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The Ripples of Ft Hood



First responders transporting the wounded after Ft Hood shooting, November 2009
(cc) US Army/flickr

Was the shooting rampage by a Muslim US Army psychiatrist at Fort Hood an act of terror? As Shaun Waterman writes for ISN Security Watch, that apparently simple question has the potential to turn the aftermath of the killings into political theatre.

By Shaun Waterman for ISN Security Watch

Rampage killings - mass murders with high-powered firearms by the mentally ill or psychologically disturbed, often at their workplace - are nothing new in the United States. They have a particular echo in Killeen, the small Texas town near the Fort Hood base, where a gunman killed 24 people in a diner in 1991 [in what was then the worst mass murder in US history](#).

But the five minute shooting spree Maj Nidal Malik Hasan allegedly went on last Thursday at a personnel processing center, which left 13 dead and 28 wounded, has many characteristics of a very different kind of event - an attack by a self-radicalized 'lone wolf' terrorist.

Some soldiers reported that he shouted "Allah u Akbar!" - "God is great!" in Arabic - before opening fire Thursday, according to base commander Lt Gen Robert Cone, who noted those reports were not yet confirmed.

And news organizations turned up a trail of internet postings, including one where Hasan justified suicide bombing as a tactic, according to ABC News.

Lone wolves have carried out the only completed acts of violence by Islamic terrorists in the US since 11 September - as distinct from plots, of varying degrees and seriousness, foiled by authorities before they could be implemented.

Federal agencies have proven relatively adept at identifying, infiltrating and dismantling even small, home-grown extremist cells, with no operational relationships to global terror networks, like the men [convicted of planning at attack on the military base at Fort Dix, NJ, last year](#).

However, lone wolves - even those with a history of violence or threatening behavior - are harder for authorities to identify because by definition they do not need to communicate with others or include them in the planning and execution of their attacks.

Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, an American-born Muslim convert [charged with the June 2009 shooting at a Little Rock, AR, recruiting center](#) that killed one soldier and wounded another, reportedly said the attack was in retaliation for the US war on terror, "done for the sake of Allah, the lord of all the world."

And the [July 2002 shootings at the Los Angeles International Airport counter of Israeli airline El Al](#) were later

defined by US authorities as an act of terrorism because the gunman, an Egyptian national and US legal resident, was politically motivated.

He “espoused anti-Israeli views and was opposed to US policy in the Middle East,” CNN reported.

Neither of them had operational contacts with terror groups that might have given advance warning of their planning to authorities through electronic surveillance or human intelligence like informers.

“Lone wolves do not share their intentions, and they rarely engage in a larger conspiracy, making it improbable to learn their plot,” [writes Gregory Lee](#), a retired agent with the Drug Enforcement Administration and a former FBI Academy instructor, on the website Family Security Matters.

But in the Hasan case, it is clear that he had come to the attention of federal investigators as recently as this year because of his extremist postings. In some versions of the reporting, the feds were tipped off by intelligence agencies after he made contact with al-Qaida sympathizers abroad.

The chairman of the powerful Senate Homeland Security Committee, Joseph Lieberman, told Fox News he wanted to find out how “strong warning signs” that the alleged gunman was becoming an “Islamist extremist” had been missed. The problem is that, in the hyper-partisan atmosphere on Capitol Hill at present, any congressional inquiry is likely to degenerate into a round of finger-pointing fueled by turf rivalries between law enforcement and intelligence agencies, and efforts for party advantage.

Congressman Peter Hoekstra of Michigan, the senior Republican on the House Intelligence Committee, has already warned that he sees “serious issues” raised by the case and ominously cautioned intelligence agencies to keep all their files complete.

“I have requested this information be preserved because I believe members of the full committee [...] will want to scrutinize the intelligence relevant to this attack, what the agencies in possession of that intelligence did with it, who was and wasn’t informed and why, and what steps America’s intelligence agencies are taking in light of what they know,” Hoekstra said.

“At some point, it becomes necessary for us as a nation to address the uncomfortable threat of homegrown terrorism and radicalism,” he added.

Other officials, like Army Chief of Staff George Casey, have cautioned against leaping to conclusions about Hasan’s motivations.

“I’m concerned that this increased speculation could cause a backlash against some of our Muslim soldiers. And I’ve asked our Army leaders to be on the lookout for that,” Casey told CNN.

The outlines of an attack strategy are already visible in the right wing media - blaming US President Barack Obama’s political correctness for thwarting the diligent spies who tracked Hasan’s connections to an anti-US cleric in Yemen, Anwar al-Awlaki.

The consequences of recognizing the attack as an act of lone wolf terror motivated by Islamic extremism are “difficult for many people to acknowledge and address [...] they raise uncomfortable questions for us as a society,” C Holland Taylor of the LibForAll Foundation told ISN Security Watch.

The Foundation, set up with the help of former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, seeks to promote tolerant inclusive versions of Islam - and to warn about the dangers of the other kind.

Taylor said the implications of recognizing that the enemy in the war on terror was an ideology and its adherents were profound. “From a social, educational, professional point of view,” Hasan looked “as integrated as you can be,” he said.

But he was an adherent of an extremist, politicized Islam which is “incompatible not just with western values and with his obligations as a citizen and a servicemember, but also with the Islam of the vast majority of Muslims.”

Taylor charged the administration suffered “an institutional incapacity to address the problem” because there was so little expertise on Islamic theology and so little willingness to engage in the intra-Islamic debate.

Hasan regained consciousness Monday, and was talking to medical staff and his lawyer. In framing his indictment and prosecution, investigators will have to pick their way through a complex of potential motives at the intersection between ideological extremism and emotional disturbance.

As if that wasn’t difficult enough, they will do so under the glare of partisan scrutiny.

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