AN ATTEMPT TO REVIVE ARMENIAN ULTRA-NATIONALIST TERRORISM: THE CONTENT OF THE FBI REPORT

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On August 29th, 2024, a post was made on the website of the US Federal Prosecutor's Office regarding the case of Aram Brunson, a 21-year-old man of Armenian descent who made false statements concerning an explosion that occurred in a dormitory room at the University of Chicago on January 2nd, 2023. However, this situation is not Türkiye's only concern. In connection with this issue, there are other important points of interest for Türkiye and Azerbaijan. It is worth noting that the activities of Aram Brunson, a university student of Armenian origin, during his time in the US were an attempt to revive Armenian ultra-nationalist terrorism.

The criminal complaint against Aram accuses him of falsifying, concealing and covering up a fact related to the preparation of explosives by using a trick, scheme or device, and of making false statements to federal authorities. The suspect currently lives in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia, where he attends the American University. Although the US Federal Prosecutor's Office uses the term presumed[1], a simple search on the internet will indicate that he is residing in Yerevan. It was written that the criminal complaint, under the signature of Thomas M. Dalton, which the FBI shared with the public, was prepared between January 2nd, 2023 and August 20th, 2023.[2] Although the report seems to be limited to a period of eight months, the root of the issue dates back to 2020. Before we move on to observations regarding the history of the issue, it would be useful to elaborate on some aspects of the reports general outlook.

Aram Brunson was caught on the FBI's radar after an explosion in a dormitory at the University of Chicago on January 2nd, 2024. Emergency personnel found about two kilos

of potassium nitrate, a kilo of charcoal, a few grams of sulphur and several bottles of isopropyl alcohol in Arams room. Additionally, emergency responders found a container with soot residue near the location of the extinguished fire. They added that the chemicals found in his room were matched with the production of black powder, a type of energetic material[3] used as a propellant in some ammunition and fireworks. Brunson then said that such an explosion occurred while he was testing a video titled 25 Pounds of Black Powder vs. iPhone 7 Experiment!. However, such a video was not found after searching his laptop. When specialists checked his laptop, the truth they revealed was much different. There were about 10 videos in which Brunson was discussing how to create, finance and arm a revolutionary group. It is understood that the videos were recorded months before the explosion occurred in the Chicago University dorm room on May 2022. In the videos, Brunson can be seen lecturing in front of a whiteboard as if he were an expert in these matters and clearly trying to assist the Armenian speakers in the creation and operation of an armed militant terrorist organization. He explains the suitable names for revolutionary and terrorist organizations, their internal structures and rules, and how such operations should be financed. He states that acquiring bombs and other weapons is expensive and difficult and that legal sources of funding (such as membership fees) would be insufficient to cover the costs of acquiring weapons. He then suggests that financing for weapons should be obtained by selling drugs or robbery. He also suggests that posts on the internet should be made in Armenian. This suggestion brings to mind the statement issued in Armenian by ASALA after Armenia's defeat in the Second Karabakh War. In that statement, ASALA blamed not only Türkiye and Azerbaijan for the defeat, but also the Armenian leadership and its military authorities.[4] It is seen in the criminal complaint that Brunson emphasized this point with the idea that it would be more difficult to detect if the statements or correspondence were only made in Armenian.

We have already mentioned that one of the reasons for the issuing of the criminal complaint was that Brunson had made a false statement. The report is not a criminal complaint regarding this information, despite the fact that the initiatives he is involved in are clearly terrorist initiatives. It should be noted that there are some deficiencies in the content of the criminal complaint. We will address these points after analyzing the report.

Another striking point in the criminal complaint is that Brunson searched for and purchased the Department of the Army Improvised Munitions Handbook. This handbook is a technical manual for the US Army Special Forces that describes how to prepare various types of munitions from readily available materials, scrap piles, common household chemicals, and materials purchased from ordinary retail stores. Among other things, this manual contains instructions on how to make black powder and HMTD (HexaMethylene Triperoxide Diamine).

As for the reasons for his interest for bomb-making, it may be useful to refer to some messages on Brunson's computer. Among these messages, it appears that on February 2nd, 2022, Brunson sent a text message to an unidentified person, who wanted to join the fedayis. It is also helpful to highlight the language in the criminal complaint. The statement According to open-source materials, Armenian Fedayis historically were ethnic Armenians who formed self-defense units and irregular armed bands, with the aim of

using force to defend Armenians from Ottomans and others, and creating an independent Armenian state.[5] was included in the complaint. This statement makes Armenians appear as a helpless and destitute people who need protection from the Ottoman Empire. This is the statement of the person who signed the criminal complaint.

Another noteworthy aspect in the complaint is the contested territory in Azerbaijan[6] description. The Second Karabakh War ended and it is undisputable that Karabakh is now Azerbaijani territory. Using such a statement is inaccurate. Therefore, it is understood that Agent Dalton, who prepared the report, internalized the radical Armenian discourse.

According to the information obtained from the scanned computer and phone, two other close friends of Brunson (referred to in the report as Individual A and Individual B), who were also involved in the Armenian struggle, appear to have exchanged WhatsApp messages in the fall of 2022. It appears that their intent was to create a militia-type camp for strategy, living, implementation and tactical/military training. Brunson and individuals A and B referred to themselves as Cells. Subsequent investigation revealed that Brunson and Individual A attempted to receive military training during a trip to the contested region in Azerbaijan in the summer of 2022. Moreover, throughout the summer and fall of 2022, Brunson and Individual A researched on where they could receive weapons training in the US or abroad.

Investigations of his computer and mobile phone show that throughout 2022, Brunson looked up the locations of Turkish and Azerbaijani diplomatic facilities both within the US and abroad, including Boston and Washington D.C. Among his searches in 2022 were residence of the Ambassador of Azerbaijan and residence of the Turkish Ambassador. In addition to these, he searched for building access and grappling hooks. This brings to mind the fact that attacks on Turkish diplomats between 1973 and 1984 were mostly carried out in the vicinity of embassy residences. It is known that a large number of incidents occurred right in front of or in the neighborhood of the residences. The case of Aram Brunson presents a different picture than the other attackers. Even a simple search on the internet about Aram Brunson reveals the image of a person who likes to be in the public eye, who does not feel the need to hide, who tries to create the perception of saviour of the Armenian people and whose Instagram account is open to everyone. Another aspect seen in these searches is that he has written eleven articles published in The Armenian Weekly. It is understood from the articles and the dates of the videos on the internet that he was an activist who went to the squares and made speeches in 2022 and 2023. He even appears to have been one of the protesters in front of the Turkish embassy on April 25th, 2023.

Brunson also conducted searches on firearms, including laws related to handguns, sites which sold firearms, and the location of gun ranges. In relation to this, the week before he set off the black powder device in his dormitory room, he made the following search, if you shoot someone whos [sic] inside an embassy from outside of the embassy what country do you go to jail in. Additionally, Brunson researched past bombings of diplomatic facilities in the US and abroad that were carried out by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF).

On November 11th, 2022, Brunson sent a text message to B stating that he made a pledge to the ARF. Further investigation confirmed that he was inducted into the Chicago branch of the ARF, and that the ceremony was conducted with firearms. Brunson also shared a photo of a bullet with the numbers 11/11/22 on it which had been given to him by the ARF when he was inducted. This bullet was found in Brunsons room after the explosion. This leads to the following question: Giving a bullet as a symbol of membership in a group has more than one meaning. If every ARF member is presented with a bullet as a symbol, is there an FBI investigation on this issue? The question is actually clear. It is no secret that the ARF harbours hostile feelings towards Türkiye and Azerbaijan, which include terrorist aims. Even though one Aram Brunson has been identified in the media, it is clear that there are other young people who have been educated to show hostility towards Türkiye. What is the extent of the FBI authorities' initiatives in this regard? Are other possible attackers being pursued?

On August 23rd, 2023, law enforcement officers issued a search warrant for Brunson's family home in Massachusetts in order to search for bomb-making materials and other related items. In Brunson's bedroom, officers found a notebook which not only contained notes of the preparatory chemicals making up HMTD, but also a detailed formula for making the explosive.

When leaving the US in August 2023, Brunson told US Border Security authorities that he was going to Yerevan to attend the American University of Armenia. Recent information suggests that he remains in Armenia. Efforts have been made recently to encourage Brunson to return to the US to meet with agents regarding the arrest warrant issued by the US Department of Justice. Through a representative, Brunson has declined to return.

Based on all of the aspects of the criminal complaint, there is reason to believe that Brunson did the following: Knowingly and willfully falsify, conceal, and cover up by trick, scheme, and device one or more material facts in a matter within the jurisdiction of the executive branch of the US Government (Beginning on or around January 2nd, 2023 and continuing through on or around August 20th, 2023), knowingly and willfully conceal material facts related to his efforts to make explosive devices (In response to questions by University of Chicago police, agents with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and officers of the Department of Homeland Security Customs and Border Protection), knowingly and willfully make a materially false, fictitious, and fraudulent statement in that he inadvertently denied ever being in a place where firearms or explosives were used or handled, and could not think of any reason why explosive residue was found on his belongings (In violation of law, on or around August 20th, 2023, in response to questions by an officer of the Department of Homeland Security Customs and Border Protection).

The complaint written by the FBI Special Agent is very detailed, but incomplete. It is difficult to understand why the US law enforcement officers involved in the investigations did not include the terrorist attempt as a cause for the criminal complaint. It is also surprising that, despite the explosion in his university dormitory and the discovery of terrorist plans at his home, US law enforcement did not arrest him immediately, choosing to believe the excuses stated by a potential terrorist.[7] Each of these charges carries a

maximum penalty of five years in prison, three years of supervised release and a fine of up to $250,000. However, the available material evidence and numerous facts show that Aram Brunson planned terrorist acts against Türkiye and Azerbaijan, but was unable to carry out this intention for reasons beyond his control.[8] As a result of this situation, Aram Brunson managed to leave the US and took refuge in Armenia. This incident is reminiscent of the unquestioned release of Hampig Sassounian, the Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide (JCAG) terrorist who murdered the Turkish Consul General in Los Angeles, the late Kemal Arıkan, on January 28th, 1982, and his smooth unproblematic return to Armenia in 2021.[9] Sassounian is currently involved in the anti-government protests of Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, an opponent of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan[10].

Coming back to the essence of the FBI's criminal complaint, it is disappointing that the complaint in question is regarding false statements and attempted bomb-making, despite the fact that the criminal complaint mentions activities supporting terrorism. Although the criminal complaint was reported in Turkish news channels as an attempt to revive Armenian terrorism, there is no doubt that the US authorities were focused on the disruption of peace and security within the US. The situation that implies this is that Aram Brunson, despite this criminal complaint, was not arrested but ended up in Yerevan and continues to live his life there. Therefore, the fact that ARF terrorists continue their lives without any problems in the region, where the mere mention of the Türkiye-Azerbaijan-Armenia peace process is a major development, should raise concerns about regional developments.

*Picture: *https://www.milliyet.com.tr/dunya/abdde-yurt-odasini-bombayla-patlatan-ermeni-ogrenci-brunsonin-hedefinde-karabag-vardi-7182895*

[1] Newton Man Charged in Scheme to Conceal Bomb Making, *United States Attorneys Office*, 29 August 2024, https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/pr/newton-man-charged-scheme-conceal-bomb-making.

[2] United States of America v. Aram Brunson, 27 August 2024, https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/media/1365926/dl.

[3] In the criminal complaint, energetic material is described as a class of material that can release chemical energy stored in their molecular structure. Additionally, upon external stimulations, such as heat, shock, or electrical current, these materials will emit energy in a short time.

[4] Hazel Çağan Elbir, Armenian Terrorism Begins To Show Its Face Again - 2, avim.org.tr/en, *AVİM*, 15 March 2021, https://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/ARMENIAN-TERRORISM-BEGINS-TO-SHOW-ITS-FACE-AGAIN-2-1

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[5] United States of America v. Aram Brunson, 27 August 2024, https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/media/1365926/dl.

[6] The statement Armenian struggle in the disputed territory, is used. (United States of America v. Aram Brunson, 27 August 2024, https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/media/1365926/dl.)

[7] New generation Armenian terrorism continues to threaten security in the 21st century, apa.az, *APA*, 3 September 2024, https://en.apa.az/political/new-generation-armenian-terrorism-continues-to-threaten-security-in-the-21st-century-analysis-447135.

[8] New generation Armenian terrorism continues to threaten security in the 21st century,.

[9] Hazel Çağan Elbir, The Decision to Release Sassounian, avim.org.tr/en, *AVİM*, 12 March 2021, https://www.avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/THE-DECISION-TO-RELEASE-SASSOUNIAN.

[10] Hazel Çağan Elbir, An Archbishop of the Armenian Apostolic Church Hand in Hand with a Murderer - Behind the Scenes of The Protests in Yerevan,avim.org.tr/en, *AVİM*, 23 May 2024, https://avim.org.tr/en/Analiz/AN-ARCHBISHOP-OF-THE-ARMENIAN-APOSTOLIC-CHURCH-HAND-IN-HAND-WITH-A-MURDERER-BEHIND-THE-SCENES-OF-THE-PROTESTS-IN-YEREVAN.

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