

# The Seattle Plot: Jihadists Shifting Away From Civilian Targets?

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On June 22 in a Seattle warehouse, Abu Khalid Abdul-Latif pulled an unloaded M16 rifle to his shoulder, aimed it, and pulled the trigger repeatedly as he imagined himself gunning down young U.S. military recruits. His longtime friend Walli Mujahidh did likewise with an identical rifle, assuming a kneeling position as he engaged his notional targets. The two men had come to the warehouse with another man to inspect the firearms the latter had purchased with money Abdul-Latif had provided him. The rifles and a small number of hand grenades were to be used in an upcoming mission: an attack on a U.S. Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS) in an industrial area south of downtown Seattle.

After confirming that the rifles were capable of automatic fire and discussing the capacity of the magazines they had purchased, the men placed the rifles back into a storage bag intending to transport them to a temporary cache location. As they prepared to leave the warehouse, they were suddenly swarmed by a large number of FBI agents and other law enforcement officers and quickly arrested. Their plan to conduct a terrorist attack inside the United States had been discovered when the man they had invited to join their plot (the man who had allegedly purchased the weapons for them) reported the plot to the Seattle Police Department, which in turn reported it to the FBI. According to the federal criminal complaint filed in the case, the third unidentified man had an extensive criminal record and had known Abdul-Latif for several years, but he had not been willing to undertake such a terrorist attack.

While the behavior of Abdul-Latif and Mujahidh in this plot demonstrates that they were amateur “wannabe” jihadists rather than seasoned terrorist operatives, their plot could have ended very differently if they had found a kindred spirit in the man they approached for help instead of someone who turned them into the authorities. This case also illustrates some important trends in jihadist terrorism that we have been watching for the past few years as well as a possible shift in mindset within the jihadist movement.

## Trends

First, Abu-Khalid Abdul-Latif and Walli Mujahidh, both American converts to Islam, are prime examples of what we refer to as grassroots jihadists. They are individuals who were inspired by the al Qaeda movement but who had no known connection to the al Qaeda core or one of its franchise groups. In late 2009, in response to the success of the U.S. government and its allies in preventing jihadist attacks in the West, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) began a campaign to encourage jihadists living in the West to conduct simple attacks using readily available items, rather than travel abroad for military and terrorism training with jihadist groups. After successes such as the November 2009 Fort Hood shooting, this theme of encouraging grassroots attacks was adopted by the core al Qaeda group.

While the grassroots approach does present a challenge to law enforcement and intelligence agencies in that attackers can seemingly appear out of nowhere with no prior warning, the paradox presented by grassroots operatives is that they are also far less skilled than trained terrorist operatives. In other words, while they are hard to detect, they frequently lack the skill to conduct large, complex attacks and frequently make mistakes that expose them to detection in smaller plots.

And that is what we saw in the Seattle plot. Abdul-Latif had originally wanted to hit U.S. Joint Base Lewis-McChord (formerly known as Fort Lewis and McChord Air Force Base), which is located some 70 kilometers (44 miles) south of Seattle, but later decided against that plan since he considered the military base to be too hardened a target. While Abdul-Latif and Mujahidh were amateurs, they seem to have

reached a reasonable assessment of their own abilities and which targets were beyond their abilities to strike.

Another trend we noted in this case was that the attack plan called for the use of firearms and hand grenades in an armed assault, rather than the use of an improvised explosive device (IED). There have been a number of botched IED attacks, such as the May 2010 Times Square attack and Najibullah Zazi's plot to attack the New York subway system.

These were some of the failures that caused jihadist leaders such as AQAP's Nasir al-Wahayshi to encourage grassroots jihadists to undertake simple attacks. Indeed, the most successful jihadist attacks in the West in recent years, such as the Fort Hood shooting, the June 2009 attack on a military recruitment center in Little Rock, Ark., and the March 2011 attack on U.S. troops at a civilian airport in Frankfurt, Germany, involved the use of firearms rather than IEDs. When combined with the thwarted plot in New York in May 2011, these incidents support the trend we identified in May 2010 of grassroots jihadist conducting more armed assaults and fewer attacks involving IEDs.

Another interesting aspect of the Seattle case was that Abdul-Latif was an admirer of AQAP ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki. Unlike the Fort Hood case, where U.S. Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan had been in email contact with al-Awlaki, it does not appear that Abdul-Latif had been in contact with the AQAP preacher. However, from video statements and comments Abdul-Latif himself posted on the Internet, he appears to have had a high opinion of al-Awlaki and to have been influenced by his preaching. It does not appear that Abdul-Latif, who was known as Joseph Anthony Davis before his conversion to Islam, or Mujahidh, whose pre-conversion name was Frederick Domingue Jr., spoke Arabic. This underscores the importance of al-Awlaki's role within AQAP as its primary spokesman to the English-speaking world and his mission of radicalizing English-speaking Muslims and encouraging them to conduct terrorist attacks in the West.

## Vulnerabilities

Once again, in the Seattle case, the attack on the MEPS was not thwarted by some CIA source in Yemen, an intercept by the National Security Agency or an intentional FBI undercover operation. Rather, the attack was thwarted by a Muslim who was approached by Abdul-Latif and asked to participate in the attack. The man then went to the Seattle Police Department, which brought the man to the attention of the FBI. This is what we refer to as grassroots counterterrorism, that is, local cops and citizens bringing things to the attention of federal authorities. As the jihadist threat has become more diffuse and harder to detect, grassroots defenders have become an even more critical component of international counterterrorism efforts. This is especially true for Muslims, many of whom consider themselves engaged in a struggle to defend their faith (and their sons) from the threat of jihadism.

But, even if the third man had chosen to participate in the attack rather than report it to the authorities, the group would have been vulnerable to detection. First, there were the various statements Abdul-Latif made on the Internet in support of attacks against the United States. Second, any Muslim convert who chooses a name such as Mujahidh (holy warrior) for himself must certainly anticipate the possibility that it will bring him to the attention of the authorities. Abdul-Latif and Mujahidh were also somewhat cavalier in their telephone conversations, although those conversations do not appear to have brought them to the attention of the authorities.

Perhaps their most significant vulnerability to detection, aside from their desire to obtain automatic weapons and hand grenades, would have been their need to conduct preoperational surveillance of their intended target. After conducting some preliminary research using the Internet, Abdul-Latif quickly realized that they needed more detailed intelligence. He then briefly conducted physical surveillance of the exterior of the MEPS to see what it looked like in person. Despite the technological advances it represents, the Internet cannot replace the physical surveillance process, which is a critical requirement

for terrorist planners. Indeed, after the external surveillance of the building, Abdul-Latif asked the informant to return to the building under a ruse in order to enter it and obtain a detailed floor plan of the facility for use in planning the attack.

In this case, the informant was able to obtain the information he needed from his FBI handlers, but had he been a genuine participant in the plot, he would have had to have exposed himself to detection by entering the MEPS facility after conducting surveillance of the building's exterior. If some sort of surveillance detection program was in place, it likely would have flagged him as a person of interest for follow-up investigation, which could have led authorities back to the other conspirators in the attack.

## A New Twist

One aspect of this plot that was different from many other recent plots was that Abdul-Latif insisted that he wanted to target the U.S. military and did not want to kill people he considered innocents. Certainly he had no problem with the idea of killing the armed civilian security guards at the MEPS — the plan called for the attackers to kill them first, or the unarmed still-civilian recruits being screened at the facility, then to kill as many other military personnel as possible before being neutralized by the responding authorities. However, even in the limited conversations documented in the federal criminal complaint, Abdul-Latif repeated several times that he did not want to kill innocents. This stands in stark contrast to the actions of previous attackers and plotters such as John Allen Mohammed, the so-called D.C. sniper, or Faisal Shahzad, who planned the failed Times Square attack.

Abdul-Latif's reluctance to attack civilians may be a reflection of the debate we are seeing among jihadists in places like Afghanistan, Pakistan and even Algeria over the killing of those they consider innocents. This debate is also raging on many of the English-language jihadist message boards Abdul-Latif frequented. Most recently, this tension was seen in the defection of a Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan faction in Pakistan's Kurram agency.

If this sentiment begins to take wider hold in the jihadist movement, and especially the English-speaking jihadist community in the West, it could have an impact on the target-selection process for future attacks by grassroots operatives in the West. It could also mean that commonly attacked targets such as subway systems, civilian aircraft, hotels and public spaces will be seen as less desirable than comparably soft military targets. Given the limitations of grassroots jihadists, and their tendency to focus on soft targets, such a shift would result in a much smaller universe of potential targets for such attacks — the softer military targets such as recruit-processing stations and troops in transit that have been targeted in recent months.

Removing some of the most vulnerable targets from the potential-target list is not something that militants do lightly. If this is indeed happening, it could be an indication that some important shifts are under way on the ideological battlefield and that jihadists may be concerned about losing their popular support. It is still too early to know if this is a trend and not merely the idiosyncrasy of one attack planner — and it is contrary to the target sets laid out in recent messages from AQAP and the al Qaeda core — but when viewed in light of the Little Rock, Fort Hood and Frankfurt shootings, it is definitely a concept worth further examination.

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