

## CASE STUDY ANALYSIS: THWARTED ATTACK AT THE CURTIS CULWELL CENTER IN GARLAND, TEXAS DURING A “DRAW MOHAMMED” EVENT

*This report is based on information collected from open sources and the professional insights of ASERO’s team of experts. This analysis focuses mainly on the anti-terrorism / protective security aspects of the event and less on the intelligence perspective.*

### SUMMARY OF ATTACK

On 3 May 2015, two gunmen wearing body armor opened fire with assault rifles outside the Curtis Culwell Center in Garland, Texas during an art exhibit and contest hosted by the American Freedom Defense Initiative (AFDI). Approximately 200 people were in attendance. The incident only lasted a few seconds, and both gunmen were killed. The first assailant was killed almost instantly by Garland police officers on site. SWAT officers quickly responded to the scene and opened fire, killing the second assailant after he tried to reach into a backpack that authorities suspected might have contained explosives. Bruce Joiner, a traffic police officer working after-hours as security for the event, was shot in the ankle but was later released from the hospital. No other injuries occurred. The two assailants were identified as Elton Simpson, who was reportedly known to the FBI and had previously been the target of a terror-related investigation and Nadir Soofi.

The investigation is ongoing and still in the early stages of understanding how this attack was planned, who was involved, the details surrounding the actual attack and the possible motive. IS had claimed responsibility for the attack. Although it remains unclear whether IS actually ordered the attack, this is the first incident in the U.S. that was directly inspired by the organization.

### DESCRIPTION EVENTS

- At 18:50hrs, two gunmen, armed with assault rifles and driving a dark sedan began firing on a police vehicle that was blocking the parking lot entrance to the west entrance of the Curtis Culwell Center.
- The armed officer inside the vehicle got out and returned fire with a pistol, hitting both of the shooters.
- The building was immediately put on lockdown and the attendees inside were moved to a more secure area of the building.
- A SWAT team that was positioned on the other side of the building, as part of pre-



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- planned security measures, was able to respond to the gunfire within seconds, killing the second gunman and helping to secure the scene.
- Police suspected that the assailants' vehicle may have contained an incendiary device and called out the bomb squad to search the vehicle and surrounding area.
  - Nearby businesses were evacuated and a 1,000-foot radius around the nearby Walmart was shut down.
  - Around midnight, the bomb squad detonated several suspicious items found in the car, but no bombs were discovered.
  - Once the scene was under control, the investigation moved to the suspects' apartment they shared together in Phoenix, Arizona.

## ENVIRONMENT

Tensions were already high in the Texas Muslim community after an Iraqi immigrant was shot dead in Dallas in March 2015 when he was standing outside his apartment photographing his first snowfall. The shooting was not ruled a hate crime, but the timing of the shooting which followed the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris in January, the ISIS executions of westerners, the death of three Muslim students in North Carolina in February and other provocative protests in Texas had increased anxiety among the Muslim community.

## MOTIVE

AFDI is known for campaigning against the building of an Islamic center a few blocks from the World Trade Center in Manhattan and for buying advertising space in cities across the US criticising Islam. The civil rights watchdog Southern Poverty Law Center considers the group to be an anti-Muslim hate group.

AFDI organized the event as a response to the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in January 2015 as well as in response to a large controversial event denouncing Islamophobia at the Curtis Culwell Center in January. Geert Wilders, a Dutch lawmaker and head of the Party for Freedom, known for his outspoken criticism of Islam was the keynote speaker at the event.

The exhibit featured cartoons depicting the Muslim prophet Mohammed. Many Muslims believe that depictions of Mohammed are insulting and disrespectful. According to mainstream Islamic tradition, any physical depiction of the prophet- either positive or negative- is considered blasphemous. Some Islamists have cited that such cartoons have been motivation in several previous attacks.

Geert Wilders indicated in an email to AFP that he was concerned that he may have been the target, because he, like the Charlie Hebdo cartoonists that were killed, is on a hit list that is circulated by al-Qaida supporters as well as death lists from the Pakistan Taliban and the Islamic

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State.

## THE ASSAILANTS

Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi were roommates in Arizona. Elton Simpson had been described as a quiet and devout individual who worshipped at the Islamic Community Center of Phoenix for almost ten years. However, the president of the mosque, Usama Shami, reported that he frequented less often since his arrest in 2011. Simpson had been under surveillance since 2006 due to his social media presence and his association with an individual the FBI believed was trying to set up a terrorist cell in Arizona. In 2011, Simpson was convicted of lying to FBI agents over his desire to join violent jihad in Somalia. He was sentenced to three years' probation and ordered to pay \$600 in fines and penalties.

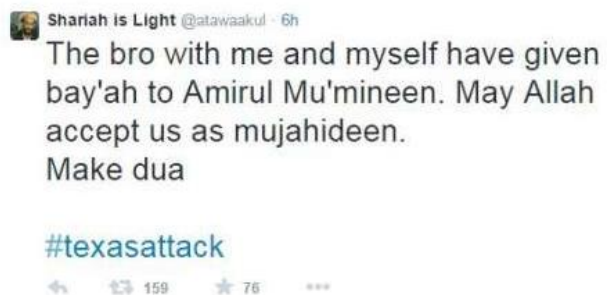


Nadir Soofi had no criminal record. He was raised in a “normal American fashion” and was very politically involved with the Middle East. In the 1990s, Soofi spent a few years in Islamabad, Pakistan, where he lived with his father and stepmother and attended a prestigious private school. His father was Pakistani and his mother was American. Soofi was also a member of the Islamic Community Center of Phoenix but attended less frequently. He owned a local pizza shop.

The mosque president stated that neither of them showed any signs of radicalization.

## LINKS TO SOCIAL MEDIA

Elton Simpson had linked himself to the Islamic State group prior to the attack. He posted on Twitter “May Allah accept us as mujahideen,” and that he and Nadir Soofi pledged loyalty to “Amirul Mu’mineen,” an Arabic title taken by Muslim rulers and these days reference to leader of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Mullah Omar, the head of the Afghan Taliban.

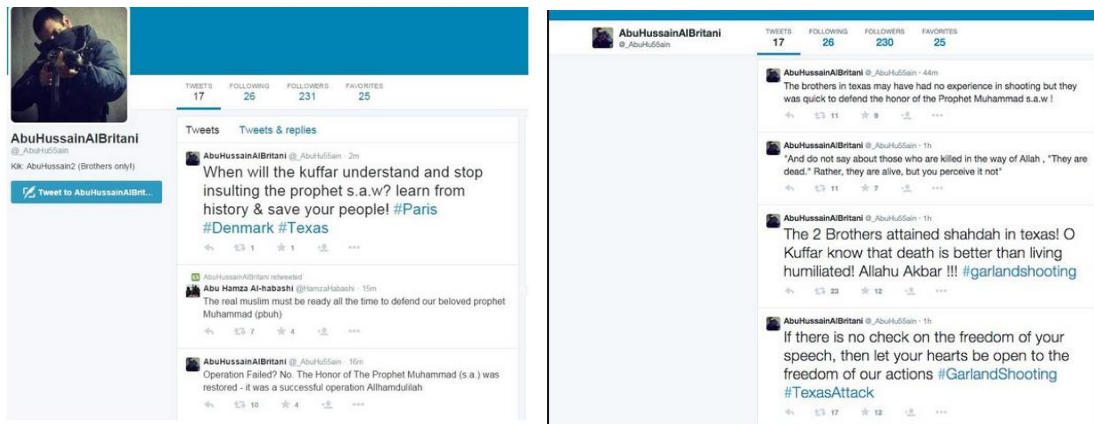


The tweet was posted at 6.35pm local time, approximately five minutes before the two gunmen

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opened fire.

It was reported that Abu Hussain Al-Britani, also known as British Islamic State (IS) fighter Junaid Hussain, claimed on Twitter that the shooting was carried out by two pro-IS individuals. He described the gunmen as "two of our brothers." Abu Hussien al Britani also tweeted, "if there is no check on the freedom of your speech, then let your hearts be open to the freedom of our actions."



Twitter has been widely used by extremists affiliated with or sympathetic is ISIS to spread propaganda and coordinate recruitment. The Garland police were monitoring social media for potential threats to the AFDI event, but it is still unclear whether they were alerted to the attack or not.

### SIMILAR RECENT ATTACKS

This incident bears similarities to the attacks that occurred this year in France and Denmark which also related to images of Mohammed as well as the IS armed assaults in Belgium and Canada in 2014.

- **Armed Attack at Charlie Hebdo in Paris**

On January 7, 2015, two gunmen entered the offices of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and fatally shot twelve people, along with injuring many more. The three alleged assailants were 32-year-old Cherif Kouachi, 34-year-old Said Kouachi and 18-year-old Hamyd Mourad. The attacks were said to have been in revenge for the magazine's controversial publications mocking the Prophet Mohammed.

The next day, a third attacker, Amedy Coulibaly, engaged in a shootout with a female police officer, killing her and seriously injuring a street sweeper. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of January, at 12:30 p.m., Coulibaly armed with an automatic rifle, took many shoppers hostage inside a kosher grocery on the southeast side of Paris, killing four hostages before police stormed the store and killed

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Coulibaly.

- **Attack at the Krudttønden Cultural Center in Denmark**

On February 14, 2015 a gunman killed one civilian and wounded three police officers at a public afternoon event called “Art, Blasphemy and Freedom of Expression” at the Krudttønden Cultural Center in Copenhagen. Swedish artist Lars Vilks was among the speakers and is thought to have been the main target because of his depictions of Mohammed. Later that evening (at midnight and therefore considered February 15<sup>th</sup>), another shooting took place outside the city's Great Synagogue in Krystalgade. A gunman killed a Jewish man on security duty during a bat mitzvah celebration and wounded two police officers. The man was killed later that morning after he opened fire on them while attempting to enter a location under police surveillance. The man was identified as Omar Abdel Hamid El-Husseini and according to police responsible for both attacks.

- **Shooting at the Jewish Museum of Belgium**

On May 24, 2014, at around 3:30 P.M. local time, 29 year old Mehdi Nemmouche entered the Jewish Museum in Brussels and shot four people dead with a Kalashnikov rifle. The victims included an Israeli couple, a French woman and a Belgian man. He was arrested six days later in Marseille, France and extradited to Belgium. Mehdi Nemmouche had dual French-algerian citizenship and had spent most of the year 2013 in Syria where he fought alongside ISIL fighters. According to a freed French hostage, Nemmouche used to torture, rape, and kill the prisoners of ISIL.

- **2014 Shootings at Parliament Hill, Ottawa**

On October 22 at around 9:50 A.M., Michael Zehaf-Bibeau drove to the War Memorial in downtown Ottawa. He got out of his car and fatally shot one soldier who was on guard fatally and tried unsuccessfully to shoot another soldier. He then drove a few blocks down the street to Parliament Hill where he parked his car and ran into the House of Commons, exchanging gunfire with security officers. Eventually he was overtaken and killed by security officers.

## **INSIGHTS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

- 🏰 The risk assessment and security planning carried out by law enforcement authorities proved correct and effective. Despite the fact that no IS-claimed attacks had occurred on US soil to date, local authorities developed a security plan months in advance based on a risk assessment of previous similar events involving controversial depictions of Mohammed. The plan included controlling all entrances and exits, using barricades and establishing a media area. The plan allowed for the rapid response by deployed SWAT



team on standby.

- 🏰 The deployment of both armed and unarmed security personnel on the outer perimeter of the facility provided both detection capabilities and enabled officers to quickly respond and defeat the threat before it could escalate.
- 🏰 Deploying the bomb squad immediately following the shooting was a positive action that took into consideration the possible modus operandi that the terrorists may have left IEDs to enhance the impact of their attack.
- 🏰 In all previous attacks linked to IS (i.e. Brussels, Paris, Denmark and Canada) the attacker was able to initiate the attack without significant hindrance and successfully penetrate the target and achieve their objectives. When such attacks are successful they are praised on Jihadi websites, which in turn raises motivation and can lead to copycat attacks. In this event, the perpetrators were clearly defeated without reaching their target or completing their objectives. These outcomes are viewed by Jihadists as a failure and may help create deterrence against future attacks.
- 🏰 The apparent motivation behind the attack was revenge against depictions of Muhammad and Islam. Other previous forms of attack aim to indiscriminately target individuals in the name of jihad. By conducting these attacks the terrorists achieve two goals: (1) spread the message of violence, jihad, and radicalization; and (2) creates friction between communities that causes problems in the assimilation of Muslims living in western countries by forcing these countries to take certain measures as a response to terrorist attacks which isolates these Muslim communities. Radicalization of those living in these isolated communities becomes easier and more widespread.
- 🏰 In more than one recent attack, the suspected attackers were known by local authorities. The shooter from the Ottawa Parliament attack, Zehaf-Bibeau, for example, had a criminal record for mainly drug-and violence-related offences and was known to authorities. Martin Couture-Rouleau from the hit-and-run incident in Ottawa just two days prior was actively monitored by a special antiterrorism force, and even arrested a month prior to flying to Turkey. It should be noted that due to lack of sufficient evidence, the authorities released Couture-Rouleau (NY Times).
- 🏰 Armed assaults/active shooter scenarios are a significant threat and are increasing worldwide.
- 🏰 There has been a history of threats directed at newspapers and individuals printing controversial content about Islam and Muhammad, including Geert Wilders, the main speaker at this event.

- 🏰 Social media, with an emphasis on Twitter, continues to be an important media channel for disseminating information by IS and its followers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 🏰 Specific risks linked to controversial issues surrounding religion (specifically Islam) should be taken into consideration when assessing the level of threat for an event, a facility or a dignitary.
- 🏰 The successful outcome of the security response should be shared with front line officers and event planners.
- 🏰 Armed assaults continue to be a chosen modus operandi by the adversary. We recommend that authorities be especially vigilant in the days and weeks following a terror attack; tactics previously witnessed may be copied.
- 🏰 Armed assaults will continue to be a viable threat and need to be addressed by both the government and the private sector. The security plan should determine the level of protection for a facility and what security measures and actions need to be taken both during routine operations and in times of emergencies. The plan should encompass all relevant and defined threats. It is important when assessing the level of overall risk for the building that planners take into consideration this modus operandi
- 🏰 Active shooter policies should focus firstly on prevention and detection and then on immediate and effective response based on in-house capabilities. Active shooter plans and policies need to be practiced by all relevant first responders and facility security (if relevant), through drills and table top exercises (TTXs).
- 🏰 In the majority of cases, terror attacks begin from outside the facility perimeter and therefore it is recommended that security on the outer rings should be both visible to increase the deterrence factor and be equipped with behavior detection tools.
- 🏰 All threats should be addressed by more than one security ring. If one security ring fails, there is an additional layer in place to prevent a breach. It is recommended to incorporate an additional ring of security in addition to the visible security guard stationed outside the building, especially during times of increased threat. Additional security inside the building may include the deployment of security guards inside, enhanced access control measures (i.e., locked doors), duress buttons, among other measures.