

By Scott Stewart and Fred Burton

At approximately 10:30 a.m. on June 1, as two young U.S. soldiers stood in front of the Army Navy Career Center in west Little Rock, Ark., a black pickup pulled in front of the office and the driver opened fire on the two, killing one and critically wounding the other.

Eyewitnesses to the shooting immediately reported it to police, and authorities quickly located and arrested the suspect as he fled the scene. According to police, the suspect told the arresting officers that he had a bomb in his vehicle, but after an inspection by the police bomb squad, the only weapons police recovered from the vehicle were an SKS rifle and two pistols.

At a press conference, Little Rock Police Chief Stuart Thomas identified the suspect as Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad, a 23-year-old African-American man who had changed his name from Carlos Leon Bledsoe after converting to Islam. In Arabic, the word mujahid is the singular form of mujahideen, and it literally means one who engages in jihad. Although Mujahid is not an uncommon Muslim name, it is quite telling that a convert to Islam would choose such a name — one who engages in jihad — to define his new identity. Muhammad was originally from Memphis, Tenn., but according to news reports was living and working in Little Rock.

Chief Thomas said Muhammad admitted to the shootings and told police that he specifically targeted soldiers. During an interrogation with a Little Rock homicide detective, Muhammad reportedly said that he was angry at the U.S. Army because of their attacks against Muslims overseas, that he opened fire intending to kill the two soldiers and that he would have killed more if they had been in the parking lot. These statements are likely what Chief Thomas was referring to when he noted in his press conference that Muhammad appears to have had political and religious motives for the attack and that it was conducted in response to U.S. military operations.

Chief Thomas also stated that the initial police investigation has determined that Muhammad acted alone and was not part of a wider conspiracy, but given that the shooting was an act of domestic terrorism directed against U.S military personnel, a thorough investigation has been launched by the FBI to ensure that Muhammad was not part of a larger group planning other attacks.

ABC News has reported that Muhammad had traveled to Yemen after his conversion, though the date of that travel and its duration were not provided in those reports. ABC also reported that while in Yemen, Muhammad was apparently arrested for carrying a fraudulent Somali passport and that upon his return from Yemen, the FBI opened a preliminary investigation targeting him.

The fact that the FBI was investigating Muhammad but was unable to stop this attack illustrates

the difficulties that lone wolf militants present to law enforcement and security personnel, and also highlights some of the vulnerabilities associated with using law enforcement as the primary counterterrorism tool.

Challenges of the Lone Wolf

STRATFOR has long discussed the threat posed by lone wolf militants and the unique challenges they pose to law enforcement and security personnel. Of course, the primary challenge is that, by definition, lone wolves are solitary actors and it can be very difficult to determine their intentions before they act because they do not work with others. When militants are operating in a cell consisting of more than one person, there is a larger chance that one of them will get cold feet and reveal the plot to authorities, that law enforcement and intelligence personnel will intercept a communication between conspirators, or that law enforcement authorities will be able to introduce an informant into the group, as was the case in the recently foiled plot to bomb two Jewish targets in the Bronx and shoot down a military aircraft at a Newburgh, N.Y., Air National Guard base.

Obviously, lone wolves do not need to communicate with others or include them in the planning or execution of their plots. This ability to fly solo and under the radar of law enforcement has meant that some lone wolf militants such as Joseph Paul Franklin, Theodore Kaczynski and Eric Rudolph were able to operate for years before being identified and captured.

Lone wolves also pose problems because they can come from a variety of backgrounds with a wide range of motivations. While some lone wolves are politically motivated, others are religiously motivated and some are mentally unstable. Even among the religiously motivated there is variety. In addition to Muslim lone wolves like Muhammad, Mir Amal Kansi, Hesham Mohamed Hadayet and John Allen Muhammad, we have also seen anti-Semitic/Christian-identity adherents like Buford Furrow and Eric Rudolph, radical Roman Catholics like James Kopp and radical Protestants like Paul Hill. Indeed, the day before the Little Rock attack, Scott Roeder, an anti-abortion lone wolf gunman, killed prominent abortion doctor George Tiller in Wichita, Kan.

In addition to the wide spectrum of ideologies and motivations among lone wolves, there is also the issue of geographic dispersal. As we've seen from the lone wolf cases listed above, they have occurred in many different locations and are not just confined to attacks in Manhattan or Washington, D.C. They can occur anywhere.

Moreover, it is extremely difficult to differentiate between those extremists who intend to commit attacks from those who simply preach hate or hold radical beliefs (things that are not in themselves illegal due to First Amendment protections in the United States). Therefore, to single out likely lone wolves before they strike, authorities must spend a great deal of time and resources looking at individuals who might be moving from radical beliefs to radical actions. With such a large universe of potential suspects, this is like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack.

Limitations on Both Sides

Due to the challenges lone wolf militants present, the concept of leaderless resistance has been publicly and widely embraced in both the domestic terrorism and jihadist realms. However, despite this advocacy and the ease with which terrorist attacks can be conducted against soft targets, surprisingly few terrorist attacks have been perpetrated by lone wolf operatives. In fact, historically, we have seen more mentally disturbed lone gunmen than politically motivated lone wolf terrorists. A main reason for this is that it can be somewhat difficult to translate theory into action, and as STRATFOR has frequently noted, there is often a disconnect between intent and capability.

Because of the difficulty in obtaining the skills required to conduct a terrorist attack, many lone wolves do not totally operate in a vacuum, and many of them (like Muhammad) will usually come to somebody's attention before they conduct an attack. Many times this occurs as they seek the skills or materials required to conduct a terrorist attack, which Muhammad appears to have been doing in Yemen.

However, in this case, it is important to remember that even though Muhammad had been brought to the FBI's attention (probably through information obtained from the Yemeni authorities by the CIA in Yemen), he was only one of the thousands of such people the FBI opens a preliminary inquiry on each year. A preliminary inquiry is the basic level of investigation the FBI conducts, and it is usually opened for a limited period of time (though it can be extended with a supervisor's approval). Unless the agents assigned to the inquiry turn up sufficient indication that a law has been violated, the inquiry will be closed.

If the inquiry indicates that there is the likelihood that a U.S. law has been violated, the FBI will open a full-field investigation into the matter. This will allow the bureau to exert significantly more investigative effort on the case and devote more investigative resources toward solving it. Out of the many preliminary inquiries opened on suspected militants, the FBI opens full-field investigations only on a handful of them. So, if the information reported by ABC News is correct, the FBI was not conducting surveillance on Muhammad because to do so it would have had to have opened a full-field investigation.

Of course, now that Muhammad has attacked, it is easy to say that the FBI should have paid more attention to him. Prior to an attack, however, intelligence is seldom, if ever, so black and white. Sorting out the individuals who intend to conduct attacks from the larger universe of people who hold radical thoughts and beliefs and assigning law enforcement and intelligence resources to monitor the activities of the really dangerous people has long been one of the very difficult tasks faced by counterterrorism authorities.

This difficulty is magnified when the FBI is looking at a lone wolf target because there is no organization, chain of command or specific communications channel on which to focus intelligence resources and gather information. Lacking information that would have tied Muhammad to other militant individuals or cells, or that would have indicated he was inclined to commit a crime, the FBI had little basis for opening a full-field investigation into his activities. These limitations, and the FBI's notorious bureaucracy (as seen in its investigation of Zacarias Moussaoui and the 9/11 hijackers), are the longstanding shortfalls of the law-enforcement element of counterterrorism policy (the other elements are diplomacy, financial sanctions,

intelligence and military).

However, politics have proved obstructive to all facets of counterterrorism policy. And politics may have been at play in the Muhammad case as well as in other cases involving Black Muslim converts. Several weeks ago, STRATFOR heard from sources that the FBI and other law enforcement organizations had been ordered to "back off" of counterterrorism investigations into the activities of Black Muslim converts. At this point, it is unclear to us if that guidance was given by the White House or the Department of Justice, or if it was promulgated by the agencies themselves, anticipating the wishes of President Barack Obama and Attorney General Eric Holder.

As STRATFOR has previously noted, the FBI has a culture that is very conservative and risk-averse. Many FBI supervisors are reluctant to authorize investigations that they believe may have negative blow-back on their career advancement. In light of this institutional culture, and the order to be careful in investigations relating to Black Muslim converts, it would not be at all surprising to us if a supervisor refused to authorize a full-field investigation of Muhammad that would have included surveillance of his activities. Though in practical terms, even if a full-field investigation had been authorized, due to the caution being exercised in cases related to Black Muslim converts, the case would most likely have been micromanaged to the point of inaction by the special agent in charge of the office involved or by FBI headquarters.

Even though lone wolves operate alone, they are still constrained by the terrorist attack cycle, and because they are working alone, they have to conduct each step of the cycle by themselves. This means that they are vulnerable to detection at several different junctures as they plan their attacks, the most critical of which is the surveillance stage of the operation. Muhammad did not just select that recruiting center at random and attack on the spot. He had cased it prior to the attack just as he had been taught in the militant training camps he attended in Yemen. Law enforcement officials have reported that Muhammad may also have researched potential government and Jewish targets in Little Rock, Philadelphia, Atlanta, New York, Louisville and Memphis.

Had the FBI opened a full-field investigation on Muhammad, and had it conducted surveillance on him, it would have been able to watch him participate in preoperational activities such as conducting surveillance of potential targets and obtaining weapons.

There is certainly going to be an internal inquiry at the FBI and Department of Justice — and perhaps even in Congress — to determine where the points of failure were in this case. We will be watching with interest to see what really transpired. The details will be extremely interesting, especially coming at a time when the Obama administration appears to be following the Clinton-era policy of stressing the primacy of the FBI and the law enforcement aspect of counterterrorism policy at the expense of intelligence and other elements.

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