



## **Pathways by Trusted Insiders at Organizations into Becoming Politically-Motivated Terrorists**

By Analytic Team, Kiernan Group Holdings

Several recent examples of “trusted” insiders (i.e., employees at organizations) who have become terrorists, with two cases in which they conducted mass violence against their fellow workers, raise the issue of why and how their trajectories into politically-motivated violence occurred and how organizations facing such threats can identify such early warning signs to effectively preempt their attacks at early pre-incident phases. This article discusses these issues by highlighting three high visibility cases: Nidal Hasan’s November 2009 shootings at Fort Hood, Texas, the shootings in December 2015 by husband-and-wife Syed Rizwan Farook and Tafsheen Malik in San Bernardino, California, and Omar Mateen’s shootings in June 2016 at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida, and the specific and general factors that likely drove them to conduct such shooting rampages and the opportunities for pre-incident intervention that reportedly had been missed in their cases.

### **Identifying “Trusted” Insiders**

As employees in an organization, “trusted” insiders have legitimate access to their facilities, where they interact with their proprietary information data and fellow employees. As employees who are assigned trust once they are hired, there is a tacit assumption that they are trustworthy. In the case of such “trusted” insiders who become politically-motivated terrorists, there are often changes in their behavioral patterns that can indicate a change in their trustworthiness. Often, such changes that affect their personal circumstances impact on the quality of their work, as well. The question then becomes, how can such behavioral changes be identified by their supervisors and fellow employees to mitigate and minimize the risk for their turn to violence.

### **Nidal Hasan**

On November 5, 2009, **Nidal Hasan**, aged 47, a U.S. Army major and psychiatrist, fatally shot 13 people and injured more than 30 others in a mass shooting at his base in Fort Hood, near Killeen, Texas. Hasan is reported to have exhibited numerous worrisome changes of behavior that should have raised red flags while he was employed as a psychiatrist at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, in Washington, DC. Beginning around December 2008, and lasting through May 2009, he engaged in an exchange of emails with Anwar al-Awlaki, a top al Qaida ideologue, to ask whether serving in the U.S. military was compatible with the Muslim faith. He also asked whether Awlaki considered those who died attacking their fellow Western soldiers as “shaheeds” (martyrs). This email exchange, which was rationalized by Hasan as part of his psychiatric research paper (**but was likely part of his own radicalization into violence**), was

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reportedly picked up by an FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force in San Diego, which was tracking Awlaki, but not followed up by an investigative interview with Hasan. Furthermore, Hasan was deemed barely competent as a practicing psychiatrist by his colleagues and supervisors, over issues such as his delivery of presentations that focused on jihadi issues, rather than psychiatric-related medical problems, his opposition to U.S. counterterrorism policy, and his generally substandard work. Like other “trusted” insiders, Hasan was unfriendly with his co-workers and kept to himself. A final trigger in Hasan’s violent inclination may have been the Army’s order to deploy him in Afghanistan, which he had asked to be rescinded, but he was overruled. This led to his orders to be sent to Fort Hood, Texas, where in-processing for his deployment to Afghanistan would take place. Despite these early warning signs, however, Hasan was not removed from his job by his supervisors because of the cumbersome and lengthy process for expelling physicians, involving numerous hearings and potential legal challenges. They also decided that his upcoming deployment in July 2009 at Fort Hood, in Killeen, Texas, would enable additional psychiatrists and other mental health specialists to monitor his concerning behavior and take corrective action, if necessary.

### **Syed Rizwan Farook and Tafsheen Malik**

On December 2, 2015, husband-and-wife Syed Farook, aged 28, and Tafsheen Malik, aged 27, conducted a shooting rampage against the husband’s co-workers at their holiday party at the [Inland Regional Center](#) in [San Bernardino, California](#). In the attack, 14 co-workers were killed and 22 others were injured. After fleeing the scene, both were killed in a [shootout](#) with police later that day. Farook was employed as an environmental health specialist at the San Bernardino County public health department. He was considered a competent worker by his fellow co-workers. His co-workers had even organized a baby shower for him and his wife, earlier that year, with their daughter aged six months at the time of their shooting rampage. The only signs of outward radicalization towards extremism, his co-workers stated, were comments to friends about not wanting to remain in the United States (his parents had hailed from Pakistan) and that upon his return from a visit to Saudi Arabia in July 2014, with Malik, his fiancé, he began growing a long beard (a possible sign of Salafist extremism). In his personal dealings with co-workers, with whom he was not overtly friendly, he had engaged in ideological arguments with a co-worker, who did not regard his views as especially extremist. Nevertheless, it appeared that Farook and Malik had long planned their attack, accumulating a large arsenal of highly lethal firearms and ammunition at their apartment, which they shared with Farook’s mother, who was divorced from her husband, whom she regarded as abusive. It came as a surprise to Farook’s co-workers, therefore, that he and his wife had reportedly maintained a social media relationship with other violent jihadi extremists and that they had posted their allegiance to the Islamic State on the day of their attack.

### **Omar Mateen**

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On June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen, aged 29, conducted a shooting rampage at the Pulse Nightclub, in Orlando, Florida, killing 49 persons and wounding 58 others. He was killed in a shootout with the responding police. Unlike Hasan and Farook, Mateen did not target his co-workers and was off-duty at the time of his shooting rampage. Like them, however, he had become radicalized into violent Islamist extremism while working at his security company, G4S, where he was employed as a guard for a period of nine years. Like Hasan, Mateen's radicalization into extremism was known to his co-workers and even the FBI (which did not judge him a security threat), but little was done to remove him from his position as a security guard. In 2013, for example, he was interviewed by the FBI after making inflammatory comments to a co-worker that gave the impression he had possible terrorist ties with al Qaida. In 2014, he again came to the FBI's attention, when they interviewed him over potential connections with Moner Abu Salh, an American suicide bomber in Syria, who had lived near him in Vero Beach, Florida. Despite these potential red flags, however, his firm still kept him as an employee, although he was transferred to a position that did not require holding a firearm at a kiosk at a gated community in Palm Beach County. In his relations with fellow co-workers, however, Mateen was the subject of several complaints over having "issues and just constant anger" and making frequent homophobic and racist remarks. In another instance of early warning "dots not being connected," it is reported that in 2007 he was fired by the Florida Department of Corrections after he had threatened to bring a gun to work. This was significant because if it had involved serious misconduct and had been revealed it would have hindered his future prospects of working for a security company such as G4S. Finally, an ex-wife had accused him of beating her, but this, too, was reportedly not revealed to G4S.

## **Assessment**

As these three cases of "trusted" insiders demonstrate, their radicalization into violent extremism while working at their jobs was missed by their respective organizations. They all exhibited the early warning indicators of a potential violent insider threat. These included expressing hatred of American society, expressing sympathy for foreign organizations that promote anti-American violence, they associated with or expressed loyalty for foreign terrorists, they browsed websites that promote violence against the U.S., they expressed outrage against U.S. military operations abroad, they had adopted an extremist ideology that advocates violence, they purchased a large amount of firearms and ammunition that was reflective of violent ambitions, and they kept a social distance from their co-workers. While in isolation, these concerning activities might not have indicated potential terrorist activity, once correlated with each other, they indicated a high risk of becoming a violent insider threat to their fellow workers.

In conclusion, when such early warning signs become noticeable to fellow co-workers and supervisors, they need to be reported to appropriate authorities for preemptive response. As the DHS motto states: "when you see something, say something."

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