

**Case 74: UC Merced**

John Mueller

November 28, 2016

A couple of months into his freshman year at the University of California in Merced, a generally quiet and withdrawn 18-year-old Muslim student was summarily kicked out of a study group for a required general education course for being “disruptive.” Humiliated and deeply angry, he spent the next week plotting his revenge. The result was a cartoonish two-page, 45-step plan, or “manifesto,” detailing how he would attack the class with a hunting knife, zip-tie all of the 15 students to their desks, squirt petroleum jelly on the floor to create a “slip and slide” condition, send a fake distress call to the police, ambush them when they arrived, steal their guns, and then shoot not only those students (some two to a bullet) who had kicked him out of the study group but also the police as they slipped around helplessly. At least five of the 45 steps were “sit down and praise Allah,” but the manifesto contained no political agenda.

This remarkable plan, notes Niko Pittore in monumental understatement, was “not the most thought out,” and when the angry freshman launched it, he managed only to wound four people with his knife before he was shot to death by campus police officers.

When investigators checked through the assailant’s backpack, they found, along with the unused zip ties and the unexpended petroleum jelly, a photocopy of an ISIS flag. They also found that he had visited ISIS and other terrorist websites on his computer. What he found there, suggests Pittore, may have helped him justify the mayhem he committed. He had no connection to any terrorist group, but ISIS did praise his deed after learning of it. Although there are some indications he had been on an FBI terrorism watchlist, campus authorities were inclined to consider the act essentially to be one carried out by a disgruntled student rather as had the authorities in Case 17, but in this case with more justification.

## Case 74: UC Merced

Nikolaus Pittore

November 27, 2016

### 1. Overview

On November 4, 2015, 18-year-old student Faisal Mohammad stabbed and injured four people with a hunting knife on the campus of the University of California, Merced.<sup>1</sup> Two people were injured inside a classroom, and the assailant attacked and hurt the other two after fleeing the room. Two campus police officers saw him outside and shot him dead as he turned toward them.<sup>2</sup>

Mohammad was described as a kid in high school who was quiet and shy but generally very kind, and the people who knew him were stunned he could have committed an act like this.<sup>3</sup> The story was very different in college. He was described by one of his roommates, a fellow Muslim, as a “loner” and an “extreme Muslim.”<sup>4</sup> At one point, a friend of his roommates had asked him what would happen if he touched the mat he used to pray and he responded with “I will kill you.”<sup>5</sup>

There are two schools of thought with regard to the motivation of Mohammad. One is that he had resentment for being kicked out a study group a week before and planned the attacks using that anger and hatred toward his fellow classmates, channeling it way beyond the scope of what would be expected of a normal human being.<sup>6</sup> The second, given his name, religion, and what is known about his background, should not be hard to figure out: radical Islam.<sup>7</sup> The difficulty with determining which theory is valid is that there is compelling evidence for both. He was clearly very angry about being kicked out of his study group and made it clear in a manifesto that he wanted revenge on his classmates. On the other hand, we know he was an “extreme Muslim,” had a photocopy of an ISIS flag, and had viewed foreign terrorist propaganda, making it easy to also see radical Islam as the key issue.

I would describe this situation as a very angry young man who had experienced a situation, being kicked out of the study group, to which he had no normal way to react. He took that anger and channeled it with the stabbings. Stabbing people because you were kicked out of a study group is an absolutely absurd reaction as there are far better ways to redeem the situation. However, that extreme anger coupled with the fact he had viewed foreign terrorist propaganda,

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Kuhn, “UC MERCED: Stabbing suspect who wounded 4 lived on campus (UPDATE 3)” pe.com, November 4, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Kuhn, “UC MERCED: Stabbing suspect who wounded 4 lived on campus

<sup>3</sup> Mark Gomez, Ramona Giwargis, Katie Nelson, and Robert Salonga, “UC Merced Student Tossed from Study Group Had ‘Manifesto’ on Violent Revenge,” mercurynews.com, November 4, 2015; updated, August 12, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Michelle Morgante, “UC Merced stabber sat in silence minutes before starting attack,” FresnoBee.com, December 11, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Morgante, “UC Merced stabber sat in silence minutes before starting attack.”

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Heise, “Sheriff: UC Merced Student Upset at Being Ousted From Study Group,” kcra.com, November 6, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Rob Parsons, Thaddeus Miller, and Michelle Morgante, “Attacker’s Manifesto Reveals Plan to Kill ‘a lot of people,’” mercedsunstar.com, November 5, 2015.

had created a massive storm no one would have been able to stop. While I find severe anger to be the main cause, radical Islam did play a role. He was able to use radical Islam as a way to essentially make the stabbings worth committing and to establish credibility for the attack in his mind.

## 2. Nature of the adversary

Not much is known about Faisal Mohammad's past before high school, but opinions about him in high school and college vary greatly. All we know about his early beginnings was that he was a US-born son of Pakistani parents,<sup>8</sup> and graduated from Wilcox High School.<sup>9</sup> Officials with the Santa Clara Unified School District described him as a quiet student who was a good kid but not very involved on campus, a high school friend said he was a "great guy."<sup>10</sup> Ish Patel said Thursday he met Mohammad in middle school in Santa Clara and was close friends with him throughout high school, but the two lost touch after graduation. He said he was shocked to hear Mohammad was involved in the stabbings.<sup>11</sup> Mohammad was friendly and loved basketball, going to the mosque to pray, and playing video games with his friends. He was also very intelligent and excelled in school according to Patel.<sup>12</sup>

In 2015, the 18-year-old from Santa Clara was a freshman studying computer science and engineering at UC Merced.<sup>13</sup> He was very anti-social and was often spotted on campus alone. Andrew Velasquez, one of his college suitemates, told ABC30, a local news station:

He didn't talk much. And I never saw him walk with anybody. Walking to class, I never saw him walk with anybody. Every time I would try and say something he would just ignore it.<sup>14</sup>

One student told the school's newspaper *The Prodigy*, that he was rarely ever in his room and no one really knew where he went because he would not talk to anyone.<sup>15</sup> "He wouldn't affiliate himself with everyone," said April Navarrete, 18, who lived in the same Tuolumne Residence Hall. "He just didn't really talk much."<sup>16</sup> Speaking with Merced County Sheriff's detective Jose Silva, one of his college suitemates, Ali Elsheikh, Elsheikh, described Mohammad as a "loner and extreme Muslim."<sup>17</sup> He added he "said he too is Muslim but that Mohammad was 'way out there' and was not surprised by the incident."<sup>18</sup> One of the most chilling

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<sup>8</sup> Sam Levin, "Attack on California university campus was Isis-inspired," FBI says, [theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com), March 17, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Farrell, "Faisal Mohammad, '5 Fast Facts You Need to Know,'" [heavy.com](http://heavy.com), November 5, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Gomez et al., "UC Merced Student Tossed from Study Group."

<sup>11</sup> Gomez et al., "UC Merced Student Tossed from Study Group."

<sup>12</sup> Gomez, Giwargis, Nelson, and Salonga, "UC Merced Student Tossed from Study Group."

<sup>13</sup> Wills Robinson and Khaleda Rahman, "'He had far greater intentions to do damage': Police reveal twisted college freshman who stabbed four on campus had a backpack containing petroleum jelly, handcuffs and night vision goggles,'" [dailymail.co.uk](http://dailymail.co.uk), November 5, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Robinson and Rahman, "He had far greater intentions to do damage."

<sup>15</sup> Robinson and Rahman, "He had far greater intentions to do damage."

<sup>16</sup> Gomez et al., "UC Merced Student Tossed from Study Group."

<sup>17</sup> Morgante, "UC Merced stabber sat in silence minutes before starting attack."

<sup>18</sup> Morgante, "UC Merced stabber sat in silence minutes before starting attack."

exchanges he witnessed was when a friend of his had asked Mohammad what would happen if he touched the mat Mohammad had used for praying. Mohammad's response was very simple: "I will kill you."<sup>19</sup>

Investigators found a photocopy of an ISIS flag among his belongings after the shooting, raising some questions about the extent of his commitment to radical Islamism.<sup>20</sup> However, authorities said they found no red flags or signs of violence from comprehensive background checks.<sup>21</sup> Merced County Sheriff Vern Warnke said Mohammad had no previous run-ins with the law and had no history of mental illness.<sup>22</sup> His family released a statement after the shooting, which said:

Our son was a kind and respectful man. He was always quiet and humble and excelled in school and academics. His teachers and friends always spoke well of him.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. Motivation

There are two schools of thought on the motivation of Faisal Mohammad. The first is that he carried this out as a form of personal revenge. The evidence for this school lies in the fact a couple weeks before the attack, Mohammad was kicked out of a study group. Whether he was physically removed from the study group or politely asked to leave is unknown since no details have been given about that. However, given his intense and extreme anger felt at the students for having being tossed out of the group, one can assume it was not the most peaceful transition. Most likely not coincidentally, the study group was for the class he started the attack in.<sup>24</sup> Given his quiet and shy nature, it was puzzling that he was kicked out of the group for "disruption," according to Warnke.<sup>25</sup> Specific details as to what that entailed were not given.

Upset over being kicked out the study group, Mohammad created what was described by Sheriff Warnke as a manifesto. The manifesto was two pages long and hand-written, and it laid out his plan to kill "lots of people."<sup>26</sup> Warnke told reporters he had a very elaborate idea of what he wanted to do during his rampage and reminded his audience how difficult is to predict human behavior:

We had an upset teenager that was upset over being kicked out of a study group for being disruptive. He was a teenager, he got mad and took it out this way. We don't know what's going to trigger and we don't have a crystal ball ... We don't know. The human person is a very unpredictable being.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Morgante, "UC Merced stabber sat in silence minutes before starting attack."

<sup>20</sup> Melissa Chan, "UC Merced stabber Faisal Mohammad had ISIS flag; teen's family offers sympathy for victims, says son was 'kind and respectful,'" *New York Daily News*, November 11, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Chan, "UC Merced stabber Faisal Mohammad had ISIS flag."

<sup>22</sup> Chan, "UC Merced stabber Faisal Mohammad had ISIS flag."

<sup>23</sup> Chan, "UC Merced stabber Faisal Mohammad had ISIS flag."

<sup>24</sup> Heise, "Sheriff: UC Merced Student Upset at Being Ousted From Study Group."

<sup>25</sup> Parsons et al., "Attacker's Manifesto Reveals Plan to Kill 'a lot of people.'"

<sup>26</sup> Parsons et al., "Attacker's Manifesto Reveals Plan to Kill 'a lot of people.'"

<sup>27</sup> Parsons et al., "Attacker's Manifesto Reveals Plan to Kill 'a lot of people.'"

The second school of thought is the predictable one when discussing a Muslim who carries out an attack like this: radical Islam. The mere name of the student behind the attack and the knowledge he was a Muslim made armchair observers on social media quick to point to radical Islam, according to Warnke. Warnke said there were references to Allah but dismissed any suggestion that Mohammad was motivated by religion. “His belief was through the Muslim faith, but there’s nothing to indicate anything other than that,” Warnke said. “It’d be like a Christian referring to the Lord Jesus.”<sup>28</sup>

The FBI, which initially ruled the attack to be “misguided acts of a disgruntled student,” changed its tune and said terrorist propaganda was the main driving force behind this act.<sup>29</sup> They said Mohammad had visited websites of ISIS and other terrorist organizations before the attack. Investigators emphasized he might have self-radicalized and drawn inspiration from the propaganda.<sup>30</sup> However, they found no evidence he had any ties to any terrorist organizations.

#### 4. Goals

It is difficult pin down a concrete goal for Mohammad. However, when investigators analyzed his manifesto, it was very chilling. While no end goal was mentioned, it included 45 detailed steps of what he was going to do—though no really specific details have been made public. The plan also had a script of what he would say to each person he confronted before killing them.<sup>31</sup> A backpack belonging to Mohammad was investigated by a bomb squad but was quickly neutralized. According to Warnke, the items contained in the backpack indicated he had far greater intentions of doing more harm.<sup>32</sup> Investigators found zip-tie handcuffs, petroleum jelly, a night vision scope, and a safety hammer used to break windows, among other things.<sup>33</sup>

#### 5. Plans for violence

The FBI had said they believe Mohammad started the preparation for the attack about a week beforehand, beginning when he was kicked out of his study group.<sup>34</sup> A search by authorities of his dorm, car, and other possessions revealed an interesting combination of items. They found a second copy of the manifesto in Mohammad’s garbage can, along with several discarded petroleum jelly cans, duct tape wrappers, large zip ties, a package that had contained a knife and sharpener, a red prayer rug, and a copy of the Koran.<sup>35</sup> He used an 8 inch hunting

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<sup>28</sup> Parsons et al., “Attacker’s Manifesto Reveals Plan to Kill ‘a lot of people.’”

<sup>29</sup> Michael Pearson, “Attacker who stabbed students at UC Merced had ISIS flag, FBI says,” *cnn.com*, March 18, 2016.

<sup>30</sup> Pearson, “Attacker who stabbed students at UC Merced had ISIS flag, FBI says.”

<sup>31</sup> Heise, “Sheriff: UC Merced Student Upset at Being Ousted from Study Group.”

<sup>32</sup> Heise, “Sheriff: UC Merced Student Upset at Being Ousted from Study Group.”

<sup>33</sup> Heise, “Sheriff: UC Merced Student Upset at Being Ousted from Study Group.”

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Serna and Matt Hamilton, “‘UC Merced Attacker was Inspired by Islamic State and Likely Self-radicalized’, FBI says,” *latimes.com*, March, 17, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Malia Zimmerman, “Call It Terrorism says father of hero who helped stop stabber at Calif. college,” *foxnews.com*, December 10, 2015.

knife to carry out the attack.<sup>36</sup> Authorities believe he planned to steal a gun by overpowering a campus cop and then take several more victims.<sup>37</sup>

The manifesto bore names of people on his target list (these have not been released, most likely due to privacy concerns), a vow “to cut someone’s head off,” and at least five reminders to “praise Allah.” Sheriff Warnke said number 27 was to make sure people were tied down and number 28 was “sit down and praise Allah.”<sup>38</sup> Warnke went into a little more detail:

There was a gruesome statement he made about wanting to cut someone’s head off and kill two people with one bullet, and he planned to shoot the police. He did not have a firearm with him and didn’t seem to have a lot of experience with firearms because he thought he could kill two people with one bullet. He reminded himself in the list to raise the gun slowly. He scripted everything out in chronological order.<sup>39</sup>

The plans laid out in the manifesto were not the most thought out, especially considering he had no firearm. He started the attack in the class from which the study group had been formed—the one he was kicked out of the week before. After he was done there, Warnke said Mohammad planned to zip-tie all 15 students in his general education core class to their desks. Mohammad named one student that he was going to make tie up the other students, then have that person tie himself up.<sup>40</sup> He then planned to put an unknown quantity of petroleum jelly into clear bags, cut holes in the bags and squirt the substance onto the floor, making a slip-and-slide that would make it difficult for anyone who entered the room.<sup>41</sup> After all that, with the students essentially trapped in the hallways with the makeshift slip-n-slide, he planned to call police with a fake distress call and ambush responding officers with the knife and steal their guns, probably under the assumption they would be trapped by the slip-n-slide. He planned to go back and shoot students he named in his “manifesto” including those in his study group, he also planned to shoot more cops and essentially anyone else who tried to get in his way.<sup>42</sup>

Mohammad began his rampage by attacking a fellow student with a knife in a required general education course—the one with the study group he was tossed out of. Byron Price, 31, a construction worker doing remodeling next door, ran into the classroom and tackled Mohammad. Price said in an interview he believed he was breaking up a fistfight but soon realized it was far more than that when Mohammad charged him with the knife, stabbing him in the side of his body. Price stopped Mohammad from moving on with his plan, and that gave enough time for police to arrive on the scene and also for students to flee the classroom. Mohammad fled the room and stabbed two others, one in a stairway, the other on a bench outside. Details were not given on the specifics of his

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<sup>36</sup> Zimmerman, “Call It Terrorism says father of hero who helped stop stabber at Calif. college,”

<sup>37</sup> Zimmerman, “Call it Terrorism says father of hero who helped stop stabber at Calif. college,”

<sup>38</sup> Zimmerman, “Call it Terrorism says father of hero who helped stop stabber at Calif. college,”

<sup>39</sup> Zimmerman, “Call it Terrorism says father of hero who helped stop stabber at Calif. college,”

<sup>40</sup> Heise, “Sheriff: UC Merced Student Upset at Being Ousted from Study Group.”

<sup>41</sup> Serna and Hamilton, “‘UC Merced Attacker was Inspired by Islamic State’.”

<sup>42</sup> Paul Elias, “UC Merced student who stabbed 4 sought revenge,” *dailynews.com*, November 6, 2015.

encounter with the campus police, but we know police shot and killed him on a nearby pedestrian bridge.<sup>43</sup>

To give a little insight into how Mohammad was acting and feeling during the attack, Price said Mohammad smiled at people as he slashed at people with the knife but looked frightened: “He also looked like he was having fun. His eyes, I could see fear in his eyes. He was smiling.”<sup>44</sup>

## 6. Role of informants

No police informants were involved in this case.

## 7. Connections

FBI investigators found no evidence Mohammad had worked with anyone or had ties to any foreign terrorist organizations. However, Mohammad had visited websites for ISIS and other terrorist organizations before the attack. He also had pro-ISIS propaganda on his laptop, and a photocopy of an ISIS flag in his backpack. They concluded he had self-radicalized and drawn inspiration from terrorist propaganda.<sup>45</sup>

## 8. Relation to the Muslim community

As noted earlier, his Muslim suitemate at UC Merced, Ali Elsheikh described Mohammad as an “extreme Muslim.” He noted that he too was a Muslim, but that Mohammad was “way out there.”<sup>46</sup> The photocopy of the ISIS flag found in his backpack after the attack seemed to verify this statement. He did attend mosque, but the frequency is unknown.<sup>47</sup>

The attack drew praise from a Twitter account associated with the Islamic State. After his death and name were made public, they tweeted in Arabic, “May Allah accept him.”<sup>48</sup>

Oddly enough, although he was a practicing Muslim, the Muslim community in Merced had absolutely no idea who he was. The Muslim Student Association at UC Merced said Mohammad wasn’t a member of the group and had never attended their prayer sessions or meetings. “No one knew who he was,” said Homza Al-Ariemy, the president of the group. Further, Sannaullah Hussain, the imam at the Islamic Center of Merced on Ashby Road, said he never saw Mohammad during Friday prayers at the mosque. Investigators asked Hussain and other members of the mosque, including UC Merced students who pray there, if anyone knew Mohammad, and no one did. Abdur Wali, the imam for the Merced chapter of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community also had “no idea” who Mohammad was before hearing of the attack.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Elias, “UC Merced student who stabbed 4 sought revenge.”

<sup>44</sup> Parsons et al., “Attacker’s Manifesto Reveals Plan to Kill ‘a lot of people.’”

<sup>45</sup> Pearson, “Attacker who stabbed students at UC Merced had ISIS flag, FBI says.”

<sup>46</sup> Morgante, “UC Merced stabber sat in silence minutes before starting attack.”

<sup>47</sup> Gomez et al, “UC Merced Student Tossed from Study Group.”

<sup>48</sup> Robinson and Rahman, “‘He had far greater intentions to do damage.’”

<sup>49</sup> Rob Parsons and Brianna Calix, “New questions emerge about background of UC Merced attacker, mercedsunstar.com,” November 9, 2015.

Santa Clara, where Mohammad was raised, and Merced, where he went to school, are 121 miles apart, making it difficult to attend the same mosque. He was known to frequent the mosque in high school, so it does not make sense that Mohammad, considered to be an “extreme” Muslim, was not known in the Muslim community in Merced.

### 9. Depiction by authorities

Authorities were very quick to dismiss the notion that this was an act of terrorism. UC Merced Chancellor Dorothy Leland said, “At this point, it would be irresponsible to draw such conclusions based solely on the ethnicity of the suspect.”<sup>50</sup> And Sheriff Warnke added:

At this point in time, the preliminary evidence suggests that freshman computer science and engineering student Faisal Mohammad of Santa Clara appears to have been motivated by personal animosities, not a political agenda. It was an act of an individual for a vendetta... nothing to indicate there was any political or religious motivation.<sup>51</sup>

When asked possible references to Allah, Warnke said there was but quickly dismissed religion as a cause:

His belief was through the Muslim faith, but there’s nothing to indicate anything other than that. It’d be like a Christian referring to the Lord Jesus. You’ve got to remember there are a lot of Muslim-faith (people) that are very kind, gentle, loving people and to have one person do this, you can’t group that whole section of folks into that. It’s just not right.<sup>52</sup>

The brief overview in this section as well as discussions in previous sections is all that’s needed to see the theme. Authorities had absolutely no interest in giving any thought to the idea he was motivated radical Islam.<sup>53</sup> This has interesting similarities to a case at the University of North Carolina that will be discussed in the appendix.

### 10. Depiction by the media

The media took the lead from the authorities. If one looks through the footnotes of this essay, the word “terrorist” is never used: “attacker” and “student” are the words used most often. Even in the depths of the articles, terrorism was very rarely used. As noted, UC Merced Chancellor Dorothy Leland said. “At this point, it would be irresponsible to draw such conclusions based solely on the ethnicity of the suspect.”<sup>54</sup>

Dipak Gupta, a political science professor who specializes in public policy, terrorism, and ethnic conflicts at San Diego State University, says that determining whether an attack is an act of terrorism hinges on whether the attacker believes his or her actions would have any political ramifications. He

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<sup>50</sup> Robinson and Rahman, “He had far greater intentions to do damage’.”

<sup>51</sup> Robinson and Rahman, “He had far greater intentions to do damage’.”

<sup>52</sup> Parsons et al., “Attacker’s Manifesto Reveals Plan to Kill ‘a lot of people’.”

<sup>53</sup> More on this will be discussed in the conclusion.

<sup>54</sup> Robinson and Rahman, “He had far greater intentions to do damage’.”



notes further that the goal of groups like the Islamic State is to inspire individuals to act out on their own as a “lone wolf.”

The question we should always be asking is whether he or she believed they were sending or making a political statement. If there is proof of that (belief), then an act can be considered an act of terrorism.<sup>55</sup>

Thus one of telltale signs of terrorism is if the attacker’s violence has political motivation to it. If his/her actions are politically motivated, it is an act of terrorism. If it is not, it is not terrorism.

Media sites on the far-right wing of the political spectrum had a different view from those of the UC Merced authorities. According to jihadwatch.com:

The University of California Merced is no different from any other campus all over the country: full of indoctrinated bots who have been thoroughly imbued with the notion that when Islamic jihadists attack us, it is our fault. Everyone who participated was sure that his stabbings had something to do with “images of masculinity” and nothing to do with Islam, and that only “Islamophobes” thought otherwise.

The Monday night after the attack, faculty at the University of California, Merced held a “teach in” which according to this website, was voided of discussions of radical Islam but instead focused on how society’s notions on masculinity pressures men. The “Don’t Turn Our Tragedy Into Hate” teach-in had several speakers, in which one allegedly described “manliness” as “Middle class, able bodied, heterosexual, red meat, probably Christian,” and continued:

Anger, that is really what we think about when we think about emotional men. They are subject to social sanctions if they deviate from masculinity. If you are perceived as failing at it, you are subject to being called a fag, a pussy, a wimp, pretty much what women are, right? So when you have this limited ability to sort of express your emotions and possible feelings of emasculation, of low self-esteem, how do you really [deal with] that? A lot of times they ... engage in violence. They need to compensate for their loss of masculinity in the most manly way they have access to, and unfortunately, a lot of times that’s Flowersviolence.<sup>56</sup>

Another website said many students mourned Mohammad instead of the survivors, including an “R.I.P” post on Facebook, garnering 800 likes. A UC Merced student who attended the teach-in said he could not believe the school blamed the stabbing spree on masculinity instead of on radical Islam. Said the student, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of backlash:

They just want to say it’s not Islamic terror. They were trying to understand why the kid did it. ”Islamophobia” was cited as the reason people want to call it a terrorist attack. People were quick to sympathize with the attacker and assume anyone who thought this was related to radical Islam was a xenophobic racist. One of the most disturbing things I

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<sup>55</sup> Parsons and Calix, “New questions emerge about background of UC Merced attacker.”

<sup>56</sup> Robert Spencer, “UC Merced mourns, sympathizes with jihad stabber Faisal Mohammad,” jihadwatch.com, November, 19, 2015.

saw on Facebook was that a student made a RIP Mohammad post that received nearly 800 Likes.<sup>57</sup>

A third conservative website, *conservativefiringline*, reported that Matthew Gonzales at the *Merced County News* wrote Mohammad was indeed on a federal terror watch list. In addition, he said officials at the school were warned of a potential threat from him. Three unnamed law enforcement officials told Gonzales that the truth was not being told about what happened and who the suspect was:

The suspect was indeed not only on the FBI's terrorist watch list but he was also on a national watch list and had been one of the topics of discussion at a recent FBI briefing to Merced County law enforcement leaders... About 6 months ago the FBI held a terrorist/extremist briefing with Merced County law enforcement leaders. At this meeting several suspected terrorists with ISIS links were said to be here in Merced County. Names and photos were presented including one of Faisal Mohammad. Based on the FBI's own analysis... they projected an attack at the UC Merced campus. Though they were not absolutely certain of the attack on the UC they did feel that there was enough information for them to be here if it did."

According to this narrative, the FBI not only believed Mohammad to be a terror suspect enough to have a full length meeting about him but also suspected him of plotting an attack at UC Merced. Also, Gonzales was told the media was forced to push a false narrative of him being an angry student instead of what he really was... a radical Muslim.<sup>58</sup>

In rebuttal, a post at *The Right Scoop* noted:

This is slightly suspect because of the anonymous sources, and because in order for it to be true then the law enforcement officials would have to be brazenly lying when they said that there was no reason to believe Islam had anything to do with the attack.<sup>59</sup>

The question ultimately posed by these sites was, "Are we being lied to about a growing threat from ISIS, or is the threat being overblown?" This issue will be further discussed in the conclusion section.

## 11. Policing costs

Since Mohammad was shot and killed by police during the attack, there were no costs brought upon to the court system, nor were there any informants, as noted earlier. They also did not know anything about Mohammad being a potential terrorist beforehand, so there were no surveillance costs. However, as noted in the previous section, conservative websites claim the FBI and local police did know beforehand that Mohammad not only was a terror threat, but that there might be an attack at UC Merced around the time the attack occurred.

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<sup>57</sup> Jennifer Kabbany, "UC Merced mourns stabbing spree attacker Faisal Mohammad, seeks to understand him," *collegefix.com*, November 18, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Joe Newby, "Report: UC Merced killer on terrorist watch list, chancellor warned of attack," *conservativefiringline.com*, November 8, 2015.

<sup>59</sup> Newby, "Report: UC Merced killer on terrorist watch list, chancellor warned of attack."

## 12. Relevance of the internet

The internet, as usual in today's high-tech American society, was a key factor. Mohammad was heavily influenced by "foreign terrorist propaganda." While there are more ways to view terrorist propaganda than through the internet, the millions upon millions of searches which can be revealed in only a matter of seconds and one click of a computer mouse makes it exponentially easier for any willing person to view terrorist propaganda.

## 13. Are we safer?

This is the age old issue. With every attack, terrorist-inspired or not, we always ask ourselves and authorities afterwards if we are safer or less safe. The authorities were quick to point out this was a disturbed young man, angered at being kicked out of a study group, who plotted a revenge that went far beyond the normal. That being said, while I agree with the authorities' conclusion, they are missing a key part: the influence of radical Islam. If we fully understand the cause(s) of the attack, and we learn from it, we are safer. If we don't, we are less safe.

In the case of 9/11, we focused entirely on the fact that the terrorists hate us for "who we are" and refused to focus on the fact that terrorist groups like al-Qaeda had an ulterior motive for the horrifying attack. According to President George W. Bush, "We are the target of enemies who boast they want to kill... This new enemy seeks to destroy our freedoms and impose its views."<sup>60</sup> However, that is not accurate entirely. Terrorist groups do use suicide tactics against democracies, but University of Chicago political scientist Bob Pape finds this to be because democratic countries are militarily occupying states—terrorists are attempting to coerce them to leave their homeland using suicide bombings.<sup>61</sup> However, our rhetoric for the "Global War on Terror has omitted much, if not all, of this, and terrorism has continued to explode in the Middle East as secular dictators, toppled by the United States, have been replaced by terrorist groups. Moreover, as we continue to have a neoconservative/liberal interventionist foreign policy in the Middle East, terrorist attacks in the United States continue to happen.

In the present case, we were informed that this attack involved a disturbed young man who took his anger far beyond the scope of a normal human being. While I do believe this to be the main cause of the attack, the authorities understated the effect radical Islam had on this young man. In consequence, I do not think we are safer. If we don't fully understand why attacks happen, the environment becomes less safe, not more so. Only time will tell whether we really did learn from this attack, just like it took several years post 9/11 to learn we learned essentially nothing from 9/11 as we continue the policies in the Middle East which played a huge part in motivating al-Qaeda to carry out the horrifying attack.

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<sup>60</sup> Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism*. New York: Random House, 2006, 51

<sup>61</sup> Pape, *Dying to Win*, 51

## 14. Conclusion

This case is a head scratcher in a way. Mohammad had been kicked out of study group for being disruptive. He decided to take revenge on these classmates and created a plan to kill them and others—a massive overreaction. I would describe this situation as a very angry young man who experienced a situation that he had no normal way to react to. He took that anger and channeled it. Stabbing people because you were kicked out of a study group is an absolutely absurd reaction as there are far better ways to redeem the situation. However, that extreme anger was coupled with the fact he had viewed foreign terrorist propaganda, and this created a massive storm no one would have been able to stop. Thus, while severe anger is my main diagnosis, radical Islam did play a role. He was able to use radical Islam as a way to essentially make the stabbings worth committing, to establish credibility for the attack in his mind. If Mohammad had stabbed those people and had not invoked the name of Allah, this stabbing would go down as a random attack with no real end goal. As it is, it (un)intentionally gives terrorist groups the ability to claim the attack for their specific political goal whether the event was supposed to be taken as such or not.

I do not believe, based on the evidence provided, that there was a political motivation to Mohammad's plans. The way he planned this attack, he would have written down what his political motivations were in the manifesto he left behind. This leaves the radicalization of Mohammad as the secondary motivation, one essentially used as justification for the attack, impelled by the primary motivation, extreme anger.

As we saw earlier, conservative websites had a very different picture of the situation than the authorities. They had claimed that Mohammad was not only on a no-fly list, but that the FBI and local authorities knew about the threat they were facing from him, including knowing there was a good possibility there was going to be an attack at UC Merced.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, they claimed the authorities silenced all other narratives and forced all journalists to embrace the “false narrative” claiming that it had nothing to do with radical Islam. The evidence for this proposition is quite limited. While it is entirely possible that Mohammad was indeed a terror watch list and authorities had known about him ahead of time, the only sites reporting it were conservative ones and the names of the three independent law enforcement officials making such charges have not been released.

In an age in which terrorism tends to be politicized on a mass level, there is a tendency to claim an attack is Islamic without looking further into the facts.<sup>63</sup> Mohammad, given the fact he had a photocopy of an ISIS flag in his backpack, was most likely a sympathetic toward ISIS. But he was not a foot soldier of that group, nor did he seem to have a political motivation. As noted, I believe anger played the biggest role with radical Islam taking a secondary, but still important role.

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<sup>62</sup> Newby, “Report: UC Merced killer on terrorist watch list, chancellor warned of attack.”

<sup>63</sup> See Nikolaus Pittore, “Case 71” in this book.

Naturally, the more we expand our investigation of such attacks, looking not only at potential inspiration by radical Islam but also at other motivating factors, the more we will be able to understand how and why these attacks occur and how to prevent them. The problem with this case is that the motivation came from Mohammad's anger at being kicked out of the study group. The way to "stop" the attack would have been to allow him to continue to be disruptive. Moreover, there was no way to anticipate what he was capable of. We can be more observant of people like him and report them if they seem to present a risk. However, Mohammad's extremism did not really take hold in a major way until the anger fit he experienced after being kicked out of the study group.

Just goes to show how pain-staking and difficult terrorism can be to study.

### **Appendix: What is and is not terrorism**

This case is similar to one at the University of North Carolina, where a recent alumnus, Mohammed Reza Taheri-Azar, attempted to attack UNC students to "avenge the deaths of Muslims."<sup>64</sup> He was subsequently arrested, charged with nine counts of attempted first degree murder and nine counts of assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill, and sentenced to 26-33 years in prison. In this case, Azar left a letter at his apartment beginning with:

I am writing this letter to inform you of my reasons for premeditating and attempting to murder citizens and residents of the United States of America on Friday, March 3, 2006 in the city of Chapel Hill, North Carolina by running them over with my automobile and stabbing them with a knife if the opportunities are presented to me by Allah...Due to the killing of believing men and women under the direction of the United States government, I have decided...to take the lives of as many Americans and American sympathizers as I can in order to punish the United States for their immoral actions around the world.

Although many students wanted to declare this act terrorism, authorities, including UNC-Chapel Hill Chancellor James Moeser, were very hesitant to do so. After much deliberation, said Moeser, they were going to regard this act not as one of terrorism—although the feeling was there—but rather as a criminal one. Many conservative-leaning students protested, while other students countered by saying that such protests were only strengthening prejudices against Muslims.

There are several similarities with the UC Merced case. As in the UNC case, the authorities, including the Chancellor of UC Merced, Dorothy Leland, refused to give credence to the idea that radical Islam had anything to do with the attack, while conservative students and websites came out against the refusal to name radical Islam as a cause of the attack, arguing that refusing to call it terrorism was only making Americans less safe. It is extremely likely that both Chancellors refused to call this as an act of terrorism because of the negative effect that could have had on future enrollment.

According to the US Code, terrorism can be defined as: (i) an attempt to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a

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<sup>64</sup> See Andrew Baum, "Case 17" in this book.

government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.<sup>65</sup>

The case of Faisal Mohammad meets the first of these criteria: it was an attempt to intimidate or coerce a civilian population: the students at his school. However, it is not clear any of this was related to a political goal and thus the second and third criteria both fail to appear in this case. He never made any reference to dissatisfaction with any policy of the US government or suggested he was trying to affect its actions. The only targets he explicitly named were the students in the study group which had rejected him. In the UNC case, Azar clearly attempted to murder students in order to send a message to the US government.

Thus, it could be argued that Faisal Mohammad's act did not constitute terrorism, but rather was a case of a young man who had an extreme anger toward fellow classmates for kicking him out of a study group and violently sought revenge against them and anyone else who stood in his way. That he invoked of Allah's name does not mean this was radical Islamic terrorism but rather gave him credibility and justification for carrying out the attack. Nonetheless, it is highly important not to completely dismiss radical Islam in this case because it does reveal important clues about how it can be used to justify a horrifying crime.

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<sup>65</sup> 18 U.S. Code § 2331 – Definitions, Legal Information Institute, law.cornell.edu