

**SAN BERNARDINO SHOOTING HIGHLIGHTS SECURITY CHALLENGES POSED BY “LONE WOLF” ATTACKS**

***By Leah Kazar,  
research intern***

The mass shooting in San Bernadino on December 2, 2015, once again launched criticisms of the competency of security infrastructure in tracking “lone wolf” terrorist plots. Though it is possible attackers discussed jihadist leaning privately online before the shooting, the trail they left was so small-scale as to be negligible, and was undetected by authorities until after the fact. Faced with “lone wolf” attacks that are difficult to detect and even harder to prevent, security officials face the increasingly vital question of how to successfully counter individually orchestrated and perpetrated attacks.

On Wednesday, December 2, 2 shooters killed 14 people and injured 22 others at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, California. The Center was hosting a holiday party for the workplace of one of the shooters. The perpetrators, spouses Syed Rizwan Farook, 28, and Tashfeen Malik, 27, also left 3 pipe bombs at the site before fleeing the scene, though they could not successfully detonate them. Farook was born in Pakistan while Malik was born in the United States. Both attackers were killed by police following an exchange of gunfire after they retreated to their home.

Malik entered the country from Pakistan on July 27, 2014 using a K-1 visa, a 90-day visa for people planning to marry Americans. The K-1 visa application process focuses on whether or not the applicants know each other and have a personal relationship, and does not ask about jihadist support. One month after Malik entered the United States, she married Farook.

Security sources reported on December 4 that Farook and Malik pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on Facebook using an account with different names. International media reported on Saturday, December 5, that the Islamic State announced that the San Bernardino shooting was carried out by “2 followers” of the group, but did not state it had directed them to carry out the attack. The FBI has stated that there is no evidence that IS were aware of Farook and Malik’s activities before the attack.

FBI director James Comey stated that though IS may have helped to motivate the attacks, the “killers were starting to radicalize towards martyrdom and jihad as early as 2013”, before IS achieved its current level of influence. Comey discussed the possibility that they had decided to attribute the attack to IS after planning the attack.

He also stated that they were likely radicalized before coming to the United States and prior to meeting one another. Though the FBI uncovered evidence that Farook communicated with terrorists both domestically and internationally a few years before the attacks, he had not done so recently. Officials have said it is likely the couple's radicalization and preparation for the attack were done on their own and only attributed to IS after-the-fact.

Officials are also investigating the idea that the attack was motivated by workplace problems. Farook worked for the San Bernardino Department of Public Health as an environmental-health specialist. Farook reportedly had a dispute about Islam 2 weeks prior with a Jewish, pro-Israel co-worker who was killed in the attacks. However, it is not clear that this motivated the shooting, as the 2 men regularly discussed religion. The shooting took place during the holiday party for Farook's office, of which Farook was in attendance before briefly leaving and then returning 15 to 30 minutes later with his wife, at which point they began shooting.

The couple prepared extensively beforehand for the attack. They stockpiled weapons and rented a getaway car 3-4 days before the shooting. They also began getting rid of information on their electronic devices the day before the attacks. Farook also took out a bank loan for \$28,500 in November, distributing about half of the money to his mother, with whom the couple left their 6-month-old child before the attack. Additionally, they practised shooting at gun ranges in the Los Angeles area in the weeks leading up to the attack.

Law enforcement officials have stated that it is possible the couple had already planned an attack for another location but shifted their target after a dispute at work. Police found 19 pipe bombs and tools to make more weapons at the shooters' home, indicating that plans for a larger attack may have been underway.

Because of this evidence, the FBI officials announced on December 4 that they would be treating the case as a terrorist incident, despite earlier reluctance to do so among theories the shooting was motivated by workplace disputes. On Sunday night, December 6, President Obama asserted that the shooting was an act of terrorism because of evidence that the couple had premeditated the act, though their motives may have been somewhat mixed.

Further adding to the theory that the shooting was a terrorist act, the Los Angeles Times revealed on Monday, December 14, that the FBI discovered that Malik sent at least 2 messages on Facebook to Pakistani friends in which she discussed her support for Islamic jihad and stated that she hoped to join jihadists in 2012 and 2014. These messages are the first indication that U.S. security services missed warning signs that she was a potential threat before granting Malik her K-1 visa. U.S. officials have consequently stated in the wake of the San Bernardino attack that they are testing new procedures in order to begin evaluating the social media activity of foreign visa applicants. However, privacy concerns continue to plague debates over more rigorous screenings.

The FBI is also investigating whether Farook had planned an attack in 2012. If this is the case, he would have been radicalized even earlier than Comey suggested. He reportedly planned the attack with his neighbour, Enrique Marquez who is distantly related to Farook by marriage and who provided 2 rifles for the couple for the San

Bernadino attack. The 2012 plot was reportedly thwarted after Farook and Marquez were spooked when the FBI broke up an unrelated plot to kill Americans in Afghanistan. However, Marquez checked himself into a mental institution the day after the attacks, calling into question some of his statements.

This incident highlights the insufficiency of existing preventive measures. Neither of the assailants was on any watch lists, and though they may have had contact with people with suspected ties to terrorism, none of the interactions were “substantial” enough to merit investigation. Because the attackers were “lone wolves” who were likely self-radicalized, their tracking and apprehension is made much more difficult.

Attorney General Loretta Lynch described this incident as an “inspired-terrorist model”, which she says is becoming much more common and is posing significant challenges to the security community. It is almost impossible to detect individuals in such cases, though Lynch repeated the call to report any suspicious behaviour to law enforcement, pointing out that certain people close to the attackers had noticed behavioural changes over the past few years.

The circumstances surrounding this attack thus highlight the difficulty of detecting and preventing “lone wolf” attacks. There were virtually no traceable warning signs preceding the shooting in San Bernardino, and the efforts that would have been necessary to detect the few that existed would have posed challenges for defenders of civil liberties. For nations like the United States that are currently menaced by threats of terrorism, attacks planned by individuals unaffiliated with larger terrorists cells or operations today represent one of the most serious challenges to national and international security.

**FIN**

**Copyright© ESISC 2015**