

Case 39: DC Metro—Facebook

John Mueller

June 5, 2011

The 25-year-old Awais Younis appears to have been as much a pre-terrorist or proto-terrorist as many of the other people arrested, convicted, and sentenced in this book. An angry, frustrated, violent, and perhaps mentally unbalanced hothead, he made dramatic and intemperate threats of violence about killing people on the Washington, DC, Metro and elsewhere to a female correspondent (who lived in New Orleans) on Facebook. In this, he “made a poor choice,” notes Lauren Brady in cosmic understatement.

The threats only became more violent and explicit when he suspected her (correctly) of telling the authorities about him and therefore of betraying him, calling her a “bitch.” His Facebook profile contained several photos of him holding weapons (one an AK-47 rifle) and a tent full of explosives with a caption sardonically reading, “My family business.” He gleefully bragged about how “we” had “dropped the twin towers,” and when he was arrested he had a loaded handgun and \$22,000 in cash secreted in his residence.

Yet he never faced a terrorism charge and was tried simply for interstate communication of a threat. He received a sentence of time served (three months) with two years of supervised release.

He never had any explosives, but that hardly makes him unusual among the young hotheads that populate many of the cases in this book. And many of those, in stark contrast to Younis, have been sentenced to decades in prison for plotting murderous crimes.

The difference seems to be that there never was time to employ a cool, calculating, older, and experienced FBI informant to worm his way into the suspect’s confidence and to encourage, and to play on, his propensity to spew bravado. As Brady points out, normally the process is “to monitor the suspects for an extended period to determine if they are a serious threat, then send in an undercover agent or team to pose as terrorists, gather evidence, and sometimes even provide the resources to carry out a plot.” However, the FBI only found out about Younis’ ravings on November 28, 2010, and a week later he made an explicit threat to do violence in Washington the next day. Not wanting “to take any chances,” he was arrested “solely based on his threats.”

There was no time, then, to create a terrorist in this case, and the authorities settled for something much more limited. But if Younis had been befriended by an informant—particularly a fatherly one as he seems to have been fatherless or effectively so—it does seem quite possible he could have been moved along the path to terrorism over, say, a few months.

Or, reversing the consideration, what if the Younis approach had been applied in some of the other cases—cutting the hotheads off early on, giving them a light sentence for making violent threats, and then supervising them for a while? Would we be less safe?

Also, there may have been other instances—perhaps many of them—in which hotheads have been turned off even before they got to the Younis stage.

Realizing that they had attracted the attention of the authorities or realizing they were being informed upon, there may be many young men who were smart enough to cork up. Since they were never arrested, these unknown guys did not make it into this study (or into jail). On the other hand, they, like Younis and some of the other hotheads who didn't stop in time and were arrested, they might never have actually committed terrorist violence in any case.

Case 39: DC Metro—Facebook

Lauren Brady

June 5, 2011

typographical and other minor corrections January 11, 2012

1. Overview

Awais Younis, a 25 year-old naturalized U.S. citizen born in Afghanistan, was arrested on December 6, 2010 for threatening an informant and her father after she alerted the FBI that he had written on Facebook that he was going to set off explosives on the DC Metrorail and in the busy neighborhood of Georgetown.¹

Younis came to the attention of the authorities in November 2010 when the informant contacted the FBI agency in New Orleans about his online Facebook posts.² The informant, who was friends with Younis on the social networking site, said that Younis described how to build a pipe bomb and discussed planting it on the Metro or under manholes in Georgetown. On December 5, 2010, the informant contacted the FBI again, stating that Younis was angry and agitated with her, seemingly because he was suspicious that she had contacted the authorities.³ The FBI arrested Younis the next day, December 6, 2010, and charged him with interstate communication of a threat.⁴ A search of his Arlington, Virginia, home revealed drugs and guns but no explosives,⁵ and he never faced a terrorism charge.⁶

Younis pled not guilty to one count of interstate communication of a threat, a charge with a maximum sentence of five years, and after a mental health hearing in January 2011 was ordered to remain in custody pending trial.⁷ In March 2011, he reached a plea bargain and was sentenced to time served, which was approximately three months, and two years of supervised release.⁸ He was released from federal custody on March 9, 2011.⁹

2. Nature of the adversary

Awais Younis, who also goes by the names Mohhanme Khan and Sundullah Ghilzai, is a naturalized U.S. citizen born in Afghanistan.¹⁰ Very little has been published about his background and upbringing. At the time of his arrest, he resided in Arlington, Virginia and apparently still lived with his family.

¹ Maria Glod, "Va. Man Allegedly Used Facebook to Threaten D.C. Area Bombings," *Washington Post*, December 14, 2010.

² Glod, "Va. Man."

³ Glod, "Va. Man."

⁴ Glod, "Va. Man."

⁵ Emily Babay, "Man Accused of Metro Threats Has Mental Illness History," *Washington Examiner*, January 27, 2011.

⁶ Devlin Barrett, "Virginia Man Charged With D.C. Subway Threat," *Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 2010.

⁷ Babay, "Man Accused."

⁸ Dana Hedgpeth, "Allegations Scaled Back for Virginia Man Indicted in Metro Bomb Threat on Facebook," *Washington Post*, March 9, 2011.

⁹ Hedgpeth, "Allegations."

¹⁰ Barrett, "Virginia."

Court records state that during the FBI search of his home, a loaded handgun, marijuana, and \$22,000 in cash were found in his 11 year-old sister's bedroom, and his family and residence are described in court documents as reflecting "very serious deficits."¹¹ His Facebook profile contained several photos of Younis holding weapons, one with an AK-47 rifle and a tent full of explosives, the caption reading "My family business."¹² During Younis' mental health hearing, presiding U.S. District Judge T. S. Ellis expressed concern about his "lack of suitable guardian" and the fact that no third-party custodian had been identified.¹³ Prosecutors even suggested that it was his family that was supplying him with drugs.¹⁴ He clearly had a troubled home life.

It is unclear when Younis and his family moved to the U.S. from Afghanistan, but according to court records he first underwent mental health treatment in middle school.¹⁵ In November 2010 he was referred for mental counseling at George Mason University, his third college in six years, where he was studying chemistry and biology.¹⁶ Younis had no criminal record, but family and friends described him as prone to violence, with frequent outbursts that resulted in smashing things and beating up on siblings.¹⁷ His long history of apparent mental illness, along with the drugs and guns in his home and an apparent lack of responsible family member caused Judge Ellis to hold Younis in custody to await trial before he reached his plea bargain.¹⁸

Younis' religious or political beliefs do not appear to be in court documents and do not appear to have been reported on by the mainstream media. Afghanistan, where Younis was born, is a Muslim majority nation, but he does not seem to have espoused Islamic extremist views and it is not explicitly clear that he was even Muslim himself. His political views are also unclear, but in his communications with the informant that alerted the FBI, he wrote to her "Bitch, I know what you are up too and you better stop if you know what is good for you!!!! You are sticking your nose where it doesn't belong into something bigger then you and I. that is the problem with Americans they cant leave well enough alone until something happens then they sit there wondering why we dropped the twin towers like a bad habit hahaha."¹⁹ He also wrote to her, "you want a reason to complain about me and my people. i will give you a reason."²⁰ From these statements, it seems that he views himself as part of a group associated with the 9/11 attacks, whether that be Muslims or Middle Easterners. By referring to his "people" and the complaints about them, it could be inferred that he feels socially

¹¹ Babay, "Man Accused."

¹² Glod, "Va. Man."

¹³ Babay, "Man Accused."

¹⁴ Babay, "Man Accused."

¹⁵ Babay, "Man Accused."

¹⁶ Babay, "Man Accused." Barrett, "Virginia."

¹⁷ Babay, "Man Accused."

¹⁸ Babay, "Man Accused."

¹⁹ Glod, "Va. Man." Bruce Alpert, "N.O. FBI Received Tip That Led to Arrest of Virginia Man in Facebook Bomb Threat Case," NOLA.com, December 14, 2010. All communications from Younis in this study retain his spelling and grammar.

²⁰ Emily Babay, "Facebook Chats Alert Authorities to Va. Man's Bomb Threats," *Washington Examiner*, December 12, 2010.

marginalized or discriminated against because of his status as an Afghani, Muslim, or a person of Middle Eastern descent. However, from these limited statements, it is difficult to definitively determine Younis' political or religious views.

Overall, Younis appears to be a young man prone to violence, perhaps because of his questionable mental health and difficult family life. His statements on Facebook suggest that he may have heavily identified with his Middle Eastern heritage, and thus felt socially marginalized. His stated plans for violence do not seem to have been motivated by any specific person or group, and appear to be a result of Younis's own psychological troubles and frustrations.

3. Motivation

Younis' motivations are unclear. In his threatening Facebook messages, he states "we dropped the twin towers" and tells the informant that he will give her a reason to complain about "me and my people," both of which suggest that he feels an association between himself and the 9/11 terrorists and that he has experienced racism based on his Middle Eastern heritage.²¹ But specific religious or political motivations are never stated, and he never mentions any explicit grievances with the U.S. or Americans. Considering his troubled family life and mental health issues, it seems likely that he simply lived an unstable life and was prone to violence. It is possible that he was frustrated living as a native Afghani in the U.S. and his apparent lack of positive family role models caused him to admire Middle Eastern terrorists and develop a desire to act like them. Because of his unstable mental health and the seemingly empty nature of his threats, it is likely that even Younis himself is unaware of his motivation behind the bomb threats.

4. Goals

The goal of Younis' threatened plans appears to be to kill (or to threaten to kill) as many Americans as possible, but no specific political or religious goal was ever explicitly stated.²²

5. Plans for violence

On November 28, 2010, an informant residing in Louisiana contacted the New Orleans FBI office to report that Younis had made bomb threats during a Facebook chat.²³ According to an affidavit signed by Washington FBI agent Joseph J. Lesinki, Younis wrote that he planned on building pipe bombs and planting them in the third and fifth car of a DC Metro train because they are the most crowded.²⁴ He also spoke of placing a bomb under a sewer head at rush hour in the busy DC neighborhood of Georgetown.²⁵ When the informant wrote back, "you wouldn't do that," Younis answered "watch me."

²¹ Glod, "Va. Man."

²² Glod, "Va. Man."

²³ Alpert, "N.O. FBI Received Tip."

²⁴ Glod, "Va. Man."

²⁵ Glod, "Va. Man."

On December 5, 2010, the informant contacted the FBI about more conversations with Younis, who seemed to suspect that the informant had disclosed his plans for violence.²⁶ As noted, he wrote in a Facebook chat, “Bitch, I know what you are up too and you better stop if you know what is good for you!!!! You are sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong into something bigger then you and I. that is the problem with Americans they cant leave well enough alone until something happens then they sit there wondering why we dropped the twin towers like a bad habit hahaha.”²⁷ He directly threatened the informant, writing “I’m telling you right now you are going to regret doing what you did. For you peace, I hope what I am hearing is all lies.”²⁸ The informant’s father lived and worked in the DC area, and Younis wrote to her, “Do yourself a favor and tell your father to cancel work tomorrow.”²⁹ This triggered the FBI into action and Younis was arrested the next day and charged with making threats via interstate communications.³⁰

A search of Younis’ Arlington, Virginia home the day of his arrest revealed no explosives or anything that would have allowed him to carry out the stated attack. It was his next day threat that likely provided the impetus for the arrest, as the FBI probably determined that it was better to be safe than sorry once provided with a potential attack date. Because he was never charged with a terror related crime, it may be inferred that his arrest was a precautionary measure, and that once they failed to discover explosives or evidence of an actual terror plot, the FBI no longer viewed Younis’ plans for violence as an existing threat. With the exception of his online threats, no concrete plans for violence were ever developed.

6. Role of informants

The informant in this case was vital—there would likely be no case without the information she provided. The federal indictment refers only to the informant as K.D., a Louisiana woman who is a private citizen and was friends with Younis on the social networking site, Facebook.³¹ How they knew each other has not been reported. Without the informant, the FBI would not have been aware of Younis nor had any evidence with which to charge him.³²

7. Connections

Younis does not appear to have any connections to a terrorist network, either abroad or in the U.S. He was born in Afghanistan, but reports do not mention any connections in Afghanistan that directly helped or encouraged Younis to develop his violent ideas. Younis was essentially self-motivated, and no terror network was operating in this case.

²⁶ Alpert, “N.O. FBI.”

²⁷ Glod, “Va. Man.” Alpert, “N.O. FBI Received Tip.”

²⁸ Alpert, “N.O. FBI.”

²⁹ Glod, “Va. Man.”

³⁰ Glod, “Va. Man.”

³¹ Bruce Alpert, “Man Who Threatened to Blow up D.C. Subway Pleads Guilty to Threatening Louisiana Woman Who Turned Him in,” NOLA.com, March 17, 2011.

³² Alpert, “Man.”

8. Relation to the Muslim community

Younis does not appear to have had any support from the Muslim community. Reports and court documents do not specify that Younis is a Muslim, but the population of his native Afghanistan is 99% Muslim.³³ He also wrote to the informant, “we dropped the twin towers like a bad habit” and that he will give her a reason to complain about “me and my people,” suggesting that he identifies with the Islamist 9/11 hijackers and has felt post-9/11 discrimination.³⁴ However, his religious beliefs and practices have not been published, and it seems unlikely that he received support from the Muslim community in developing his threats.

9. Depiction by the authorities

Federal officials and the Justice Department took great care to publicly assure that Younis was carefully monitored and that the public was never in any danger.³⁵ Justice Department spokesman Dean Boyd said in a statement that “The public should be reassured that his activities prior to his arrest were carefully monitored and that there is no threat against Metrorail or the general public in the Washington, D.C. area.”³⁶ There was no heralding of this arrest as a victory for the war on terror and no issue of warning to domestic terrorists; it seems that the FBI arrested Younis as a precaution, and took care to not label him as a serious threat. Their reports were responsible and non-alarmist—an appropriate response considering Younis was never actually charged with a terror related crime and was not sentenced to additional jail time beyond time served.³⁷

Younis’ defense attorneys argued that he was a “nobody” who posed no real danger or threat. They argued that Younis had mental health issues, and pushed for a lenient sentence and treatment for mental health issues and substance abuse.³⁸ Many terrorist defense teams will argue their client was not mentally stable, but in this case, considering Younis’ past, the attorneys’ depiction of their client seems within reason.

10. Coverage by the media

Media coverage of the case was non-alarmist and responsible, and most journalists took extra care to emphasize that Younis was not actually being charged with a terror crime and that there was no real danger of an attack. Just days after the arrest, the *Washington Post* published an article that quoted Arthur Hulnick, a Boston University professor who worked with the CIA for 28 years and who said that “A real terrorist who is going to blow up the Washington Metro wouldn’t put an advertisement on Facebook. He’d just do it.” This suggests that Younis is not viewed by credible experts as a “real terrorist.”³⁹ Hulnick also

³³ “Afghanistan,” U.S. Department of State. December 6, 2010.

³⁴ Glod, “Va. Man.”

³⁵ Barrett, “Virginia.”

³⁶ Barrett, “Virginia.”

³⁷ Hedgepeth, “Allegations.”

³⁸ Maria Glod, “Metro Threat Suspect Seeks Pre-trial Release,” *Washington Post*, January 24, 2011.

³⁹ Glod, “Va. Man.”

stated that the authorities, however, must devote resources to checking out threats to determine whether or not they are serious, which was the situation in this case.⁴⁰ Articles took special care to differentiate between this case and the previous DC Metro bombing case of Farooque Ahmed (Case 37). Ahmed, who had been arrested five weeks earlier, had conspired with FBI undercover operatives he believed to be al-Qaeda, while Younis made undeveloped threats in a Facebook chat.⁴¹

Probably due to the lack of serious danger presented by this case, it has been covered much less thoroughly than other terrorist threats. Only the *Washington Examiner*, a free local newspaper in Washington DC, reported extensively on Younis' mental health evaluation and dug into his personal history.⁴² Journalists are often very interested in the backgrounds of those involved in terror threats, but the seemingly non-threatening nature of this case resulted in a general apathy towards Younis; there were probably other, more realistic dangers taking up journalists' time.

11. Policing costs

After the informant first reported Younis to the FBI on November 28, 2010, he was monitored until the informant contacted the FBI again on December 5, 2010 with the direct threats on her and to her father, and Younis was arrested the next day. Younis was therefore under FBI investigation for a total eight days before his arrest. This is an extremely short period of time compared to other terror investigations, and therefore it was probably a relatively cheap investigation. There was no expensive undercover operation involving paid informants or fake bomb materials, and the case did not take up significant labor hours for the FBI. All that being said, Younis was never charged with a terror related crime, and while he pled guilty to interstate communication of threats, he served no additional jail time.⁴³ However, evaluating and responding to all possible terror threats is the FBI's duty.

Younis originally pled not guilty to one count of making a threat via interstate communications.⁴⁴ After a mental health evaluation and hearing, U.S. District Judge T. S. Ellis ruled Younis was to remain in custody pending trial.⁴⁵ After three months, Younis reached a plea bargain in which he pled guilty to one count interstate communication of a threat and was sentenced to time served plus two years supervised release.⁴⁶ The ruling came on March 9, 2011, a little over three months since Younis' arrest. This case traveled through the legal system quickly and, because of the plea agreement, will not be dragged on by appeals; its speed means it was probably a low cost case for both the government and for Younis.

⁴⁰ Glod, "Va. Man."

⁴¹ "Feds: Va. Man Makes DC Subway Bomb Threat Online," ABCNews.com, December 14, 2011.

⁴² Babay, "Man Accused."

⁴³ Hedgepeth, "Allegations."

⁴⁴ Glod, "Metro."

⁴⁵ Babay, "Man Accused."

⁴⁶ Hedgepeth, "Allegations."

12. Relevance of the internet

Younis' threats were communicated on the social networking website, Facebook, making the internet extremely relevant—indeed, the key element—in this case. Using the Facebook chat feature, Younis wrote to the informant, who was his “friend” on the site, that he was going to place bombs on DC Metro cars or under the streets of Georgetown at rush hour.⁴⁷ They monitored Younis online until the informant contacted them again⁴⁸ on December 5, 2010, about additional threats Younis had made on Facebook. The FBI also found further evidence of Younis' violent tendencies on the internet, including the photos he had posted on his Facebook page of him holding an AK-47 in front of a tent full of explosives.⁴⁹ The internet was vital to Younis' crime, to apprehending Younis, and to providing evidence for the government.

13. Are we safer?

We are safer, but only slightly. Younis did not have any developed plans for attack, nor did he appear to have the resources for such an attack or any connection to an actual terrorist group. What he did seem to have, however, was a violent personality and an apparent frustration with Americans that led him to make the online threats. While the threats under consideration may have been empty, we are safer with the FBI monitoring Younis to ensure his violent ideas never come to fruition. Hulnick, the Boston University professor, commented on this case about the importance of authorities devoting time and resources to checking out threats and determining which ones are serious. He notes that the most serious terrorists aren't likely to promote their plans on Facebook, but you can't ignore it if someone does.⁵⁰ Younis was unlikely to have bombed Washington when he said he was going to, but with him under FBI surveillance, we are safer knowing that he will now probably never have that chance.

14. Conclusions

This case is unique, or at least unusual, on many different levels. First, it involves no actual charges of terrorism. Younis was only charged with interstate communication of a threat, and it was not the bomb threats that he was charged with but rather the threats against the informant and her father.⁵¹

It is also unique because of its short timeline—just a few days. In cases similar to this one, the FBI strategy seems to be to monitor the suspects for an extended period to determine if they are a serious threat, then send in an undercover agent or team to pose as terrorists, gather evidence, and sometimes even provide the resources to carry out a plot.⁵² But because the informant reported that Younis told her to tell her father to “cancel work tomorrow,” the FBI

⁴⁷ Glod, “Va. Man.”

⁴⁸ Barrett, “Virginia.”

⁴⁹ Glod, “Va. Man.”

⁵⁰ Glod, “Va. Man.”

⁵¹ Alpert, “Man.”

⁵² “FBI Terror Stings: Entrapment or Prevention?” CBS News, November 30, 2010.

likely did not want to take any chances and arrested Younis solely based on his threats.⁵³

Finally, this case is unique because it is not clear whether or not Younis' desire to bomb Washington is a result of Islamist beliefs. He seems to affiliate himself with the Islamist terrorists of 9/11 by stating that “we dropped the twin towers,” but nowhere in court documents or media reports is he described as an Islamist or even as a Muslim. Because of the undeveloped and haphazard nature of his plans, his political or religious motivations remain very unclear.

This case is similar to other cases because of Younis' background and behavior. Younis was an American citizen, but he was born in Afghanistan. His court ordered psychological evaluation revealed a troubling family life and a propensity towards violence, though he had no criminal record.⁵⁴ Many terror plots since 9/11 have been thought up by those similar to Younis—young men in their late teens or twenties, foreign born or of Middle Eastern descent, and socially isolated. The only true evidence of Younis' motivation for making the threats was when he wrote, “you want a reason to complain about me and my people. i will give you a reason.”⁵⁵ He seems to have experienced discrimination as a result of his Middle Eastern heritage or Muslim faith, and it is entirely possible that the threats were an expression of violent frustration with that discrimination.

Younis was a frustrated, violent young man who made a poor choice by posting some of his violent ideas on the internet. Considering a lack of explosives, it seems very unlikely that he was actually going to carry out the attacks he described to the informant. However, it is clear that Younis had access to guns and at least thought about expressing his frustrations through violence. It was good that the informant contacted the FBI and important that the FBI monitored him then and that it continues to monitor him now.

It is easy to declare young men like Younis to be angry but harmless. However, they are only harmless because they do not yet have the resources, connections, or will to transform their dangerous ideas into realities. The FBI needs to keep men like Younis on its radar, because meeting the right people or obtaining the right resources can easily turn them into a serious terror threat.

⁵³ Barrett, “Virginia.”

⁵⁴ Babay, “Man Accused.”

⁵⁵ Babay, “Facebook.”