

US Citizen Arrested for Plotting an Attack in Portland, Oregon Monday, November 29, 2010

Prepared by MSA's Research and Intelligence Analysis Team
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Overview

As part of an FBI sting, a naturalized US citizen from Somalia was arrested for plotting an attack using a vehicle bomb at the annual Christmas tree-lighting ceremony in Portland, Oregon's Pioneer Courthouse Square on Friday, November 26. Mohamed Osman Mohamud, a 19 year old former student at Oregon State University, has been charged with the attempted use of a weapon of mass destruction. Mohamud attempted to use a cell phone twice to detonate what he believed were explosives stored in 55-gallon drums packed into a white van which he parked near the tree-lighting event. The detonator and explosives were provided by undercover FBI agents who were working in the investigation of Mohamud which began over a year ago. He reportedly told the undercover investigators that he wanted "whoever is attending that event to leave either dead or injured."



Over the summer of 2010, Mohamud had been in frequent contact with the undercover agents who he believed were connected to an international terrorist organization. Although this was a sting operation, law enforcement officials say that Mohamud hatched the plan on his own, including the choice of the Christmas tree-lighting ceremony as the target. Details of the incident are as follows:

- The FBI began surveillance of Mohamud after receiving a tip from someone who was concerned about his behaviors.
- After monitoring his emails, the FBI found he was in contact with an individual overseas in Pakistan's northwest province. Mohamud expressed his interest in traveling to Pakistan to join jihad. He supposedly had no formal ties to foreign terror organizations and was acting somewhat independently.
- According to the affidavit, Mohamud provided the undercover agents with a computer drive that contained detailed instructions for the attack, including directions to the bombing location. Additionally, he mailed them bomb components and passport photos as part of a plan to help him sneak out of the country after the attack.
- When they returned to Corvallis, Oregon, Mohamud recorded a video in which he stated a rationale for the attack to be released after the bombing.



Key Points

- On November 4, Mohamud traveled with the undercover agents to Lincoln County, Oregon where they detonated a backpack-concealed bomb as a trial run for the attack.

Although this particular incident was part of an FBI operation, terrorist operatives will typically conduct a dry run at the site of the chosen target before an actual attack. Pre-operational surveillance is a key part of the terrorist attack cycle. If a facility's security is perceived as weak, it is more likely to become a target than others.

- Before trying to detonate the device with a cell phone in the attempted attack, Mohamud went to a nearby train station presumably for a fast getaway.

This was not an attempted suicide bombing. Mohamud presumably had plans to make an escape, similar to Faisal Shahzad (Times Square Bomb Plot) who had taken the train to Connecticut after attempting to detonate the explosives in his SUV.

- Mohamud told the FBI undercover agents that he became radicalized at the age of 15 and had wanted to wage violent jihad ever since. He received influence from jihadist websites and contributed to English-language jihadist magazines including a publication titled "Jihadist Recollections" and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) magazine "Inspire."

Recently there have been numerous cases in which individuals have been radicalized over the internet without overseas travel. In a similar incident, two US citizens from New Jersey who were planning to travel to Somalia to join the terror group al Shabab were arrested in June 2010 as part of an undercover sting. The two men accessed jihadist videos posted on the internet and were reportedly influenced by AQAP leader Anwar Al-Awlaki.

Implications

Mohamud planned this plot with the goal of maximum casualties. What makes this case interesting is the departure from the previously discussed trend of small-scale attacks back to large-scale, mass casualty producing operations. Due to the recent event, security personnel should remain alert during large public gatherings, particularly throughout the holiday season. When planning events that are expected to draw large crowds, it is important for security personnel to set up proper vehicle check points and access areas.