-specific priorities as well.

Baucus, a fifth-generation Montanan, was elected to the Senate in 1978 after two terms in the House. He became the top Democrat on the Finance Committee in early 2001. He has held the position ever

since on the panel — which has jurisdiction over taxes, Medicare, Medicaid, health care and trade — as chairman when his party held a majority and as senior member of the minority when Republicans were in power.

The panel has a long tradition of bipartisanship, but Baucus ascended to power in an era of increasing partisanship in Congress.

Many Democrats were unhappy when he worked with Republicans to enact the tax cuts that President George W. Bush won in 2001. And then again in 2004 when Congress pushed through a GOP plan to create a new prescription drug benefit under Medicare, a measure that most Democrats opposed as a giveaway to the large drug companies.

Baucus stood with fellow Democrats in 2005 when Bush proposed legislation to partially privatize Social Security, an epic battle that ended in defeat for the president's effort.

He played a central role in the enactment of Obama's watershed health care legislation in 2010, although some inside his party complained that precious momentum was lost while he spent months on bipartisan negotiations that ultimately proved fruitless.

More recently, Baucus has expressed opposition to Democratic proposals to use an overhaul of the tax code as a means of raising additional revenue. He was one of four members of his party to oppose the budget the leadership brought to the floor with a requirement to that effect.

Kerry:

NATO Needs Plan For Syrian Chemical Weapons

BY MATTHEW LEE
 AND DON MELVIN
 Associated Press

BRUSSELS — U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry urged NATO on Tuesday to prepare for the possible use of chemical weapons by Syria on the same day that a senior Israeli military intelligence official said Syrian President Bashar Assad had used such weapons last month in his battle against insurgents.

It was the first time Israel had accused the embattled Syrian leader of using his stockpile of nonconventional weapons.

The assessment, based on visual evidence, could raise pressure on the U.S. and other Western countries to intervene in Syria. Britain and France recently announced that they had evidence that Assad's government had used chemical weapons.

President Barack Obama has warned that the use of chemical weapons by Assad would be a "game changer" and has hinted that it could draw intervention.

But White House spokesman Jay Carney said while the administration is continuing to monitor and investigate whether the Syrian regime has used chemical weapons, it has "not come to the conclusion that there has been that use."

"But it is something that is of great concern to us, to our partners, and obviously unacceptable as the president made clear," Carney said.

Despite the deteriorating situation, NATO officials say there is virtually no chance the alliance will intervene in the civil war. More than 70,000 people have died in the conflict, according to the United Nations. The violence also has forced more than 1 million Syrians to seek safety abroad, and more are leaving by the day, burdening neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq.

On Tuesday, Brig. Gen. Itai Brun, the head of research and analysis in Israeli military intelligence, told a security conference in Tel Aviv that Assad had used chemical weapons multiple times. Among the incidents were attacks documented by the French and British near Damascus last month.

He cited images of people hurt, but gave no indication he had other evidence, such as soil samples, typically used to verify chemical weapons use.

"To the best of our professional understanding, the regime used lethal chemical weapons against the militants in a series of incidents over the past months, including the relatively famous incident of March 19," Brun said. "Shrunken pupils, foaming at the mouth and other signs indicate, in our view, that lethal chemical weapons were used."

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