

Analysis: Islamist Inspired Violent Extremism in the United States

Assault at UNC Chapel Hill Continues Trend of Violent Acts Associated With Islamist Ideology

Summary:

- On March 3, 2006, Mohammad Reza Taheri-azar drove a rented Jeep Grand Cherokee through a crowd at a UNC Chapel Hill campus center known as “The Pit,” hitting nine people
- Shortly afterwards, Taheri-azar called 911 and told a dispatcher that he committed the act to “punish the government of the United States for [its] actions around the world”
- He then disclosed his location and turned himself in to the authorities
- Local authorities quickly concluded that Taheri-azar was working alone
- Taheri-azar, 22, had recently completed an undergraduate degree in psychology at UNC and was in the process of applying to graduate Ph.D. programs
- Born in Iran to a well-off Shia family, Taheri-azar spent most of his life in the United States. A few weeks prior to the attack, he began working at a fast-food restaurant
- Taheri-azar was a serious student but also a social recluse. He was a drinker and marijuana smoker, but stopped these habits approximately 6 months prior to the attack, adopting a more pious demeanor
- Taheri-azar’s attack came shortly after a UNC campus paper published images of Danish political cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammad



Mohammed Reza Taheri-azar



The Pit at UNC Chapel Hill

Ali R. Warrayat – Home Depot, Chandler, AZ

- On December 18, 2005, Ali R. Warrayat drove his car through the front doors of the Chandler Home Depot, barely missing an employee
- Warrayat stopped the car in the paint department and attempted to set fire to it
- Warrayat had placed a Palestinian flag and a copy of the Quran in the trunk of the car
- Warrayat told police he was angry with Home Depot, where he worked as a paint stocker, about not getting a sufficient raise. He also said he was angered by proposals to build a 700-mile fence along the Mexican border. Warrayat claimed he wanted to make America, “more free”
- Warrayat, 24, had formerly studied computer science at Arizona State University
- Originally from Jordan, Warrayat became a U.S. citizen after living here for several years
- Co-workers described Warrayat as “gentleman-like” and “respectable with everyone.” He was a “hard worker” and alluded to his religion frequently
- Images on Warrayat’s computer depicted men lighting Molotov cocktails and a cartoon of two bloodied children with a Palestinian flag in the background

A Pattern of Violent Extremism:

- Taheri-azar's UNC attack was part of a larger pattern of violent extremism in America

Personal					Attack		
Name	Age	Ethnicity	Education	Employer	Attack Target	Alone / Assisted	Possible Catalyst
Mohammed Reza Taheri-azar	22	Iranian Shia	UNC Chapel Hill graduate (psychology)	Fast food restaurant	The Pit student center at UNC	Alone	Publishing of Danish cartoons by campus paper
Ali R. Warrayat	24	Jordanian Sunni (U.S. Citizen)	Arizona State student (computer science)	Home Depot	Chandler, AZ Home Depot	Alone	Defacing of local mosque / Workplace frustration
Joel Henry Hinrichs III	21	American - possible convert	Univ. of Oklahoma student (engineering)	N/A	Oklahoma Memorial Stadium	May have had assistance	Unclear

Joel Henry Hinrichs III – University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK

- October 1, 2005, a 21-year-old engineering student detonated a bomb near a packed football stadium at the University of Oklahoma in Norman, killing himself in the process
- Authorities reported that the bomb detonated prematurely when Hinrichs was either arming a bomb vest or backpack containing TATP (triacetone triperoxide), a relatively easily manufactured compound that has become the explosive of choice for terrorists
- It is unclear whether Hinrichs ever formally converted to Islam, but when police searched Hinrichs's apartment they allegedly discovered a "huge cache" of TATP explosives, as well as bomb-making manuals and a "significant amount" of Islamist literature
- Although Hinrichs belonged to a campus fraternity consisting of engineers, architects and scientists, he did not live in the fraternity house and was considered a quiet type who kept mostly to himself
- Controversy persists as to whether Hinrichs's death was a simple suicide or part of a larger plot

Distinguishing Violent Extremism From Homegrown Terrorism

- Violent extremists can be distinguished from homegrown terrorists, who tend to act in groups and conduct more coordinated attacks
- Whereas violent extremists are often motivated in large measure by personal dissatisfaction and tend to work independently, homegrown terrorists are more frequently motivated by closely held doctrinal beliefs and usually work together in small groups or cells
- Examples of homegrown terrorists include the London July '05 bombers, the Lodi, CA father and his son who trained at an Al-Qaeda camp in Pakistan (Hamid and Umer Hayat), and the Torrance, CA Islamic prison gang headed by Levar Haley Washington

- Violent extremism examples include Hesham Mohamed Hadayat, who sprayed the El Al ticket counter at LAX with automatic gunfire, and the Beltway sniper attacks from October 2002
- Violent extremists have generally not been exposed to intentional doctrinal radicalization like homegrown terrorists are, but tend to be radicalized through personal interpretation of news events
- While violent extremists may invoke Islamist political or social objectives, they need not be particularly devout – or even necessarily open converts to Islam
- Exposure to or advocating of virulent Islamist rhetoric or expression is closely associated with both violent extremism and homegrown terrorism
- Violent extremists may be less organized than certain homegrown terrorists, but they still have the capacity to cause tremendous damage; for example, Oklahoma Memorial Stadium was filled with a capacity crowd of 84,000 at the time Joel Henry Hinrichs blew himself up
- For more on homegrown terrorism and the Levar Haley Washington prison gang in particular, see CPT's Bulletin, "Militant Islam in U.S. Prison System" located on our website



Joel Henry Hinrichs III



Capacity Crowd at Oklahoma Memorial Stadium

Implications for Law Enforcement

- These violent extremists were students or recent graduates who may have been exposed to new ideas about Islam and/or ethnic politics while living away from home; law enforcement should partner with campus security to be on the watch for precursor indicators
- Given the proximity of OU Stadium to the explosion, the worst case must be assumed—that Hinrichs intended to detonate his bomb inside; crime scene photos of his apartment should be studied carefully
- Local law enforcement should partner with academia and private groups to construct mock-ups of Hinrichs's apartment in order to train patrol officers and other local actors on warning indicators; such models should ideally be built on mobile platforms and can easily be positioned at high volume areas such as qualification ranges or police headquarters
- Law enforcement should be vigilante following local, national, or international events perceived as anti-Muslim or unjust, which serve as a catalyst for outbursts by violent extremists; for example, see CPT's Bulletin, "Firebombing Jewish Elementary School in Montreal" located on our website

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