

Case 31: Mehanna

John Mueller

June 4, 2011

If Tarek Mehanna is a terrorist, he is, as Mal Mrozek points out, a failed, frustrated, and incompetent one—even, in his own words, a cowardly one—at least as far as actually committing violence is concerned.

He seems to have been part of an embryonic plot in 2003 to shoot up a shopping mall and perhaps to assassinate two politicians. However, he and his fellow conspirators abandoned the scheme very quickly. He also seems to have been interested in waging violent jihad abroad, but couldn't find any organization over there willing to take him on.

His arrest in 2009 does not concern the mall or assassination plots, but is for writing some poems and translating a document that might conceivably be inspiring to aspiring terrorists and for desiring to fight abroad. Much of the hype around the case, however, whether from officials or from the media, stresses the attention-attracting, if abruptly aborted, mall plot.

A well-educated American citizen, Mehanna is just about unique among the “adversaries” considered in this book for hating America not only for what it does, but also for what it is. Although deeply opposed to the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Mehanna also appears to dislike living among so many non-believers and has contemplated moving to, or exiling himself to, an Islamic country. He has been in solitary confinement since his arrest which may solve part of his problem, but not in the way he envisioned.

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Mal Mrozek

June 4, 2011

typographical and other minor corrections December 17, 2011

1. Overview

On October 21, 2009 Tarek Mehanna was arrested in Sudbury, Massachusetts, by the FBI on charges of providing material support to terrorists and conspiracy to kill in a foreign country.¹

The material support charge was based on recovered computer data from Mehanna's personal computer, including his instant messenger conversations on the internet and photos and videos from his hard drive, as well as interviews with witnesses. He is said to have translated "39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad" into English, starting sometime in 2005 and finishing in April 2006.² This document is 65 pages long and includes numerous quotes from the Koran and other religious writings, as well as explanations and advice on how to prepare oneself for, and support, jihad. In connection to this translation, Mehanna also wrote a poem called "Make Martyrdom what you Seek" to be published after Step 2, "Truthfully Ask Allah for Martyrdom."³

The charge about conspiracy to kill in a foreign country is based on his previous travels to Yemen and about his possible future plans to travel to Somalia.

Mehanna had previously been arrested on November 8, 2008 for providing the FBI with false information regarding the whereabouts of Daniel J. Maldonado, who was suspected of training at an al-Qaeda terrorist camp and plotting to overthrow the Somali government.⁴

Mehanna told the FBI that he did not know of Maldonado's whereabouts after Maldonado fled the country when in reality the two men were in telephone and e-mail contact and Mehanna knew Maldonado was in Somalia.

There is another allegation in this case concerning earlier efforts by Mehanna to join an overseas terrorist training camp and to commit violence within the United States. A co-conspirator of Mehanna, Ahmad Abousamra, traveled to Pakistan in 2002 hoping to join a terrorist training camp and make contacts that he, Mehanna, and another man could use in order to commit attacks in the U.S.⁵ When Abousamra failed to join a camp in Pakistan, he returned to the U.S. and, in early 2003 the group instead made its own plans for a shooting in a local mall as well as for the assassination of two politicians. They tried to buy automatic rifles for the purpose from Maldonado, but he was not able to get the weapons they needed and so the plan was abandoned. These issues, however, are not what Mehanna was arrested for in 2009. After this setback, the FBI claims

¹ United States District Court, District of Massachusetts, Government's Proffer and Memorandum in Support of Detention, by Michael Loucks and Jeffrey Auerhahn, November 5, 2009.

² Ibid, 10.

³ Ibid, 65.

⁴ Claire Suddath, "Two-Minute Bio: Alleged U.S. Terrorist Tarek Mehanna," *Time*, October 22, 2009.

⁵ Mark Clayton, "How FBI traced Tarek Mehanna in his quest to become a jihadi," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 22, 2009.

that Mehanna and Abousamra traveled to Yemen to join a training camp there, and that Abousamra additionally traveled to Iraq and Syria for the same purpose and that they were rejected.⁶ (Abousamra has since fled and is currently living in Syria.) These allegations *are* part of the current charges.

Mehanna's family is adamant that he is innocent. His brother, Tamer, has a website, which has received thousands of visits, dedicated to freeing Tarek, that posts his brother's writings, poems, interviews and drawings. The brother also asks for donations. There is information about Mehanna, his trial, and the actions of his supporters on the website. There is also a Free Tarek Mehanna Facebook page that has over 4000 supporters.

Mehanna's trial was meant to start in October 2010, but so far there is no evidence that the trial has begun. He is currently being held in solitary confinement in the Plymouth Correctional Facility in Massachusetts.

2. Nature of the adversary

Tarek Mehanna is a 27-year-old, natural born citizen of the United States. His family is of Egyptian descent and they currently reside in Sudbury, Massachusetts. He has a Ph.D. from the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy, where his father is a professor of medicinal chemistry. According to friends and family, Tarek was a warm, kind, and giving young man. He was very involved in tutoring children in math and religion at his local mosque, as well as translating Islamic teachings into English for those Muslims who do not know Arabic.⁷

Mehanna became radicalized before 9/11.⁸ The genesis of his radicalization is unclear. He appears to be mentally stable. He comes from a well-off family, attended university, and thus is not socially marginalized or economically destitute. Though he does not say he feels that he is personally politically downtrodden, he does express sentiments that Muslims in America and across the globe are persecuted. He also expresses an admiration for Osama bin Laden, calling him "my real father."⁹ Acting on his own, Mehanna translated "39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad" and wrote "Make Martyrdom what you Seek." These were published on the same website on which he also published other writings about the Koran and Islamic theology.

Prior to his arrest in 2008 for lying to the FBI about the whereabouts of Maldonado, Mehanna had no criminal record. He was free on bail on that charge when he was arrested in October 2009 on the terrorism charges.

3. Motivation

Mehanna was devoutly religious and did not approve of the treatment of Muslims by Americans around the world. He greatly resented America's actions in Iraq and Afghanistan; he enjoyed watching videos of American soldiers being

⁶ Abby Goodnough and Liz Robbins, "Mass. Man Arrested in Terrorism Case," *New York Times*, October 21, 2009.

⁷ Tamer Mehanna, "Who is Tarek Mehanna?" FreeTarek.com, December 3, 2010.

⁸ United States District Court. District of Massachusettes, Criminal Complaint, by Heidi L. Williams, October 21, 2009, 13.

⁹ U.S. District Court, Proffer, 62.

killed in the Middle East. He said he hated living in the United States, being surrounded by kuffirs, or non-believers. He was planning on moving to Saudi Arabia, to live in a purely Islamic society.¹⁰

He was inspired by the writings of jihadist scholars and by the actions of jihadists in Afghanistan and Iraq. In internet conversations with other extremists he would say that he felt like a coward for not laying his life on the line for Islam, as others did. However, he did hope that his translations would inspire others to join jihad.¹¹

Mehanna is clearly motivated by a hatred both of who we are and what we do. He hates America fighting wars in the Middle East and killing Muslims. But he also hates living in the U.S. being surrounded by those who do not follow Islam. He constantly refers to Americans as kuffirs in internet conversations.¹²

4. Goals

In translating a jihadist document and in his poem, Mehanna's goal was to inspire young Muslim men in America to fight and kill Americans abroad, and presumably, also in the United States. The goals of the mall attack and assassinations are unclear, especially since the conspirators never followed through. It seems they just wanted to emulate other jihadists around the world.

5. Plans for violence

Mehanna did at one point have a plan for violence, although he is not being charged with this. In 2002, Mehanna, Abousamra, and an unnamed man who later, in 2006, became an FBI informant, would meet to discuss Islam, and these meetings would sometimes venture into a discussion of jihad and possible attacks.¹³ Abousamra seems to have been the leader of this tiny group. They planned on traveling to Pakistan to a join terrorist training camp. Abousamra did make the trip later in the year, but failed in his mission.¹⁴ He was rejected by the Taliban for being too inexperienced, and by Lashkar e Tayyiba because he is not Pakistani.¹⁵

After giving up that plan, the three men began to think about shooting up a mall and assassinating two U.S. government officials.¹⁶ They were inspired by the success of the D.C. snipers in 2002 and modeled their plan after those attacks.¹⁷ The mall plan involved having Mehanna shoot people at random while the other two guarded entrances and prevented emergency workers from entering.¹⁸ They attempted to buy automatic weapons for the purpose from Maldonado. However, Maldonado could only get them handguns, not automatic weapons. The group thought handguns were not enough to carry out their plot, and it was abandoned in

¹⁰ U.S. District Court, Complaint.

¹¹ U.S. District Court, Complaint.

¹² U.S. District Court, Complaint.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 14.

¹⁵ Clayton, "How FBI."

¹⁶ Ibid, 16-17.

¹⁷ Ibid, 15.

¹⁸ U.S. District Court, Complaint, 17.

late 2003. They did not make any other efforts to obtain weapons. That is, they gave up fairly quickly after the one man they asked said he could not get them automatic weapons. One would think that handguns would still inflict much pain and suffering, but the co-conspirators did not want them. This calls into question the seriousness of the threat. There is no evidence that any of the men had any weapons training and would know how to use such weapons.

Despite the fact that this attack would involve many police officers and other law enforcement agents with firearms, and thus would likely lead to the death of the plotters, Mehanna and Abousamra clearly did not want this to be a suicide attack. They believed that if they perpetrated this attack they would be able to escape.¹⁹

In 2006 the three men traveled to the Middle East, hoping to join terrorist organizations. On an online jihadist discussion board Abousamra had met a man, a convert to Islam, who claimed he had trained in terrorist training camps in Yemen. Abousamra flew to California to meet this man and was supplied with the names of people to contact in Yemen. The informant then paid for all three men to travel to Yemen, but he backed out upon arriving in the UAE, and only Abousamra and Mehanna went all the way to Yemen. However, they were unsuccessful in their venture. They traveled around for about two weeks trying to meet the terrorists other connections had told them about, but the pair claimed that everyone they tried to meet was either on the hajj or in jail.²⁰ After that failure, Abousamra went on to Syria and Iraq with the same result. In 2006, he fled to Syria, and after this the group effectively fell apart, with Mehanna and the informant meeting only occasionally.

Through the years, Mehanna had numerous internet conversations with other pro-jihadists online in which they would trade jihadist videos and discuss jihadist scholars. Mehanna mentions in these conversations his admiration for jihadists who die fighting America and his love of Osama bin Laden, and he derides himself for being a coward for not fighting like other jihadists.²¹ However, despite his admiration for those who die for the cause, he expressed that he did not want to be a martyr.²²

Although Mehanna did speak out against the United States in internet conversations, and although he did allegedly plan an attack in the United States on a mall and on two politicians, and although he did go to Yemen in the hopes of joining a terrorist organization, in all of these ventures he never came close to actually hurting anyone. The internet transcripts read very much like ones between average teenagers. He gave up on his plan to attack the mall very quickly. And after Yemen he did not try very hard to go to other countries when he failed to make contact. Though he does hate the U.S. and has proclaimed jihad, he does not seem to me to be extremely motivated to actually kill anyone himself.

6. Role of informants

¹⁹ Clayton, "How FBI."

²⁰ U.S. District Court, Complaint, 18.

²¹ U.S. District Court, Proffer, 55

²² Clayton, "How FBI."

The third member of the group became an FBI informant in 2006, though he had been involved with his co-conspirators for many years previous. He then began recording telephone conversations and saving electronic correspondence, and all are crucial to Mehanna's arrest and the charges brought against him. Since he is cooperating with the authorities, the informant's name has not been released. He has been a friend with Mehanna for about 15 to 20 years, meaning they were childhood friends.²³ He would often meet to discuss Islam and later, between 2000 and 2008, to discuss jihad.

He was the group member who traveled to meet with Maldonado to discuss purchasing the automatic weapons.²⁴ He also intended to travel with the other two to Yemen in 2006, and flew with them to the UAE. However, once in Dubai, he decided to return home after receiving an e-mail from his family begging for his return.²⁵

It is unclear what motivated him to become an informant. The Complaint and the Proffer do not offer any clues. He became an informant after his return from the UEA so it is possible his family convinced him to cooperate with the authorities. It is also possible that he became an informant after interviews with the FBI in late 2006 in exchange for lesser punishment for his involvement in the plots. His true motivations, like his name, are presently unknown, however.

This case has an interesting twist on the role of informants. Mehanna's family and friends continue to claim that Mehanna is innocent and that the charges against him have been completely fabricated. They claim that the reason Mehanna is in prison, and has been targeted by the FBI, is that he refused to become an informant for the authorities. Mehanna's supporters believe his punishment for this refusal is his imprisonment.

7. Connections

Abousamra, Mehanna and the informant attempted, and failed, to link with overseas terrorist organizations on two occasions. Abousamra also met the Californian to obtain contacts in Yemen.

Additionally, Mehanna translated "39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad" on his own prerogative and with the support of some fundamentalist friends online, who do not appear to be linked to al-Qaeda or other such entities.

There is no organized terrorist network operating in the case, but it is clear that there is a community online that discusses and supports jihad. There are several documented conversations between Mehanna and unidentified extremist men. Yet these are only conversations, and no actions are ever planned and it does not even appear they ever met in person.²⁶

8. Relation to the Muslim community

²³ Ibid., 13.

²⁴ Clayton, "How FBI."

²⁵ U.S. District Court, Complaint, 20

²⁶ U.S. District Court, Proffer.

Mehanna's family claims that he was an upstanding member of the Sudbury Muslim community. He tutored students at the local Muslim community center in math and religion; he also translated religious documents from Arabic to English to make them more accessible to non-Arab speakers.²⁷ His family also claims he was an upstanding Muslim and community member. During his sentencing hearing around 200 people came to the courthouse to support him with posters and "Free Tarek" T-shirts.²⁸

Tarek Mehanna's brother, Tamer, has created a website called FreeTarek.com. It has a running clock denoting how long it has been since Tarek's arrest. There is also information about Tarek, newspaper articles written about him, as well as interviews with him, his poem, his drawings, and his writings about Islam and about his experiences in prison. Tamer gives information about rallies and dinners in support of Tarek. He also provides templates for supporting letters to be sent to the Massachusetts Attorney General. There are also videos that mention Tarek's trial. The most visited articles on the website have over 4000 views. The most recent update on the website is from December 3, 2010, a poem by Tarek entitled, "A DRONE OVER THE SKIES OF MADINAH: The Final Crusade."

Though there seems to be some support for Mehanna in the Muslim community, Tamer also criticizes the Muslim American Society for not helping him, distancing themselves, and abandoning a Muslim brother in need. The Muslim American League in response has said it has organized community forums to raise awareness about the case and has met with Mehanna's lawyer to ensure he gets due process.²⁹

9. Depiction by the authorities

The authorities have not released much information about Tarek Mehanna outside of the Complaint and the Proffer. The Proffer emphasizes Mehanna's activities on the internet, and claims that he should not be released on bail because he is likely to flee the country. The Complaint clearly states that Mehanna is arrested and charged based on his translation of "39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad" into English, as well his poem "Make Martyrdom what you Seek." However, most of the text of the Complaint details Mehanna's past plots, travels and actions.

In newspaper articles, Michael Loucks, the acting U.S. attorney in the case, is always quoted discussing Mehanna's mall-plot, assassination plots, or attempts to join terrorist groups in Yemen, instead of the translation and the poem.³⁰ This makes it appear that the government is trying to sensationalize Mehanna's arrest, and make it seem that he was arrested for reasons other than the translation and the poem. This seems alarmist, and quite deceptive. Mehanna's

²⁷ Mehanna, "Who is Tarek Mehanna?"

²⁸ Shelly Murphy, "Taking refuge where his woes began," *Boston Globe*, February 1, 2010.

²⁹ Dan McDonald, "Terror suspect Tarek Mehanna writes about jail life," *MetroWest Daily News*, February 2, 2010.

³⁰ Denise Lavoie, "Boston Terror Arrest: Tarek Mehanna Arrested For Planning Attacks On Shopping Malls," *HuffingtonPost.com*, October 21, 2009. Goodnough, "Mass. Man Arrested." Murphy, "Taking refuge." Suddath, "Two-Minute Bio."

family has openly spoken out about the characterization of the charges against Mehanna.³¹

10. Coverage by the media

Though the charges against Mehanna are conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists and conspiracy to kill in a foreign country, they are based on the translation and his poem. In contrast, articles in the *New York Times*,³² *Time Magazine*,³³ and the *Huffington Post*³⁴ all emphasize the mall plot and assassinations, while underplaying or ignoring the actual foundation for Mehanna's arrest. A few news articles, such as ones in the *Boston Globe*, do mention that the charges are based upon Mehanna's writing, and the *MetroWest Daily News* also mentions the translation and poems, although this paper has a much smaller circulation than the *New York Times*.

Many of the articles do a poor job of distinguishing the roles of Abousamra, Mehanna, and the informant in the plots. They also make it sound as though Mehanna also traveled to Pakistan, Iraq, Syria and Yemen, when, in reality, he only traveled to Yemen.

Additionally the articles about Mehanna's arrest are all quite short, and they do not appear to have been front-page news. Beyond the brevity of new articles on Mehanna, there is also a dearth of them. Some major newspapers, like the *Washington Post*, do not even mention his arrest. It should be noted that the *Boston Globe* distinguishes itself from other newspapers in the depth and breadth of its articles about Mehanna, his arrest, and the charges against him.

11. Policing costs

There was at least one special agent assigned to the case, Heidi L. Williams. There were other agents with involvement in the investigation, but it is unclear how many.³⁵ The information about Tarek Mehanna was gathered through the use of informants and cooperating witnesses, such as Maldonado who is now in custody after having been captured by Kenyan authorities in 2007 and extradited to the Southern District of Texas. After his arrest he spoke about his experiences with Mehanna to the FBI. Additionally, Mehanna's computer was deciphered once it was taken, which means there must have been technicians working to get internet conversations from the hard drive. The salaries of FBI agents and technicians would need to be paid in the course of this investigation.

The informant recorded conversations between himself and Mehanna, but is it unclear how he did this, and what technology he used, and thus the cost is difficult to determine. It is also unknown if the informant has been paid, or if he is cooperating to avoid harsh sentencing, since he was involved in the mall and assassination plots.

³¹ Mehanna, "Who is Tarek Mehanna?"

³² Goodnough, "Mass. Man Arrested."

³³ Suddath, "Two-Minute Bio."

³⁴ Lavoie, "Boston Terror Arrest."

³⁵ U.S. District Court, Complaint, 1.

There are at least two U.S. attorneys building a case against Mehanna and they have to be paid.³⁶ Also he has been held in solitary confinement since his arrest on October 21, 2009.

12. Relevance of the internet

The internet was crucial to this case. Tarek Mehanna has in fact been arrested because of his publications there. Mehanna received the document he was meant to translate online, and posted his poem online, hoping to inspire other jihadists. He also communicated with other jihadist sympathizers via chat rooms and instant messaging. They would send one another videos of American troops being killed.³⁷

The internet was not important in the embryonic plots to shoot up a mall and assassinate politicians since those actions were planned between the three conspirators in person.

The internet has also played a major role with the website freetarek.com, run by his brother Tamer.

13. Are we safer?

No. Though Mehanna's plans for the mall shooting and politician assassinations were terrible, he abandoned them fairly quickly and easily, over seven years ago. His attempts to join terrorist organizations were also unsuccessful. He appears to be an incompetent terrorist, since he failed to get very far with any attack or even manage to join a terrorist organization.

The material aid Mehanna is accused of providing to terrorists is his translation of a text called "39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad," a list with explanations on how to serve jihad.³⁸ It contains fairly obvious things that one would assume someone who wants to participate in jihad would already know or be doing such as "Speak Out for Mujahedeen and Defend them." Other "Ways" resemble Boy Scout training: "Learn First Aid," "Be Physically Fit," "Learn to Swim and Ride Horses." The document is inflammatory because it attempts to convince people to join jihad, but it did not appear to be revelatory. Thus, it is difficult to see how the translation of this document makes Americans any less safe than before. Moreover, there is a translation on line now, published by the publisher Mehanna meant to use, though it does not give Mehanna's name as the translator—though Mehanna always meant that to be the case.³⁹ Additionally, his poems on his brother's website do not seem to be the sort likely to inspire one to sacrifice one's life. Many of them sound like the result of a eighth grade homework assignment.

It is in fact possible that we are less safe with Mehanna in prison. Based on the writings he publishes on his brother's website, he seems to have become more radicalized in the past year. If he is released he may try with more vigor, and success, to join a terrorist organization. Additionally, his brother's website has

³⁶ www.justice.gov/oarm/arm/hp/hpsalary.htm

³⁷ U.S. District Court, Proffer, 38-43.

³⁸ "39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad," trans. At-Tibyan Publications.

³⁹ U.S. District Court, Proffer, 12.

received thousands of visits, so Mehanna's imprisonment maybe used as proof, to some, of the tyranny of the United States.

14. Conclusions

Mehanna was a well-educated, well-off young man in Massachusetts. If he was the man his family claims him to be, he was also involved in the local community and admired for his service. His writings do show a deep devotion to Islam, though not as intense as a person might expect from a jihadist.

He and his co-conspirators were unable to join terrorist groups abroad, which seems strange considering their American citizenship. What is more baffling is why an organization would not want to use someone with a Ph.D. in pharmacy, someone who clearly knows how to use chemicals, to create bombs or other explosive devices.

Mehanna also quickly gave up on his violent plots after the one person he asked could not provide with the exact weapons he wanted, and this suggests that the plan may not have been very serious.

The translation and poem written by Mehanna were so non-specific that it is difficult to say what actions they could facilitate. They might inspire someone to join jihad, but not to commit a specific attack. It is possible that someone would read these two texts, be inspired, and come up with a new attack, but a causal relationship would be difficult to prove. A translation of "39 Ways to Serve and Participate in Jihad" has been available for quite some time now online, and a quick Google search will bring it up. No new terrorist attack has been inspired by it.

Passport records do show that Mehanna did travel to Yemen, but he was unable to make any connections. There is no doubt that Mehanna is an extremist. In instant messenger conversations he is clearly pleased when he sees American troops being killed in jihadist videos. His poems show that he has a deep devotion to Islam, that he despises American foreign policy in the Middle East, and that he dislikes American culture. Yet it is also clear that he is a product of this culture. In his instant messenger conversations it is comical how many emoticons and how much internet slang he uses. The conversations almost look like ones between teenage girls, except the topic being discussed is jihad, not cute boys. For example, this exchange between Mehanna and a fellow jihadist while discussing the film "United 93," about the plane that went down in Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001:

'AAB: it was soo unbelievable man ... it was so funny how clueless the americans were

MEHANNA: One question: ... how did it end?

hahhhahahahahahahahaahaahahaha

'AAB: lol

MEHANNA::-d ... :-D:-D:-D:-D:-D:-D:-D:-D [big smile]

Also he uses Malcolm X and Howard Zinn to show how people are oppressed in the U.S. and how to fight this oppression.

Mehanna clearly hates America, is devoutly religious, admired Osama bin Laden, and liked watching jihadist videos. He also apparently translated a list, along with explanations, on how to wage jihad. The list, though inflammatory, does not have any great breakthrough information or suggestions for jihadists. It is difficult to say if this should be “material aid to terrorists,” especially because other translations already exist, like the ones I was able to find. I doubt the poem he is accused of writing was inspirational.

I am not convinced that he is a great threat to our national security, however morally repugnant his views may be to anyone who supports America. Nor should he be in solitary confinement while in prison. If anything his treatment since his arrest is most likely to radicalize him and others.