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“Boston Bombing Case Upends Assumptions About Racial Profiling” Reflection

The main idea of this article is that racial profiling is an unsuccessful way to solve crimes. It is also a terrible thing to do to make an assumption about a person because of the color of their skin or the ethnicity a person may think they belong to. In the article, the author argues that the bombers of the Boston marathon, Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev, would have never been caught if the police relied on racial profiling instead of good detective work.

The author supports his argument by giving examples of why they would have never been caught. The brothers responsible for the crime did not belong to any sort of racial stereotype that is associated with terrorism. One example given in the article is that most terrorists are believed to be Middle Eastern older men in their mid 30s. Another example of terrorists can be homegrown, like Timothy McVay, a white male who was responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing. Had the police relied on these two racial profilings of terrorists, they would have never caught the Tsarnaev brothers because they didn't fit into any of the racial profilings of terrorists. They were two young adults, who were from Chechnya, and lived in the US for about a decade.

Boston Bombing Case Upends Assumptions About Racial Profiling

By Elahe Izadi

The identities of the suspects in the Boston Marathon bombing, which emerged Friday, completely negated assumptions born of racial profiling.

In the wake of the blasts that killed three people and injured more than 175, news organizations and social-media websites picked apart photos of marathon crowds by zeroing in on brown men with backpacks. CNN's John King quoted a law-enforcement source as saying they had a suspect who was "dark-skinned." A Saudi national, first identified as a person of interest, turned out to just be an injured witness. A Moroccan-American teenage track athlete who appeared on a *New York Post* cover under the headline "Feds seek these two pictured at Boston Marathon" now fears for his life.

But the actual bombing suspects, Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev, are ethnic Chechens who have lived in the United States for a decade. Their roots are tied to the Caucasus region -- quite literally, they are Caucasian. One attended the same high school that Matt Damon graduated from and was on the wrestling team; the other had boxing ambitions. They both have dark hair and are relatively light-skinned. They are reportedly Muslim, and an unverified YouTube account under the elder brother's name included videos made by Islamic fundamentalists. But it's impossible to determine their ethnicity, much less their nationality, religion, or ideology, simply by looking at them.

Right after the bombings, two main narratives -- and corresponding physical profiles -- emerged in the media: Was this the work of domestic terrorists, perhaps connected with antigovernment groups attempting to make a statement on Patriot's Day? Or were foreign terrorists, linked to some kind of element such as al-Qaida, responsible? While the motives behind the attacks remain unclear, the Tsarnaev brothers don't fit that assumed physical profile of a domestic terrorist (white, American-born men) or a Qaida-linked one (dark-skinned, brown men).

"Until definitive information emerges, it's pointless to speculate on who did or didn't do this. The Oklahoma City bombing was first blamed on men dressed in 'Arab garb,' " Juliette Kayyem, executive director of the Domestic Preparedness Session at Harvard University wrote in the *Boston Globe* the day after the attack. "The thirst for a quick and easy explanation leads everyone astray."

It wasn't until Thursday afternoon that law-enforcement officials released photos of the suspects. Many took to Twitter to proclaim they were white men. But identifying someone's race is difficult, even with a photo.

"That preconceived bias was stunted, because you didn't know their background, you didn't know their religious affiliation," says Todd McGhee, a former Massachusetts State Police officer

and cofounder of security firm Protecting the Homeland Innovations. "It doesn't matter if you're from a foreign nation, or grew up on Main Street in Boston, Mass. As you looked at the [photos], all you could have said is that they were two men. You could confirm gender, and they were lighter-skinned."

Even if the public had known whether the suspects were white or "dark-skinned," that piece of information was still too vague to be useful -- how many men in Boston fall under that description?

While so much is yet unknown, "this is going to be a landmark case study," says McGhee, adding that profiling by race and religion is simply not an effective way of combating terrorism. For one, religious and ethnic communities -- crucial to cooperating with law enforcement on terrorism cases -- may become alienated. Entire groups of people fall under suspicion, just because of how they look. And others who pose a threat may go unnoticed, such as domestic, homegrown terrorists. "No religion and no culture or ethnicity has a monopoly on terrorism," McGhee says.

The public is better served by being aware of factors such as unusual behavior, McGhee added, or anomalies in something as simple as how someone is walking to whether they are overdressed for an event (as the Tsarnaev brothers appeared to be). Racial profiling is less effective than random sampling for law enforcement looking to catch terrorists, University of Texas statistician William Press has found.

To be sure, federal and Massachusetts authorities have not encouraged racial profiling in how they've handled the case; they simply released photos once they had them. On Wednesday, Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick said: "These are times when all kinds of forces sometimes conspire to make people start to think of categories of people in sometimes uncharitable ways....This community will recover and will heal if we turn to each other rather than on each other."

Indeed, in the end, it was assiduous detective work that led to the identification of suspects, not racial profiling.

