

**Case 65: Shootings at Cartoon Contest in Garland, Texas**

John Mueller

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In the middle of 2014, a new and especially brutal terrorist/insurgent entity emerged in the Middle East. It is most commonly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS.

Unlike other such groups in Iraq, it seeks to hold territory, and its conquest of Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, was especially impressive even though the venture was essentially a fluke. Its idea was to hold part of the city for a while in an effort, it seems, to free some prisoners. The attackers were much outnumbered by the defending Iraqi army, "trained" by the American military at enormous cost to US taxpayers, even though its ranks had been substantially reduced by the popular device in which a soldier is excused from showing up if he gives his commander half his salary. Those who did show up simply fell apart in confusion and disarray, abandoning weaponry, and the city, to the tiny group of seeming invaders.<sup>1</sup>

The American public was substantially unmoved by this event, but the American military began to use air attacks against ISIS. In retaliation, two American journalists were beheaded with the executioner declaiming on camera, "just as your missiles continue to strike our people, our knife will continue to strike the necks of your people."<sup>2</sup> This gruesome event galvanized attention and greatly increased American military involvement.

ISIS has differentiated itself from al-Qaeda in that it does not seek primarily to target the "far enemy," preferring instead to carve out a state in the Middle East for itself, mostly killing fellow Muslims who stand in its way. In the process, it has alienated virtually all outside support and, by holding territory, presents an obvious and clear target to military opponents.

Outrage at the tactics of ISIS is certainly justified, as is concern about the menace it presents in the Middle East. But there is fear as well that it presents a security threat to the United States.

There are two avenues by which, it is commonly argued, ISIS will be able to inflict damage abroad.

The main fear is that foreign militants who had gone to fight with ISIS would be trained and then sent back to do damage in their own countries. However, there has been little of that so far, and essentially none at all in the United States. In part, this is because foreign fighters tend to be killed early (they are common picks for suicide missions), often become disillusioned especially by in-fighting in the ranks, and do not receive much in the way of useful training for terrorist exercises back home. Although there has been a trendy concern about the way ISIS uses social media, the foolish willingness of would-be terrorists to spill

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<sup>1</sup> Ned Parker, Isabel Coles, and Raheem Salman. "How Mosul Fell." Special Report, Reuters, 2014. [graphics.thomsonreuters.com/14/10/MIDEAST-CRISIS:GHARAWI.pdf](http://graphics.thomsonreuters.com/14/10/MIDEAST-CRISIS:GHARAWI.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Peter Bergen, *United States of Jihad: Investigating America's Homegrown Terrorists* (New York: Crown, 2016), 2.

their aspirations and their often childish fantasies on social media has been, on balance, much to the advantage of the police seeking to track them.<sup>3</sup>

The second avenue involves the possibility that potential homegrown terrorists will become inspired by ISIS's propaganda or example. In a reactive pose that has become routine for it, the group has claimed responsibility for—or, more accurately, boorishly celebrated—such distant ventures.

However, as terrorism specialist Max Abrahms notes, isolated homegrown offenders have carried out just two of the 1,900 most deadly terrorist attacks over the last four decades.<sup>4</sup> And, as with earlier homegrown terrorists, almost all of those picked up in the United States who seem to have been inspired at least in part by ISIS not only have demonstrated a pathetic absence of capacity but, in many cases, have suffered from mental disease.

The armed attack at an anti-Islamic cartoon contest in Garland, Texas, in May 2015, was the first ISIS-claimed attack on American soil. The two attackers, as discussed by Sam Zacher, an intern at the Cato Institute when he wrote this case, do not seem to have been mental cases. But their capacities were clearly deficient: they were well armed and wore body armor, but they did little damage and were disabled within 15 seconds by a traffic officer armed only with a pistol.

As Zacher stresses, although ISIS lauded the fallen attackers as their “soldiers” and “brothers,” the group did not take credit for directing the attack, and there is no evidence that they did.

December 25, 2017: As it happens, there was an undercover FBI special agent working on this case. Court documents revealed in mid-2016, a year after the attack, that the agent had been communicating with at least one of the terrorists in Arizona and, a few days before the attack, had urged them to “Tear up Texas.” The operative, based in Ohio, even drove to Garland and took a picture of the event. The U.S. government argued that the communication did not amount to incitement. See “Affidavit in Support of an Application for a Criminal Complaint and Arrest Warrant,” Case of Erick Jamal Hendricks, August 3, 2016; Katie Zavadski, “FBI Agent Apparently Egged on ‘Draw Muhammad’ Shooter,” Daily Beast, August 4, 2016; Murtaza Hussain, “FBI Agent Goaded Garland Shooter to ‘Tear Up Texas’,” Intercept, August 9, 2016; John Mueller, “The Cybercoaching of Terrorists: Cause for Alarm?” *CTC Sentinel* 10(9), October 2017, 29-35: [pdf](#). See also “60 Minutes investigates first ISIS-claimed attack in U.S. and what the FBI knew,” CBS News, March 26, 2017.

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<sup>3</sup> Byman, Daniel, and Jeremy Shapiro. “Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid. The Threat of Terrorism from Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq,” Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, Policy Paper 34, November 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Max Abrahms, “Fear of ‘Lone Wolf’ Misplaced,” *Baltimore Sun*, January 5, 2011.

## Case 65: Shootings at Cartoon Contest in Garland, Texas

Sam Zacher

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### 1. Overview

On May 3, 2015, Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi drove from Phoenix, Arizona, to Garland, Texas, with the presumed intention of killing as many people as possible at the Muhammad Art Exhibition and Cartoon Contest event. The two men had six guns, including automatic weapons, and wore body armor. Upon arriving, they immediately opened fire but were taken down by a traffic officer who was armed only with a handgun, and then killed by the Garland SWAT team. Simpson and Soofi managed to kill no one, and the only injury was of an unarmed security officer who was shot in the ankle.<sup>1</sup>

Authorities are still questioning the degree to which Simpson and Soofi were connected with terrorist organizations. Simpson had corresponded at least briefly with a former Brit who joined ISIS, and who had also been a member of Al-Shabaab in Somalia, an affiliate group of al-Qaeda. In 2011, Simpson was arrested for conspiring to travel to Somalia in order to commit violent jihad, presumably by joining Al-Shabaab. Leading up to the Garland attack, Simpson and the members of terrorist organizations whom he knew mentioned the eventual attack via social media, which played a tremendous role in the episode by allowing these men to communicate with each other and with a wider public about the attack.<sup>2</sup>

Simpson and Soofi had both worshipped at the same mosque in Phoenix for years. Simpson turned to radicalism far before Soofi, and it appears that Simpson may have converted Soofi to extremism. Both men were also relatively unsuccessful professionally, as neither held a steady job. However, both men also seemed to have joy in their lives. Simpson was passionate about playing basketball at the Islamic Community Center of Phoenix and advising young men on how to improve. Soofi was unmarried but had a 9 year-old son, of whom he was very fond. Those who knew Simpson and Soofi well indicated they were surprised when the two men attempted a terrorist attack.<sup>3</sup>

The Muhammad Art Exhibition and Cartoon Contest was hosted by Pamela Geller and her organization called the American Freedom Defense Initiative, which the Southern Poverty Law Center labels as “anti-Muslim” and an “extremist group.” Geller is very outspoken about her anti-Islamic beliefs, and she also leads a group that opposes Muslim immigration to the United States. She came into the public spotlight by fighting against a plan to build a mosque in New York City near Ground Zero of the 9/11 attack.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Botelho, “Texas shooting: Outgunned traffic officer stopped 2 attackers,” cnn.com, May 5, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Jim Sciutto, Pamela Brown, Paul Cruickshank, and Paul Murphy, “Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists,” cnn.com, May 5, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Holly Yan, “Texas attack: What we know about Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi,” cnn.com, May 5, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine E. Shoichet and Ann Colwell, “Who is beheading plot target Pamela Geller?” cnn.com, June 3, 2015.

Simpson's and Soofi's ambiguous connection with ISIS and other terrorist organizations sheds light on terrorism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as it has evolved tremendously with use of the internet and specifically social media. While this particular event only cost the lives of the two terrorists, it represents the larger threat of terrorist organizations wreaking havoc from other parts of the world: Simpson and Soofi intended to kill many people only after apparently being inspired and possibly being persuaded by terrorists abroad.

## 2. Nature of the adversary

Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi directly carried out the terrorist attack, and a third man, Decarus Thomas—also known as Abdul Malik Abdul Kareem—aided them in planning and obtaining weapons.<sup>5</sup> All had participated in criminal activity in the past. However, unlike Thomas, Simpson and Soofi lived much of their lives as upstanding citizens, and many people close to them were surprised to hear they tried to commit this violent act. However, they had shown signs of turning to violent jihad late in their lives.

Elton Simpson was either 30 or 31 years old at the time of the attack—news sources don't agree on his age.<sup>6</sup> He was born and raised in Westmont, Illinois, just west of Chicago, and moved to Phoenix as a young man. He attended Washington High School there and is believed to have converted to Islam while in high school.<sup>7</sup> Simpson's parents are not Muslim. They say they are "American," but no more information about their race, ethnicity, or religious background is given about them.<sup>8</sup> Simpson then attended Yavapai (community) College and starred on the basketball team during the 2002–2003 season.<sup>9</sup> He also worshipped at the Islamic Community Center of Phoenix, although he stopped going there two or three months before the attack.<sup>10</sup> According the Center's president Usama Shami, "[Simpson] was very competitive. Basketball was his passion."<sup>11</sup>

Simpson did seem to care about those around him. According to Shami, he advised teens at the Community Center on how to improve their basketball skills and played with them often. Neighbors say that he—along with Soofi—helped

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<sup>5</sup> Greg Botelho, "Man indicted for allegedly helping Mohammed cartoon contest attackers," [cnn.com](http://cnn.com), June 16, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Weiss and Kevin Krause, "2 Garland shooters' lives twined to tragic end," [dallasnews.com](http://dallasnews.com), May 4, 2015. Scott Shane and Fernanda Santos, "Elton Simpson Eluded U.S. Inquiry Before Texas Shootout," [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com), May 6, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Chuck Goudie, "Elton Simpson, shooter in Texas prophet cartoon contest, from Illinois," [abc7chicago.com](http://abc7chicago.com), May 4, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Ross, Rhonda Schwartz, and Randy Kreider, "Garland Shooting Suspect Elton Simpson's Father Says 'Son Made a Bad Choice'," [abcnews.go.com](http://abcnews.go.com), May 4, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Lydia Warren, "Texas gunman as a community college basketball star before family say he 'brainwashed' his 'heartthrob' roommate into carrying out attack," [dailymail.co.uk](http://dailymail.co.uk), May 5, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Julie Watson and Ryan Van Velzer, "Doubts raised in Islamic State's claim in Texas attack," [news.yahoo.com](http://news.yahoo.com), May 6, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Warren, "Texas gunman as a community college basketball star."

feed stray cats around their neighborhood.<sup>12</sup> Simpson's father said he worked at a dentist's office in Phoenix prior to his death.<sup>13</sup>

However, Simpson had broken the law when he lied to authorities in 2011 about terrorism plans, and he had at least contemplated committing terrorism in the past. In 2006, the FBI began watching him because of his believed connections to Hassan Abu Jihaad, a man who had been kicked out of the U.S. Navy after being arrested and charged with providing U.S. ship location information to an organization that promoted violent jihad against the U.S.<sup>14</sup> In 2008, Abu Jihaad was convicted of terrorism and espionage, and in 2009, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison by a United States district court.<sup>15</sup>

That same year, an FBI informant named Dabla Deng befriended Simpson and taped their conversations over several years. On May 29, 2009, Simpson stated, "I'm telling you, man, we can make it to the battlefield. It's time to roll."<sup>16</sup> He was referring to travelling to Somalia to participate in violent jihad. Simpson then lied to federal agents about his plans to head to Africa, and for that, he was arrested in 2011, given three years of probation, and put on a no fly list.<sup>17</sup>

The FBI and Phoenix police opened a new investigation on Simpson a few months before the Garland attack because he had posted about ISIS on social media, a platform which he was quite fond of using.<sup>18</sup> Just one week before the incident, he tweeted about the upcoming Garland cartoon contest: "When will they ever learn? They are planning on selecting the best picture drawn of Rasulullah [the Islamic Prophet Muhammad]...in Texas."<sup>19</sup>

Authorities also believe Simpson was connected with Junaid Hussain, a British hacker who allegedly joined ISIS and has been described as a "real problem" because—coming from Britain—of his ability to recruit from the Western world by inspiring attacks. Hussain also allegedly founded the group CyberCaliphate which briefly hijacked the U.S. Central Command's twitter in January 2015. An hour before the Garland attack, Simpson tweeted about Soofi and himself, stating, "The bro with me and myself have given bay'ah to Amirul Mu-mineen. May Allah accept us as mujahideen. Make dua #texasattack." This is believed to be their pledge of allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,<sup>20</sup> as a "bay'ah" is an oath of allegiance to a leader,<sup>21</sup> and "Amirul Mu-mineen" means "commander of the faithful."<sup>22</sup> Hussain retweeted Simpson's tweet sometime around the time of the attack.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Weiss and Kraus, "2 Garland shooters' lives twined to tragic end."

<sup>13</sup> Nick Allen, Harriet Alexander, and Laura Dixon, "Texas shooting: Islamic State claims responsibility for first US attack as gunmen named," telegraph.co.uk, May 4, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Yan, "Texas attack: What we know about Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi."

<sup>15</sup> David Fein, "Major Achievements in the Courtroom: U.S. v. Hassan Abu-Jihaad," justice.gov, 2015. See also the appendix to Case 21 in the volume.

<sup>16</sup> Weiss and Kraus, "2 Garland shooters' lives twined to tragic end."

<sup>17</sup> Yan, "Texas attack: What we know about Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi."

<sup>18</sup> Weiss and Kraus, "2 Garland shooters' lives twined to tragic end."

<sup>19</sup> Sciutto et al., "Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists."

<sup>20</sup> Sciutto et al., "Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists."

<sup>21</sup> "Bay'ah," Wikipedia.com, August 5, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> "Amir al-Mu'minin," Wikipedia.com, August 1, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Sciutto et al., "Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists."

It is also believed that Simpson had been talking to Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan, an American who traveled to Somalia in 2008 to aid al-Qaeda-affiliate Al-Shabaab. Court records state that Simpson had intended to join that same group with Hassan at that time. A week before the Garland incident, Hassan tweeted, “The brothers from the Charlie Hedbo attack did their part. It’s time for brothers in the #US to do their part.”<sup>24</sup> Hassan is referring to the Paris terrorist attack in January 2015, when two men with some connection to al-Qaeda in Yemen killed 12 people in an attack at the offices of a French satirical magazine that had caricatured the Prophet Muhammad, an act which Islam considers to be blasphemy.<sup>25</sup>

Even though Simpson had previously sought to travel overseas to commit terrorism and was likely in communication with known radicals in the Middle East, he projected a positive image to those people who knew him. Kristina Sitton, Simpson’s lawyer, said, “He was a very kind-hearted, respectful young man. He always treated me with respect.” Shami, the Community Center president, said, “[Simpson] was a gentle person. He always had a good attitude, a good demeanor.” Shami also suggested that Simpson showed no signs of radicalization. Additionally, Simpson’s family was shocked. “Just like everyone in our beautiful country,” his mother said, referring to the United States, “we are struggling to understand how this could happen... We are heartbroken and in a state of deep shock as we grieve.”<sup>26</sup> Simpson’s father added, “[he was] always a good kid,” but noted they had “some very serious differences.” Neither of Simpson’s parents are Muslim.<sup>27</sup> Courtney Lonergan, who knew Simpson from the Phoenix mosque, offered some more analytical thoughts: “He was in a pattern of feeling isolated, a pattern of feeling marginalized by society.” She thought he was troubled about not being able to find a wife. Additionally, she stated, “He thought everybody should be Muslim.”<sup>28</sup>

Soofi, a Pakistani-American, was 34 years old at the time of the attack<sup>29</sup> and had less serious run-ins with the law than Simpson. Coincidentally, Soofi was born in Garland, Texas, and lived there with his parents for the first three years of his life.<sup>30</sup> They then moved to Plano, Texas, then to Alabama, and then to Pakistan, where Soofi’s father—an engineer—was from.<sup>31</sup> His mother, an American, converted to Islam when Soofi was a boy.<sup>32</sup> He attended a private school in Islamabad, Pakistan,<sup>33</sup> and his high school friends called him a “cool

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<sup>24</sup> Sciutto et al., “Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists.”

<sup>25</sup> Gordon Rayner, Henry Samuel, and Martin Evans, “Charlie Hebdo attack: France’s worst terrorist attack in a generation leaves 12 dead,” *telegraph.co.uk*, January 7, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> Yan, “Texas attack: What we know about Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi.”

<sup>27</sup> Jon Herskovitz and David Schwartz, “Gunman in Mohammad cartoon attack in Texas monitored for years,” *reuters.com*, May 4, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Sean Holstege and Matthew Casey, “Elton Simpson’s slow, isolated descent into ISIS, jihad,” *azcentral.com*, May 9, 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Weiss and Kraus, “2 Garland shooters’ lives twined to tragic end.”

<sup>30</sup> Yan, “Texas attack: What we know about Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi.”

<sup>31</sup> Matt Pearce and Nigel Duara, “Texas gunman’s mother: ‘He just had a normal American upbringing,’” *latimes.com*, May 5, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Weiss and Kraus, “2 Garland shooters’ lives twined to tragic end.”

<sup>33</sup> Yan, “Texas attack: What we know about Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi.”

kid” who was popular and drew attention from females.<sup>34</sup> In 1998, Soofi moved back to the U.S. with his mother—after his parents divorced—and attended the University of Utah as a pre-medical student, but he never finished college. From then on, his life became seemingly less focused. In Utah, he received multiple traffic tickets<sup>35</sup> and in 2001 pled guilty to alcohol possession by a minor, drunk driving, and driving on a suspended license. Then in 2002, he was charged with a misdemeanor, assault.<sup>36</sup>

While living in Phoenix—where Soofi and Simpson met and had lived together for a number of years—Soofi fathered a son in 2006 with his girlfriend. Though they later split up and she claimed primary custody over the child, Soofi still saw his son at times.<sup>37</sup> He seemed to be very fond of the child, posting pictures of them together on Facebook. In addition, Soofi used social media to demonstrate his faith in Islam, posting on Facebook, “‘I am a traveler seeking the Truth, a human searching for the meaning of humanity, and a citizen seeking dignity, freedom, stability, and welfare under the shade of Islam.’ –Hasan Al-Banna.”<sup>38</sup> He also owned a pizza shop in Phoenix called “Cleopatra Pizza Bistro,” started on a loan from his father.<sup>39</sup> However, it closed five months before to the Garland attack.<sup>40</sup> Soofi, like Simpson, was a good neighbor, feeding stray cats, and once helped a neighbor who had fallen over because of a heart condition.<sup>41</sup>

In the last few years of his life, Soofi grew a beard and wore more traditional Muslim clothing. He also became more vehement in his religious Facebook posts, once stating, “May Allah turn the tides of this war and punish the Israeli oppressors, ameen, ameen, ameen!”<sup>42</sup> Soofi was also charged with a misdemeanor of marijuana possession just a month before the attack.<sup>43</sup> Unlike Simpson, however, he was not on the authorities’ radar at all.<sup>44</sup>

As with Simpson, people close to Soofi were dumbstruck when they found out he had attempted to commit violent jihad. “He put his son above everything,” Soofi’s mother said. “The hard thing to comprehend is why he would do this and leave an 8-year-old behind.”<sup>45</sup> She also said, “He was a good parent.” Soofi’s father described his son as a “humble, soft-spoken person.”<sup>46</sup>

The Garland attack’s third known culprit, Decarus Thomas, an African-American, was raised in Philadelphia and was previously charged with two drunk

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<sup>34</sup> Warren, “Texas gunman as a community college basketball star.”

<sup>35</sup> Weiss and Kraus, “2 Garland shooters’ lives twined to tragic end.”

<sup>36</sup> Watson and Van Velzer, “Doubts raised in Islamic State’s claim in Texas attack.”

<sup>37</sup> Pearce and Duara, “Texas gunman’s mother: ‘He just had a normal American upbringing’.”

<sup>38</sup> Weiss and Kraus, “2 Garland shooters’ lives twined to tragic end.”

<sup>39</sup> Pearce and Duara, “Texas gunman’s mother: ‘He just had a normal American upbringing’.”

<sup>40</sup> Weiss and Kraus, “2 Garland shooters’ lives twined to tragic end.”

<sup>41</sup> Yan, “Texas attack: What we know about Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi.”

<sup>42</sup> Pearce and Duara, “Texas gunman’s mother: ‘He just had a normal American upbringing’.”

<sup>43</sup> Tristan Hallman and Ray Leszczynski, “Police: Men killed in Garland shooting had assault rifles, body armor,” *dallasnews.com*, May 3, 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Yan, “Texas attack: What we know about Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi.”

<sup>45</sup> Yan, “Texas attack: What we know about Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi.”

<sup>46</sup> Pearce and Duara, “Texas gunman’s mother: ‘He just had a normal American upbringing’.”

driving incidents and aggravated assault and spent four months in jail.<sup>47</sup> Thomas is believed to have supplied Simpson and Soofi with all their weapons and helped them practice using the weapons during the few months before the attack, from January through May. He also discussed the plans of attack with them, presumably after they met at the Phoenix mosque where Thomas cleaned the carpets for some time.<sup>48</sup> However, he hadn't been to the mosque in six or eight months. Thomas wasn't arrested until June 11, 2015, over a month after the attack, and authorities then discovered plans on his computer to attack the 2015 Super Bowl, which had been held in Glendale, Arizona, the previous February.<sup>49</sup> Authorities say other people likely knew about the plans for the Garland attack, but they have not released any names.<sup>50</sup>

Overall, there are a few things to say about Simpson and Soofi. They apparently experienced joy in their lives, though they didn't achieve professional success, and were driven to radicalization—Simpson earlier in his life than Soofi. Simpson had a deep-seeded vision of committing violent jihad that very possibly affected Soofi, who hadn't seen much success in school or business life, although his son seemed to bring him joy. Clearly, they both thought that risking their lives for a cause outweighed their current lifestyles.

Based on known connections between Simpson and Islamic radical terrorists, it's highly possible that the two men—especially Simpson, who apparently was directing the two men's actions—were inspired by ISIS, al-Qaeda, or other terrorist groups. In Simpson's same tweet declaring their allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS leader, Simpson stated, "May Allah accept us as mujahideen #texasattack."<sup>51</sup> These strongly suggest a connection to ISIS and to Islamic radical terrorism more generally, but there's no evidence that he and Soofi were directed by ISIS or were explicit ISIS members. Former FBI agent Time Clemente said, "They were kind of applying for membership into ISIS."<sup>52</sup>

### 3. Motivation

There were multiple forces behind Elton Simpson's and Nadir Soofi's inspiration that all came together at this particular time in the men's lives: previous radicalization, momentary life circumstances, the rise of ISIS, and provocation by the cartoon-drawing event.

As seen by the FBI's previous investigation of him, Simpson had been motivated to commit violent jihad for at least six years, as he told the FBI's informant Deng on May 29, 2009, "...we can make it to the battlefield. It's time to roll," referring to travelling to Somalia to join the al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Shabaab.<sup>53</sup> It's unclear when Simpson turned to radical Islam, though it was likely

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<sup>47</sup> Associated Press, "Man allegedly helped plan Texas cartoon contest shooting, wanted to attack Super Bowl," foxnews.com, June 17, 2015.

<sup>48</sup> Botelho, "Man indicted for allegedly helping Mohammed cartoon contest attackers."

<sup>49</sup> Associated Press, "Man allegedly helped plan Texas cartoon contest shooting."

<sup>50</sup> Botelho, "Man indicted for allegedly helping Mohammed cartoon contest attackers."

<sup>51</sup> Yan, "Texas attack: What we know about Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi."

<sup>52</sup> Holly Yan, "ISIS claims responsibility for Texas shooting but offers no proof," cnn.com, May 5, 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Weiss and Kraus, "2 Garland shooters' lives twined to tragic end."



some time between his conversion to the religion in high school<sup>54</sup> and 2006, when the FBI began to investigate him.<sup>55</sup> Simpson's connection to Hassan Abu Jihaad—the former U.S. Navy member who gave secrets to the terrorist organization while living in Phoenix, is a plausible reason for Simpson's radicalization.<sup>56</sup> Soofi, on the other hand, seemed to hint at radicalization far more recently, as seen by the transformation of his Facebook posts, shifting from average personal posts to a more rhetorically extreme post in 2014, stating, "May Allah turn the tides of this war and punish the Israeli oppressors, ameen, ameen, ameen!"<sup>57</sup> It thus seems most likely that Simpson contributed to Soofi's radicalization prior to the attempted attack.

At this time in their lives, both Simpson and Soofi were relatively unsuccessful professionally. Soofi's business attempts had failed,<sup>58</sup> and neither man had finished college.<sup>59</sup> In addition, Simpson reportedly had much trouble trying to find a romantic companion.<sup>60</sup> It's possible that these conditions increased the likelihood of these men turning to terrorism.

Simpson and Soofi also could have been motivated by terrorist groups, which can be seen through Simpson's connection to Abu Jihaad, who tweeted prior to the Garland incident, "The brothers from the Charlie Hebdo attack did their part. It's time for the brothers in the #US to do their part."<sup>61</sup> Additionally, Simpson's tweet the day of the attempted attack, "The bro with me and myself have given bay'ah to Amirul Mu-mineen. May Allah accept us as mujahideen. Make dua #texasattack," seemed to declare their allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bark al-Baghdadi. At a time when Simpson and Soofi ostensibly weren't too professionally satisfied, groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda likely provided life purposefulness through shared conviction, manifested in inspired action. U.S. law enforcement, including Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, believed Simpson and Soofi were at least motivated by organized terrorism: "It's concerning that there are individuals like this who draw their inspiration from ISIL," Carter said.<sup>62</sup>

The Garland cartoon-drawing event itself most certainly inspired Simpson and Soofi. One week before the attempted attack, Simpson tweeted, "When will they ever learn? They are planning on selecting the best picture drawn of Rasulullah [Prophet Muhammah] (saws) in Texas."<sup>63</sup> According to Islam, it's blasphemous to depict Muhammad in any corporeal way, and this event's attempt to do so in a defamatory way was apparently offensive to Simpson and Soofi. The anti-Islam sentiment present at this event, though described as a practice of free

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<sup>54</sup> Goudie, "Elton Simpson, shooter in Texas prophet cartoon contest, from Illinois."

<sup>55</sup> Weiss and Kraus, "2 Garland shooters' lives twined to tragic end."

<sup>56</sup> *United States of America v. Elton Simpson*, Trial Brief, abcnews.go.com, filed October 20, 2010.

<sup>57</sup> Pearce and Duara, "Texas gunman's mother: 'He just had a normal American upbringing'."

<sup>58</sup> Weiss and Kraus, "2 Garland shooters' lives twined to tragic end."

<sup>59</sup> Warren. "Texas gunman as a community college basketball star." Weiss and Kraus, "2 Garland shooters' lives twined to tragic end."

<sup>60</sup> Holstege and Casey, "Elton Simpson's slow, isolated descent into ISIS, jihad."

<sup>61</sup> Sciutto et al., "Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists."

<sup>62</sup> Jacqueline Klimas, "Ashton Carter: Texas attack 'inspired by' Islamic State," washingtontimes.com, May 7, 2015.

<sup>63</sup> Sciutto et al., "Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists."

speech, mirrored ones in Paris, France,<sup>64</sup> and Copenhagen, Denmark,<sup>65</sup> which earlier in the year had experienced incidents of violent jihad. Those precedents very possibly inspired a similar attempt at vengeance for Simpson and Soofi.

Although the cartoon-drawing event was the proximate cause of the two men attempting to attack at this time, a more general hostility toward the group that organized the event—the American Freedom Defense Initiative (AFDI)—likely also increased Simpson’s and Soofi’s motivation. AFDI is explicitly anti-Islam, and in its written ideals, it describes fighting “against this tenant of Islam,” referring to multiple Islamic beliefs. The Southern Poverty Law Center describes AFDI as anti-Muslim and as an extremist group, and it refers to the group’s leader, Pamela Geller, as the “anti-Muslim movement’s most visible and flamboyant figurehead.”<sup>66</sup> In addition, Dutch politician Geert Wilders spoke at the event, and he’s on al-Qaeda’s hit list for blatantly promoting an anti-Islam philosophy.<sup>67</sup>

In sum, in attempting this terrorist act, Simpson and Soofi had already been primed by prior radicalization and life circumstances. Inspiration by Middle Eastern terrorist organizations—possibly by Simpson and Soofi paying distant attention to them, and possibly from direct social media communication—also appeared to motivate them.

#### 4. Goals

It appears, then, that Simpson and Soofi were acting partly on behalf of ISIS—Simpson’s final tweet seemingly declared allegiance to al-Baghdadi suggests ISIS inspiration for the attack. However, it’s not clear the extent to which the goals of the men coincided with the goals of the terrorist organizations. It seems likely that ISIS (and whatever other organizations, such as al-Qaeda, could have inspired the incident) has goals that are more broad, symbolic, and normative than those of the two men.

Simpson and Soofi aimed at a few tangible goals. Using their six guns—including assault rifles—and wearing body armor, they tried to wreak havoc at an event that appeared to them to be anti-Islam.<sup>68</sup> They aimed to kill people, possibly consciously seeking to kill Geller and Wilders. Symbolically, they clearly aimed to do this to defend their faith and demonstrate to the world that this type of defamation would not happen unopposed, as with the attacks in Paris and Copenhagen.<sup>69</sup> Simpson and Soofi very likely also sought to demonstrate allegiance to ISIS in order to elevate their feelings of life purposefulness.

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<sup>64</sup> Rayner et al., “Charlie Hebdo attack: France’s worst terrorist attack in a generation.”

<sup>65</sup> Andrew Higgins and Melissa Eddy, “Terror Attacks by a Native Son Rock Denmark,” *nytimes.com*, February 15, 2015.

<sup>66</sup> Holly Yan, “Garland shooting: What is the American Freedom Defense Initiative?” *cnn.com*, May 4, 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Catherine Shoichet and Michael Pearson, “Garland, Texas, shooting suspect linked himself to ISIS in tweets,” *cnn.com*, May 4, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Hallman and Leszcynski, “Police: Men killed in Garland shooting had assault rifles.”

<sup>69</sup> Andrew Higgins and Melissa Eddy, “Terror Attacks by a Native Son Rock Denmark,” *nytimes.com*, February 15, 2015. Rayner et al., “Charlie Hebdo attack: France’s worst terrorist attack in a generation.”

ISIS, on the other hand, likely shared the tangible and symbolic goal of violently defending Islam against perceived defamation. However, the symbolic nature transcends simple precedent: the Syria-and-Iraq-based terror organization likely also aimed, in (seemingly) inspiring Simpson and Soofi, to establish a perceived presence in the U.S. and Western world—this was the first ISIS-claimed attack on American soil, though once again, there’s no evidence that ISIS was directly responsible for, or directed, the attack.<sup>70</sup> After it was over, ISIS referred to Simpson and Soofi as their “soldiers” and warned of future attacks, stating on their radio show, “We say to the defenders of the cross, the U.S., that future attacks are going to be harsher and worse. The Islamic State soldiers will inflict harm on you with the grace of God. The future is just around the corner.”<sup>71</sup>

## 5. Plans for violence

Law enforcement officials believe that Decarus Thomas, the third culprit involved in the attack—in addition to supplying Simpson and Soofi with weaponry—helped plan the attack in the few months leading up to it. Thomas also practiced firing the weapons with Simpson and Soofi, but beyond that, the two attackers had no known experience using the weaponry.<sup>72</sup> The body armor, guns, and ammunition seem to have been bought legally.<sup>73</sup>

Hours before the attack, the FBI reported to the Garland police that Simpson was “interested in the event,” but the Bureau didn’t know he intended to come to the event.<sup>74</sup> Garland Police Chief Mitch Bates later denied any knowledge of that intelligence: “We had no information from the FBI or anyone else that Elton Simpson posed a threat to our event,” he said.<sup>75</sup> It appears the information didn’t properly travel through the chain of command.

As mentioned, the Garland event and its organizers certainly had some effect in motivating the attackers. Pamela Geller and her organization American Freedom Defense Initiative (AFDI) are very outspoken about their beliefs, and that has stirred quite a bit of controversy. AFDI claims it stands for freedom of speech and conscience, and for equal rights of all people. However, it is explicitly anti-Muslim, stating that it stands against multiple tenants of Islam. The Southern Poverty Law Center calls it anti-Muslim and an extremist group, claiming that Geller is the “most visible and flamboyant figurehead” of anti-Islamic sentiments.<sup>76</sup> The Anti-Defamation League labels her an “anti-Muslim activist.”<sup>77</sup> Geller also leads another group called Stop Islamization of Nations, which opposes Muslim immigration to the U.S.<sup>78</sup> She writes a blog called “Atlas

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<sup>70</sup> Watson and Van Velzer, “Doubts raised about Islamic State claim in Texas attack.”

<sup>71</sup> Yan, “ISIS claims responsibility for Texas shooting but offers no proof.”

<sup>72</sup> Botelho, “Man indicted for allegedly helping Mohammed cartoon contest attackers.”

<sup>73</sup> Yan, “ISIS claims responsibility for Texas shooting but offers no proof.”

<sup>74</sup> Pete Williams, “FBI Alerted Garland Police About Elton Simpson Hours Before Shooting,” nbcnews.com, May 8, 2015.

<sup>75</sup> Naomi Martin and Ray Leszcynski. “Garland police say they had no tip about attack at Culwell Center,” dallasnews.com, May 11, 2015.

<sup>76</sup> Yan, “Garland shooting: What is the American Freedom Defense Initiative?”

<sup>77</sup> Shoichet and Colwell, “Who is beheading plot target Pamela Geller?”

<sup>78</sup> Yan, “Garland shooting: What is the American Freedom Defense Initiative?”

Shrugs” and has published books such as “Stop the Islamization of America” and “Freedom or Submission.” She has also led the movement opposing the construction of a mosque near Ground Zero of the World Trade Center attacks, as well as a New York City subway advertising campaign, which stated “In any way between the civilized man and the savage, support the civilized man. Support Israel. Defeat jihad.”<sup>79</sup> Geller has been forbidden from entering the United Kingdom since 2013.<sup>80</sup>

Geller and AFDI organized the Muhammad Art Exhibit and Cartoon Contest at the Garland Curtis Culwell Center because an anti-Islamophobia event had been held there in January 2015.<sup>81</sup> Geller claimed that she wanted to hold the event in response to the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris,<sup>82</sup> where terrorists attacked a satirical newspaper for depicting the Islamic Prophet Muhammad in a cartoon. During the attack, they proclaimed, “We have avenged the Prophet!” They claimed to be acting on behalf of al-Qaeda in Yemen.<sup>83</sup>

There were between 300<sup>84</sup> and 350<sup>85</sup> cartoon entries to the Garland event, and between 150<sup>86</sup> and 200<sup>87</sup> people attended. As mentioned, Dutch politician and anti-Muslim Geert Wilders, who is on al-Qaeda’s hit list, spoke at the event.<sup>88</sup> The contest winner, Bosch Fawstin claims to be a “former Muslim.”<sup>89</sup> He submitted six drawings, and his winning cartoon depicted a turban-wearing Muhammad holding a sword, telling an artist, “You can’t draw me,” to which the artist responds, “That’s why I draw you.”<sup>90</sup> Fawstin took home \$12,500 in prize money for winning the contest. After the event, Fawstin said the attackers “came to kill us and died for it. Justice.”<sup>91</sup>

The event was heavily guarded in anticipation of a possible terrorist attack attempt. Geller and AFDI paid \$10,000 for the event’s security.<sup>92</sup> Security personnel from at least four different agencies were present, including the Garland police (with a SWAT team), school district security officers, the FBI, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF).<sup>93</sup>

On May 3, Simpson and Soofi drove from Phoenix to Garland. The Muhammad Art Exhibit and Cartoon Contest event began at 5pm Central Time, and, just as the event was ending at around 6:50pm, Simpson and Soofi pulled up

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<sup>79</sup> Shoichet and Colwell, “Who is beheading plot target Pamela Geller?”

<sup>80</sup> Allen et al., “Texas shooting: Islamic State claims responsibility for first US attack.”

<sup>81</sup> Shoichet and Pearson. “Garland, Texas, shooting suspect linked himself to ISIS in tweets.”

<sup>82</sup> Yan, “Garland shooting: What is the American Freedom Defense Initiative?”

<sup>83</sup> Rayner et al., “Charlie Hebdo attack: France’s worst terrorist attack in a generation.”

<sup>84</sup> Scott Farwell and Ray Leszcynski, “Muhammad cartoon event bristled with security personnel,” *dallasnews.com*, May 4, 2015.

<sup>85</sup> Jobin Panicker, “Traffic cop killed both attackers at Mohammed exhibit in Texas,” *usatoday.com*, May 4, 2015.

<sup>86</sup> Martin and Leszcynski, “Garland police say they had no tip about attack at Culwell Center.”

<sup>87</sup> Farwell and Leszcynski. “Muhammad cartoon event bristled with security personnel.”

<sup>88</sup> Shoichet and Pearson. “Garland, Texas, shooting suspect linked himself to ISIS in tweets.”

<sup>89</sup> Allen et al., “Texas shooting: Islamic State claims responsibility for first US attack.”

<sup>90</sup> Panicker, “Traffic cop killed both attackers at Mohammed exhibit in Texas.”

<sup>91</sup> Allen et al., “Texas shooting: Islamic State claims responsibility for first US attack.”

<sup>92</sup> Botelho, “Texas shooting: Outgunned traffic officer stopped 2 attackers.”

<sup>93</sup> Farwell and Leszcynski, “Muhammad cartoon event bristled with security personnel.”

to the building in their dark-colored sedan. The two closest men working security for the event were an unarmed school district security officer and a Garland traffic officer armed only with a .45 caliber Glock handgun<sup>94</sup> who was working overtime. They were sitting in their vehicle and exited, preparing to confront the approaching figures, apparently unaware that Simpson and Soofi were armed. At the same moment, Simpson and Soofi got out of their vehicle and began shooting at the two officers who immediately hid behind their car and exchanged gunfire.<sup>95</sup>

Within roughly 15 seconds, the traffic officer had wounded both Simpson and Soofi, even though the two attackers wore body armor, and they fell to the ground. The unarmed security officer had also been shot, but only in the ankle. No one else was injured, suggesting the terrorists' lack of experience with guns. Four Garland SWAT team members then arrived. They killed both Simpson and Soofi when the terrorists reached for more guns and ammunition.<sup>96</sup> There was no apparent attempt at suicide by the two attackers. After Simpson and Soofi had been killed, the Garland police bomb squad searched their car and discovered more ammunition, but no explosives.<sup>97</sup>

Thomas was arrested on June 11, just over a month after the attempted attack, and charged with conspiracy, making false statements, and interstate transportation of firearms with intent to commit a felony. The FBI questioned Shami, the head of the Phoenix Islamic Community Center, about Thomas among other possible suspects, and this presumably is what led to Thomas' arrest.<sup>98</sup> Thomas allegedly gave weapons to the two attackers as early as January 7, practiced shooting with them, aided in the attack's planning, and lied to the FBI multiple times about his involvement with Simpson and Soofi.<sup>99</sup>

Two days after the attempted attack, Garland Mayor Douglas Athas said that Geller "put my officers, my citizens and others at risk." He also stated that he wished she had chosen a different location for the event,<sup>100</sup> though she wanted the event there because a previous anti-Islamophobia event was held at the Culwell Center months before Geller's event. There is no indication anyone tried to persuade her not to hold the cartoon contest at the Culwell Center.<sup>101</sup>

Also after the event, Geller fired back at all naysayers about her views and actions. "I will not abridge my freedoms so as not to offend savages," she said. "Freedom of speech is under violent assault here."<sup>102</sup> In separate comments, she also said, "This is a showdown for American freedom. Will we stand against this savagery or bow down to them and silence ourselves? It won't end with me no matter what happens to me, or the cops...This is just the beginning...It's

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<sup>94</sup> Shoichet and Pearson, "Garland, Texas, shooting suspect linked himself to ISIS in tweets."

<sup>95</sup> Botelho, "Texas shooting: Outgunned traffic officer stopped 2 attackers."

<sup>96</sup> Martin and Leszcynski, "Garland police say they had no tip about attack at Culwell Center."

<sup>97</sup> Hallman and Leszcynski, "Police: Men killed in Garland shooting had assault rifles."

<sup>98</sup> Todd L. Lewis, "Third Man Arrested in Garland 'Draw Muhammad' Shooting: Authorities," nbcdfw.com, June 16, 2015.

<sup>99</sup> Botelho, "Man indicted for allegedly helping Mohammed cartoon contest attackers."

<sup>100</sup> Jessica Chasmer, "Douglas Athas, Garland mayor, blasts Pamela Geller: 'She invited an incendiary reaction'," washingtontimes.com, May 6, 2015.

<sup>101</sup> Shoichet and Pearson, "Garland, Texas, shooting suspect linked himself to ISIS in tweets."

<sup>102</sup> Yan, "Garland shooting: What is the American Freedom Defense Initiative?"

devastating and people need to understand what's at stake. I mean, if we surrender on this point, what will we surrender next?"<sup>103</sup>

For its part, ISIS has called for the "slaughter" of Geller, and the terrorist organization reportedly inspired a planned attack by three young men in Boston aiming to assassinate her.<sup>104</sup> In response to attacks on her life, Geller responded, "Of course I'm not surprised that they would target me. This is a war."<sup>105</sup>

## 6. Role of informants

The FBI utilized an informant when investigating Simpson in the decade before the attack. Beginning in 2006, the FBI began paying Dabla Deng—who had immigrated to the U.S. in 2000—to befriend Simpson and to attempt to figure out any potential criminal activity, as authorities knew that Simpson had some sort of connection to Hassan Abu Jihaad, the former U.S. Navy member who was giving secrets to a terrorist organization.<sup>106</sup> Deng eventually recorded Simpson's plans to travel to Somalia to commit violent jihad, and that recording caused his arrest in 2011. Over those years, the FBI paid Deng \$132,000—as he recorded over 330 hours of conversations with the would-be attacker—in addition to performing its own surveillance of Simpson.<sup>107</sup> However, informants played no role in the Garland shooting.

## 7. Connections

It's a bit tough to determine the degree to which this attack was motivated by terror organizations. Simpson had previously communicated with members of ISIS and an al-Qaeda affiliate group, and his social media activity leading up to the attack suggests some sort of further, recent communication and possibly inspiration from external groups, but U.S. law enforcement members are skeptical about the extent of terror organizations' direct causation of this attack.

Law enforcement officials know Simpson had contacted Junaid Hussain prior to the attack in Garland. Hussain, a skilled hacker, had been jailed in Britain years ago for allegedly posting Prime Minister Tony Blair's address book online and had joined ISIS "sometime in the past two years." He is considered tech savvy, and authorities believe he is especially adept at recruiting ISIS members from the West because of his knowledge of British culture. Hussain also allegedly founded a group called CyberCaliphate, which briefly overtook the U.S. Central Command's Twitter account in January 2015.<sup>108</sup>

Simpson is also believed to have been talking to Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan, who, in 2008, traveled to aid al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Shabaab in Somalia, where Simpson had been plotting to go around the same time, before he was stopped by law enforcement. A week before the attack, Hassan tweeted, "The

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<sup>103</sup> Shoichet and Colwell. "Who is beheading plot target Pamela Geller?"

<sup>104</sup> Susan Zalkind. "How ISIS's 'Attack America' Plan Is Working," *dailybeast.com*, June 22, 2015.

<sup>105</sup> Shoichet and Colwell. "Who is beheading plot target Pamela Geller?"

<sup>106</sup> Weiss and Kraus, "2 Garland shooters' lives twined to tragic end."

<sup>107</sup> Shane and Santos, "Elton Simpson Eluded U.S. Inquiry Before Texas Shootout."

<sup>108</sup> Sciutto et al., "Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists."

brothers from the Charlie Hebdo attack did their part. It's time for the brothers in the #US to do their part."<sup>109</sup>

As noted, just hours before the attack in Garland, Simpson urged his Twitter followers to follow Hussain, who had been posting under the name Abu Hussain al Britani.<sup>110</sup> Simpson also tweeted, "The bro with me (Soofi) and myself have given bay'ah to Amirul Mu'mineen. May Allah accept us as mujahideen. Make dua #texasattack." Experts believe this was Simpson's attempt to pledge his and Soofi's allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. However, the picture for his Twitter account, titled "Shariah is Light," actually depicted Anwar al-Alwaki, a leader of al-Qaeda in Yemen who was killed in a drone strike in 2011.<sup>111</sup>

Around the time of the attack, Hussain retweeted Simpson's tweet, which is believed to be a potential confirmation sign of Simpson's and Soofi's allegiance to al-Baghdadi and ISIS. Just after the attack, Hussain tweeted, "Allahu Akbar!!!! 2 of our brothers just opened fire at the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w) art exhibit in texas! #TexasAttack."<sup>112</sup>

A connection between Simpson—and by default Soofi—and ISIS seems to have been at least superficially established, but ISIS claims, or suggests, a more concrete relationship. After the attack, ISIS referred to Simpson and Soofi as their "two soldiers," and as their "brothers." Additionally, after ISIS stated on its radio station that more attacks would come: "We say to the defenders of the cross, the U.S., that future attacks are going to be harsher and worse. The Islamic State soldiers will inflict harm on you with the grace of God. The future is just around the corner."<sup>113</sup>

Multiple news sources reported that ISIS claimed responsibility for this attack. However, ISIS didn't specifically state that it directed or carried out the attack; it simply referred to Simpson and Soofi as their "brothers" perhaps to encourage its audience to infer that the group was involved.<sup>114</sup> One official said this was something between a "lone wolf" attack and ISIS-directed, meaning Simpson and Soofi didn't act completely from their own will without any external force or pressure, but they also weren't acting under direct orders from ISIS. Former FBI agent Time Clemente said this probably wasn't directed by ISIS, but instead that the attackers "were kind of applying for membership into ISIS."<sup>115</sup> U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter stated that the attackers "were inspired by ISIL, not directed by ISIL," and found it "concerning that there are individuals

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<sup>109</sup> Sciutto et al., "Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists."

<sup>110</sup> Sciutto et al., "Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists."

<sup>111</sup> Allen et al., "Texas shooting: Islamic State claims responsibility for first US attack."

<sup>112</sup> Sciutto et al., "Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists."

<sup>113</sup> Yan, "ISIS claims responsibility for Texas shooting but offers no proof."

<sup>114</sup> Allen et al., "Texas shooting: Islamic State claims responsibility for first US attack." Watson and Van Velzer, "Doubts raised about Islamic State claim in Texas attack." Yan, "ISIS claims responsibility for Texas shooting but offers no proof."

<sup>115</sup> Yan, "ISIS claims responsibility for Texas shooting but offers no proof."

like this who draw their inspiration from ISIL.”<sup>116</sup> Other U.S. officials said that ISIS is trying to be “opportunistic” by claiming responsibility for this attack.<sup>117</sup>

However, although this attack doesn’t seem to have as much ISIS direction as the terror group suggests, it does represent a dangerous evolution of terrorism strategy in which internet and social media influence and communication may be used to inspire attacks in Western countries. ISIS had called for the “slaughter” of Pamela Geller, and authorities believe that ISIS had inspired the planned attack by three young Boston men who were speaking of beheading her in the weeks following the Garland incident. According to the FBI, the major difficulty in this new realm of terrorism prevention is determining those who are only superficially interested in ISIS propaganda and those who are willing and capable of acting on it. “I know there are other Elton Simpsons out there,” FBI Director James Comey said.<sup>118</sup>

According to a State Department report, ISIS “membership” definition is becoming more amorphous: “These attacks may presage a new era in which centralized leadership of a terrorist organization matters less, group identity is more fluid, and violent extremist narratives focus on a wider range of alleged grievances and enemies with which lone actors may identify and seek to carry out self-directed attacks.”<sup>119</sup>

## **8. Relation to the Muslim community**

Simpson and Soofi were both involved in their local Muslim community in Phoenix, but for the most part, that didn’t seem to relate directly to their attempted terrorist attack.

It is believed that Simpson converted to Islam while in high school in Phoenix, and he began attending the Islamic Community Center of Phoenix some time after converting to worship and to play basketball—which he often did with younger players, giving them tips on how to improve.<sup>120</sup> According to Courtney Lonergan, a fellow worshipper at the Community Center mosque, Simpson was committed to Islam and the mosque.<sup>121</sup> Simpson regularly attended the Community Center and mosque until 2011, when he was arrested for lying about his plans to travel to Somalia to commit violent jihad.<sup>122</sup> Following his arrest and probation period, Simpson still came to the mosque but stopped showing up around two or three months prior to the attack in Garland.<sup>123</sup>

While growing up in the U.S. and Pakistan, Soofi was raised Muslim by his Pakistani father and American mother who converted to Islam. He never seemed to be extremely religious until the few years leading up the Garland attack, as he grew out his beard and wore more traditional Muslim attire. This surprised his family; one cousin commented on a Facebook picture of Soofi’s,

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<sup>116</sup> Klimas, “Ashton Carter: Texas attack ‘inspired by’ Islamic State.”

<sup>117</sup> Botelho, “Man indicted for allegedly helping Mohammed cartoon contest attackers.”

<sup>118</sup> Zalkind, “How ISIS’s ‘Attack America’ Plan Is Working.”

<sup>119</sup> Zalkind, “How ISIS’s ‘Attack America’ Plan Is Working.”

<sup>120</sup> Weiss and Kraus, “2 Garland shooters’ lives twined to tragic end.”

<sup>121</sup> Holstege and Casey. “Elton Simpson’s slow, isolated descent into ISIS, jihad.”

<sup>122</sup> Shoichet and Pearson, “Garland, Texas, shooting suspect linked himself to ISIS in tweets.”

<sup>123</sup> Watson and Van Velzer, “Doubts raised in Islamic State’s claim in Texas attack.”



saying, “Nadir hard to believe that’s you.” Soofi’s Facebook messaging also took a more serious religious turn, as he posted from his account in 2012, “May Allah protect the oppressed and suffering, and bring justice to the oppressors and wrongdoers, ameen!” and, in 2014: “May Allah turn the tides of this war and punish the Israeli oppressors, ameen, ameen, ameen!”<sup>124</sup>

Decarus Thomas, who aided Simpson and Soofi in acquiring weapons and conspiring about their plan, was born in Philadelphia and had lived in the Phoenix area for the past several years. He wasn’t raised Muslim, though news sources haven’t reported when he converted to Islam. However, in 2013, he changed his name to Abdul Malik Abdul Kareem. He also cleaned the carpets at the Islamic Community Center and worshipped there for roughly the previous four years, according the center’s president, Shami, though Thomas hadn’t shown up in the previous six to eight months.<sup>125</sup> Authorities detained Thomas about a month after the attack.<sup>126</sup>

All in all, Simpson and Soofi had mostly healthy relationships with the Muslim community at the Islamic Community Center, and besides likely meeting Thomas there, it seemed to be a positive aspect of their lives.

## 9. Depiction by the authorities

Essentially all of the media coverage of the attempted attack in Garland happened in the few days following the event. Because of that, there wasn’t much evolution in how law enforcement or government officials discussed the attack or attackers. Additionally, they didn’t connote much with their statements: most stated facts, praised the response by law enforcement in stopping the attack, or speculated about the attack’s implications for terrorism strategy.

After the attack, Garland Police Chief Mitch Bates said, “We had no information from the FBI or anyone else that Elton Simpson posed a threat to our event,” responding to the FBI’s claim that it warned Garland police that Simpsons was “interested” in the cartoon-drawing event.<sup>127</sup>

Local law enforcement heavily praised the armed traffic officer who took down Simpson and Soofi. “He did what he was trained to do,” Garland police spokesman Joe Harn said. “And under the fire he was put under, he did a very good job.” However, his name was not released for safety reasons. “You have one heroic cop who kills two (Islamist extremist) soldiers. He needs to be cautious about not celebrating in the end zone,” former FBI assistant director Tim Fuentes said.<sup>128</sup> White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said, after the event, “The thing that we can say definitively, because of the quick, professional, brave work of local law enforcement forces, is an attempted terrorist act was foiled.”<sup>129</sup>

In speculating about this attack, one law enforcement official said this was more than a “lone wolf” attack but not quite ISIS-directed, inferring that ISIS had

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<sup>124</sup> Pearce and Duara, “Texas gunman’s mother: ‘He just had a normal American upbringing’.”

<sup>125</sup> Davis, “Third Man Arrested in Garland ‘Draw Muhammad’ Shooting: Authorities.”

<sup>126</sup> Botelho, “Man indicted for allegedly helping Mohammed cartoon contest attackers.”

<sup>127</sup> Martin and Leszczynski, “Garland police say they had no tip about attack at Culwell Center.”

<sup>128</sup> Botelho, “Texas shooting: Outgunned traffic officer stopped 2 attackers.”

<sup>129</sup> Kevin Liptak, “White House says attempted shooting was attempted terror attack,” *cnn.com*, May 5, 2015.

some form in inspiring the two men. As noted, former FBI agent Tim Clemente said, “They were kind of applying for membership into ISIS,”<sup>130</sup> while U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said, “These were inspired by ISIL, not directed by ISIL... it’s concerning that there are individuals like this who draw their inspiration from ISIL.”<sup>131</sup>

The White House called this an “act of terror,”<sup>132</sup> and the State Department released a report after the attack, stating, “These attacks may presage a new era in which centralized leadership of a terrorist organization matters less, group identity is more fluid, and violent extremist narratives focus on a wider range of alleged grievances and enemies with which lone actors may identify and seek to carry out self-directed attacks.”<sup>133</sup> White House Press Secretary Earnest also said, “There are extremists around the globe, including those affiliated with ISIL, who are trying to capitalize on the opportunity presented by social media, to try to communicate with individuals around the world, including in the United States.”<sup>134</sup> And FBI Director James Comey expressed worry about shifting trends in terrorism: “I know there are other Elton Simpsons out there.”<sup>135</sup>

## 10. Coverage by the media

Since this was such a high-profile attack (two people died, ISIS seemed to claim its first attack on American soil, outspoken Pamela Geller was at its center), numerous media outlets provided coverage, from national media (CNN, NBC, *New York Times*, *USA Today*) to local media (*Dallas Morning News*, *Arizona Republic*) to foreign sources (Reuters, *Telegraph*). However, coverage largely stopped after a few days.

Overall, media coverage was pretty objective. Most of the writing consisted of a simple investigation into what happened, the backgrounds of the culprits, quotations from people close to them, and statements from police or other authorities. Moreover, different media outlets investigated different aspects of the story. For example, CNN—which covered the story in the greatest depth—reported lots of information about Simpson’s connections (or lack thereof) with ISIS and other terror group members, reported in much detail about Simpson’s and Soofi’s past, and interviewed law enforcement officials<sup>136</sup> and people who knew Simpson and Soofi.<sup>137</sup> CNN also reported some of the only background information about the third culprit, Decarus Thomas,<sup>138</sup> and provided the most

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<sup>130</sup> Yan, “ISIS claims responsibility for Texas shooting but offers no proof.”

<sup>131</sup> Klimas, “Ashton Carter: Texas attack ‘inspired by’ Islamic State.”

<sup>132</sup> Ray Leczcynski, Todd J. Gillman, and Michael E. Young, “Islamic State claims Garland attack; White House says possible link being investigated,” *dallasnews.com*, May 5, 2015.

<sup>133</sup> Zalkind, “How ISIS’s ‘Attack America’ Plan Is Working.”

<sup>134</sup> Liptak, “White House says attempted shooting was attempted terror attack.”

<sup>135</sup> Zalkind, “How ISIS’s ‘Attack America’ Plan Is Working.”

<sup>136</sup> Yan, “ISIS claims responsibility for Texas shooting but offers no proof.” Scitutto et al., “Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists.”

<sup>137</sup> Yan, “Texas attack: What we know about Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi.”

<sup>138</sup> Botelho, “Man indicted for allegedly helping Mohammed cartoon contest attackers.”

detailed information about Geller.<sup>139</sup> The *Dallas Morning News* also reported information about the culprits' pasts, but it interviewed different neighbors and family members,<sup>140</sup> and even contacted the Arizona Council on American-Islamic Relations.<sup>141</sup>

CNN and *Dallas Morning News* provided the most expansive, in-depth reporting, and other media outlets filled in some gaps with individual article coverage. The *New York Times* reported extra information about Dabla Deng, the FBI informant from 2006-2009.<sup>142</sup> The *Arizona Republic* was the only one to interview Courtney Lonergan, a woman who worshipped at the Phoenix mosque with Simpson and Soofi;<sup>143</sup> and the Daily Beast reported the most heavily on ISIS' evolving terror and recruitment strategy.<sup>144</sup> It seems that other news outlets that covered the story for the most part repeated most facts and quotations by these publications.

## 11. Policing costs

There were two main costs associated with this event. First, the FBI invested quite a bit of time and money into investigating Elton Simpson over the years. Second, Geller and the AFDI spent \$10,000 for extra security for the event.

As mentioned previously, the FBI began paying its informant Dabla Deng in 2006 to befriend Simpson and attempt to figure out any potential criminal activity, as authorities knew that Simpson had some sort of connection to Hassan Abu Jihaad, the former U.S. Navy member who was giving secrets to a terrorist organization.<sup>145</sup> Deng eventually recorded Simpson's plans to travel to Somalia to commit violent jihad, which led to his arrest in 2011. Over those years, the FBI paid Deng \$132,000—as he recorded over 330 hours of conversations with the would-be attacker—in addition to performing its own surveillance of Simpson.<sup>146</sup>

However, that FBI surveillance and investigation didn't provide any intelligence about the Garland attack, which came years after Simpson's arrest and long after Deng left the picture. The FBI had been keeping tabs on Simpson before the May 3 Garland attack and allegedly informed Garland police that Simpson was "interested" in the event.<sup>147</sup> But that information ultimately didn't travel to those in charge of the event's security, and it didn't make a difference in preparing for the attack.

Geller and the AFDI spent \$10,000 on security for the event, utilizing people from at least four different agencies, including the Garland police (with a

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<sup>139</sup> Shoichet and Colwell, "Who is beheading plot target Pamela Geller?" Yan, "ISIS claims responsibility for Texas shooting but offers no proof." Yan, "Garland shooting: What is the American Freedom Defense Initiative?"

<sup>140</sup> Hallman and Leszcynski, "Police: Men killed in Garland shooting had assault rifles." Weiss and Kraus, "2 Garland shooters' lives twined to tragic end."

<sup>141</sup> Leszcynski et al., "Islamic State claims Garland attack."

<sup>142</sup> Shane and Santos, "Elton Simpson Eluded U.S. Inquiry Before Texas Shootout."

<sup>143</sup> Holstege and Casey, "Elton Simpson's slow, isolated descent into ISIS, jihad."

<sup>144</sup> Zalkind, "How ISIS's 'Attack America' Plan Is Working."

<sup>145</sup> Weiss and Kraus, "2 Garland shooters' lives twined to tragic end."

<sup>146</sup> Shane and Santos, "Elton Simpson Eluded U.S. Inquiry Before Texas Shootout."

<sup>147</sup> Williams, "FBI Alerted Garland Police About Elton Simpson Hours Before Shooting."

SWAT team), school district security officers, the FBI, and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF).<sup>148</sup> Following the attack, the FBI also spent time and money investigating the situation, and after about a month, arrested Decarus Thomas, the third culprit, although they believe others knew about the attack beforehand.<sup>149</sup>

Could this attack have been prevented? It was certainly possible to stop Simpson and Soofi from risking their own lives, shooting a security officer in the ankle, causing general mayhem in Garland, and providing inspiration for ISIS's strategies. However, that would have required far more time and money.

## 12. Relevance of the internet

Social media has seemingly been an effective tool that terror groups have used to advance their agendas by recruiting people—notably from the Western world—through direct communication and propaganda, and by issuing messages to the entire global public. In this case, Simpson appeared to have used social media to express his radical Islamic ideals as well as communicate with official members of terror groups.

As noted, roughly a week before the Garland attack, Mohamed Abdullahi Hassan, member of Al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda affiliate group, tweeted, “The brothers from the Charlie Hebdo attack did their part. It’s time for the brothers in the #US to do their part.” Hassan is believed to have traveled to Somalia in 2008, around the same time that Simpson had planned to do the same. Also around a week before the attack, Simpson tweeted, “When will they ever learn? They are planning on selecting the best picture drawn of Rasulullah (saws) in Texas.”<sup>150</sup>

The most notable tweet from this entire incident is Simpson’s, posted just hours before the attack on May 3: “The bro with me [Soofi] and myself have given bay’ah to Amirul Mu’mineen. May Allah accept us as mujahideen. Make dua #texasattack.” This is particularly notable because Simpson hinted at an attack in Texas and this could have tipped off law enforcement if they were paying closer attention. According to experts, the message also declared his and Soofi’s allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the ISIS leader.<sup>151</sup>

Following the attack, Junaid Hussain, the British hacker who authorities believe joined ISIS, tweeted, using the same hashtag as Simpson: “Allahu Akbar!!!! 2 of our brothers just opened fire at the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w) art exhibition in texas! #TexasAttack.”<sup>152</sup>

At times, Soofi posted personal religious views from his Facebook page, like this one from 2014: “May Allah turn the tides of this war and punish the Israeli oppressors, ameen, ameen, ameen!”<sup>153</sup>

It’s tough to know how many terrorist plots that law enforcement thwarts, but monitoring social media seems to be one method of gathering intelligence to

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<sup>148</sup> Farwell and Leszczynski, “Muhammad cartoon event bristled with security personnel.”

<sup>149</sup> Associated Press, “Man allegedly helped plan Texas cartoon contest shooting.”

<sup>150</sup> Sciutto et al., “Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists.”

<sup>151</sup> Allen et al., “Texas shooting: Islamic State claims responsibility for first US attack.”

<sup>152</sup> Sciutto et al., “Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists.”

<sup>153</sup> Allen et al., “Texas shooting: Islamic State claims responsibility for first US attack.”

prevent attacks. Attention is clearly paid to Twitter and Facebook, but more sophisticated, detailed attention might have proved valuable in this case. Simpson implied the attack on Twitter with the hashtag “texasattack.”<sup>154</sup>

The importance of social media is the primary lesson of this case. However, not just in this one—numerous people in the U.S. and Western world have been able to communicate with Islamic terror groups in the Middle East, have been persuaded to join them or even persuaded to commit violent jihad in the West, as may have been the situation in this case. Here, Simpson was able to declare his and Soofi’s allegiance to the ISIS leader, in addition to posting threatening opinions of Geller’s event, alongside terrorist organization members like Abdullahi Hassan.<sup>155</sup> This isn’t conclusive evidence that social media caused this attack, but it certainly gave the attackers and their contacts space to more easily communicate. The evolving nature of terrorism from one person or one group plotting and carrying out attacks to those people having the ability to directly communicate with contacts in different parts of the world, and potentially inspiring them with propaganda, is a seemingly significant tactic of terrorism in today’s age.

### **13. Are we safer?**

Attendees of the Garland cartoon contest event are safer because of law enforcement’s actions, but this terrorist attack displays something extremely dangerous about the evolution of terrorism in today’s world—culturally and technologically.

As mentioned, the heroic actions of the traffic officer to take down Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi on May 3 possibly saved lives of others in the vicinity—because even though they didn’t have much experience with firearms, they did have automatic weapons and lots of ammunition. For his actions, the security officer was heavily praised. However, it is sad that two humans still died that day. The greatest costs to the victims were the security officer who was shot in the ankle, and the general panic and fear by Garland residents and by attendees of the American Freedom Defense Initiative’s event.

The single person whose safety suffered the most is Pamela Geller. Apart from continuing to speak out about the importance of freedom—though in anti-Muslim fashion—the attack allegedly later inspired an attack on her life by three men in Boston, though they never made it close to her.<sup>156</sup>

All in all, are we safer? The people of Garland and event attendees from May 3 are safer, but the rest of the U.S. and world population is not, as this event exhibits the danger of terrorism’s widespread reach in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **14. Conclusions**

A main takeaway from this case is that it’s nearly impossible to know how much to spend on terrorism prevention and protection. \$10,000 was spent on

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<sup>154</sup> Allen et al., “Texas shooting: Islamic State claims responsibility for first US attack.”

<sup>155</sup> Sciutto et al., “Texas attacker tweeted with overseas terrorists.”

<sup>156</sup> Zalkind, “How ISIS’s ‘Attack America’ Plan Is Working.”

protection in this case, and though an arguably preventable attack happened, it only took one man with a handgun to bring down the attackers.

One possible prevention measure could have been for the FBI to know about the plan and arrest Simpson, Soofi, and Thomas before the attackers arrived in Garland. This would have required some sort of further informant work—which Simpson likely would have suspected—or increased surveillance, beyond what the FBI had been doing, which had been comparatively light because Simpson didn't seem to pose as great a threat as he had before his 2011 arrest. The one main sign that's easy to identify in hindsight is Simpson's tweet just hours before the attack, "The bro with me (Soofi) and myself have given bay'ah to Amirul Mu'mineen. May Allah accept us as mujahideen. Make dua #texasattack."<sup>157</sup> The FBI already knew that Simpson was interested in the event, as it notified the Garland police, but if it had read and understood this tweet, then it seems very possible to have known that Simpson was going to attack the Garland event, a conclusion suggested by his tweet's "#texasattack."

Another possible prevention measure could have been to have the \$10,000 worth of security at the event to be stationed outside where Simpson and Soofi pulled up in their car. It's difficult to know if the security had been in the right places—let alone if they were actually expecting any form of attack—at the time of the attack. But, if more substantially armed security had been closer to the gunmen, instead of one unarmed officer and another armed with just a .45-caliber handgun, it's very likely that Simpson and Soofi wouldn't have harmed anyone, though it's still likely they would have been killed.

When they occur, attacks like this need to be fought by law enforcement. But they also need to be countered by stemming the radicalization of individuals before terrorism is even a thought. In this case, Simpson and Soofi were relatively unsuccessful professionally and personally, something that very likely played a role in their turn toward Islamic radicalism as they searched for a different purpose for their lives. The more that can be done by governments and non-governmental organizations to increase professional opportunities will certainly reduce the potential for homegrown people turning to terrorism.

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<sup>157</sup> Allen et al., "Texas shooting: Islamic State claims responsibility for first US attack."