



Assessing the Vehicular Attack, New York City, October 31, 2017

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This article presents an overview and assessment of Sayfullo Saipov's truck ramming attack in New York City, on October 31, 2017. It discusses the incident, the attacker's biographical background, his pathway to violence, and the tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) used in his attack. Since this article was written in the attack's immediate aftermath, it is based on preliminary publicly available information, with additional information likely to provide an extensive amount of greater insight into this terrorist attack.

The Incident

At around 3:00pm on October 31, 2017, Sayfullo Habilbullaevi Saipov, 29, drove his rented pickup truck from Northern New Jersey, proceeded across the George Washington Bridge, and then drove south into lower Manhattan, where he drove for about a mile along a bike path, mowing people along the way, killing eight and wounding 11 others. The vehicle ramming attack ended when he crashed into a school bus. He then jumped out of his wrecked truck brandishing two imitation guns, and shouted, Allahu Akbar" (Arabic for "God is Great") before a New York Police Department (NYPD) officer shot him. In the rental truck, authorities retrieved a handwritten note that, translated into English, said: "ISIS Lives Forever."

Biographical Information

Saipov was born in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. He arrived in the United States in 2010 under a "Diversity Visa Lottery Program,"ⁱ and held a green card, which enabled him to work in the country. He initially settled with Dilnoza Abdusamatova, a family friend who was living in a Cincinnati suburb, but moved out after a few weeks. Within a few months, he obtained a commercial truck driving license, first in New Jersey, and then in Tampa, Florida. He also registered two automobile-related businesses in Ohio, one at the Cincinnati address of his host family, and another in Cuyahoga Falls.

In April 2013 Saipov married Nozima Odilova, an Uzbek national, who was also born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. She was six years younger than he was. They were married in Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio. At the time of the truck ramming, Saipov and his wife lived with their three young children in Patterson, New Jersey.ⁱⁱ An older woman reportedly lived with the family, who may have been Saipov's mother-in-law.ⁱⁱⁱ

Up to the time of the attack, he had worked as an Uber driver for six months. Although Uber had claimed that he had no traffic violations while employed with the company, he had been cited for various previous traffic violations in Maryland (2011), in Pennsylvania (2012 and 2015), and in Missouri (2016).^{iv} In the Missouri case, he was arrested for not appearing in court on a charge of failure to maintain his truck's brake system.^v

Pathway into Violence

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Saipov was influenced by the Islamic State's ideology and its violent warfare tactics after he had arrived in the country, according to New York Governor Andrew Cuomo.^{vi} A senior official who had been briefed on the investigation stated that a preliminary assessment found that Saipov's online history indicated that he had "consumed ISIS propaganda."^{vii}

As part of his pathway into extremism, Saipov may have associated with other militants, as it was reported that he was questioned in 2015 by an FBI agent after he was listed as a point of contact for two people who were being tracked by FBI agents.^{viii} It was not publicly known at the time of this report whether other militant associates were involved in his attack.

It is important to note that Saipov's possible pathway into violence was similar to that of other contemporary jihadi adherents, especially in the West. In previous terrorism eras hierarchically-based terrorist groups radicalized prospective members into violent extremism in person-on-person engagements that were geographically centered, with their attacks highly organized by the groups' operational managers (like 9/11's highly centralized operation). Today, radicalization is also conducted virtually on the Internet, and, as Governor Cuomo explained, "It's no longer geographically isolated....The Internet has given them a global platform and a global training ground. They have a very simple play: rent a car; rent a truck; create mayhem."^{ix}

Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs)

Saipov's attack's modus operandi adhered to the Islamic State's call for its supporters to use vehicles as weapons.^x As explained by John Miller, Deputy Commissioner for Counterterrorism at the NYPD, "He seemed to have followed almost to a T the instructions ISIS had put out" on how to carry out a truck-borne attack."^{xi} Al Qaida, the Islamic State's rival, had earlier published an article in its "Inspire" magazine, "recommending wannabe jihadists [to] consider car rammings as a particularly effective terrorist tactic."^{xii}

The use of vehicular attacks in a terrorist group's warfare, while long used in conflict zones such as the Middle East and elsewhere, is relatively recent in the West, including the United States. After 9/11, on March 3, 2006, Mohammed Reza Taheri-azar, an [Iranian-American](#), intentionally rammed his [sport utility vehicle](#) at the campus of the [University of North Carolina \(UNC\) at Chapel Hill](#), injuring nine persons. His motivation was reportedly to punish the United States for its "war against Muslims." This vehicle ramming attack and other such attacks around the world, led the FBI and DHS to issue a co-authored report in December 2010 "warning of 'ramming attacks' and the ease with which a truck could be rented for such a purpose..."^{xiii} This warning has come to fruition, especially in Western Europe, where vehicular ramming attacks by Islamic State adherents have recently occurred in countries such as Britain, France, Germany, Spain, and Sweden.

As part of this trend, a previous vehicle ramming attack occurred in the U.S. on November 28, 2016, when an Ohio State undergraduate student of Somali origin deliberately

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rammed his car into a crowd of students at the university on Columbus, wounding 13 people. Some of the injuries occurred when the perpetrator emerged from his car with a machete to stab additional victims.

One of the reasons for the recent frequency in vehicular attacks in the West is likely to be their operatives' inability to acquire weapons and ammunition, with vehicles, whether cars or trucks, relatively easy to rent and use as a mass casualty weapons against their adversaries. This was likely the case for the decision to employ vehicles in the Columbus, Ohio, and New York City attacks.

Like other terrorist attackers, Saipov had deliberately chosen a soft target for his attack, in this case, an undefended bicycle path full of pedestrians. Also, like other some other soft targets that also fulfill a strategic objective, the bicycle path was located in an iconic part of Manhattan, near the newly reconstructed World Trade Center and 911 memorial, thus ensuring that his attack would generate world-wide publicity for his extremist cause.

In his pre-attack planning, Saipov also followed the five TTPs of terrorist warfare. These consist of attack preparation steps (such as acquiring expertise and funding), the execution timeline (identifying the timeline for an attack, in this case, the day of Halloween, when large crowds would be celebrating in the streets), targeting (including carrying out reconnaissance of a potential target and assessing its vulnerabilities), the planning stage (collecting resources for the attack, in this case, renting the vehicle), and the final execution stage (conducting the actual attack). In this regard, it is reported that Saipov had been planning the attack for several weeks.^{xiv} It is also reported that he had performed "dry-runs" of the attack plan by driving to the bike path to ensure he could turn into it.^{xv}

ⁱ <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/nyc-terrorist-attack/sayfullo-saipov-s-path-immigrant-trucker-accused-terrorist-n816331>.

ⁱⁱ <http://heavy.com/news/2017/11/nozima-odilova-sayfullo-saipov-wife/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ ibid.

^{iv} <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/nyc-terrorist-attack/sayfullo-saipov-s-path-immigrant-trucker-accused-terrorist-n816331>.

^v ibid.

^{vi} <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/new-york-truck-attacker-pledged-allegiance-to-isis-was-'radicalized-domestically'-officials-say/ar-AAuj5TF?ocid=spartandhp>.

^{vii} <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/nyc-terrorist-attack/sayfullo-saipov-s-path-immigrant-trucker-accused-terrorist-n816331>.

^{viii} <http://heavy.com/news/2017/11/nozima-odilova-sayfullo-saipov-wife/>.

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^x <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/new-york-truck-attacker-pledged-allegiance-to-isis-was-'radicalized-domestically'-officials-say/ar-AAuj5TF?ocid=spartandhp>.

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^{xi} <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/manhattan/terrorist-sayfullo-saipov-feels-accomplished-nyc-attack-article-1.3603698>.

^{xii} <http://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/america-radicalization-problem-local-article-1.3603746>.

^{xiii} <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/manhattan/terrorist-sayfullo-saipov-feels-accomplished-nyc-attack-article-1.3603698>.

^{xiv} <http://heavy.com/news/2017/11/nozima-odilova-sayfullo-saipov-wife/>.

^{xv} Ibid.

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