

Case 95: Chelsea

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December 8, 2017

After working on the project for some three months, Ahmad Khan Rahimi, a married, 28-year-old naturalized Afghan-American, amassed an arsenal of around nine explosives at his residence in New Jersey. Two of these were pressure-cooker bombs to be detonated by timers, and the others were smaller, one configured to be set off by a timer, the others by fuses.¹

On September 17, 2016, at 9:30am, he detonated the smaller timer bomb (in some accounts a cluster of three pipe bombs, only one of which detonated) in a garbage can at the finish line of a charity race in Seaside Park, NJ. The explosion did little damage, and, because the race's start was delayed, few, if any, were at the finish line at the time. No one was hurt.²

He then went to the train station in Elizabeth, NJ, and accountably left a back pack with the remaining smaller explosives nearby. He took the train to Penn Station in New York with each of the two pressure cooker bombs in a separate roller suitcase. He then walked a few blocks to the Chelsea neighborhood and placed one of the bombs in a heavy steel sidewalk dumpster on 23rd Street and the other near a mailbox on a street a few blocks away.³

At 8:30pm, the first of these two bombs exploded, shattering windows, damaging cars, propelling debris onto rooftops, and sending people running at a time when the area was filled with residents and tourists.⁴ Although more than two dozen people were injured by the explosion, none was killed.⁵

The second device failed to detonate. Two men saw the suitcase on the sidewalk, took out the bomb that was wrapped in a plastic bag, and then walked off with the empty suitcase. A neighbor, aware of the nearby explosion earlier in the evening, saw the mysterious object on the sidewalk and called the police who took the bomb into custody.⁶

The backpack in New Jersey was discovered the next day and delivered to the police.

Rahimi's identity was quickly ascertained. There was extensive footage from surveillance cameras tracing his walk around New York. And he was unwise enough to use his own cell phone as a detonator on the second, unexploded, Chelsea bomb, which supplied not only personal information about who he was and where he had been, but a fingerprint which was quickly traced to police records from a year earlier when he had been arrested in New Jersey for assaulting his mother and sister and for stabbing his brother in the leg.

¹ Michael Wilson, "Chelsea Bomb Suspect Guilty in Attack That Sowed Terror Across Region," *nytimes.com*, October 16, 2017.

² Wilson, "Chelsea Bomb Suspect Guilty." Marc Santora, William K. Rashbaum, Al Baker, and Adam Goldman, "Ahmad Khan Rahami Is Arrested in Manhattan and New Jersey Bombings" *nytimes.com*, September 19, 2016.

³ Wilson, "Chelsea Bomb Suspect Guilty." Santora et al., "Ahmad Khan Rahami Is Arrested."

⁴ Wilson, "Chelsea Bomb Suspect Guilty."

⁵ Wilson, "Chelsea Bomb Suspect Guilty."

⁶ Wilson, "Chelsea Bomb Suspect Guilty."

Police sent out multiple alerts with Rahimi's picture in them to millions of residents in the New York/New Jersey area. In Linden, New Jersey, one resident called the police when he saw a suspicious man huddling in the doorway of a bar. It was Rahimi, and he pulled out a gun when a police officer arrived. Rahimi was arrested after a shootout and a chase in which he and two police officers were wounded.⁷ After four hours of deliberation, jurors at his trial a year later found him guilty of all counts including at least one that carries a mandatory life imprisonment provision.⁸

As documented by Niko Pittore, an intern at the Cato Institute when he wrote this case, Rahimi's high school classmates remember him with considerable affection—as quiet and respectful with a good sense of humor. Things changed, however, in 2013 when Rahimi began to become obsessed with jihadist videos and statements by Osama bin Laden and Anwar al-Awlaki. His proclivities in this direction were likely substantially enhanced when he fell under the sway of a radical Muslim cleric he met in Pakistan on a yearlong trip to Pakistan (where his wife then lived). He came back to the United States in 2014 angry and violent.⁹ As Pittore points out, Rahimi was particularly outraged by the American attacks on Muslims in the Middle East.

At the time of the attack, investigating bomb technicians said they believed that Rahimi constructed all the devices himself, suggested he may have had received training: “If you're working off the premise that the guy made all these devices, then the guy is a pretty good bombmaker. And you don't get that good on the internet.”¹⁰ However, only one of the three bombs seems to have gone off as planned, and no one was killed. And, as this may suggest, there seems to be no evidence Rahimi had any training anywhere.

⁷ Santora et al., “Ahmad Khan Rahami Is Arrested.”

⁸ Wilson, “Chelsea Bomb Suspect Guilty.”

⁹ Kim Barker, Pir Zubair Shah, Joseph Goldstein, and Jessica Silver-Greenberg, “Journey From Class Clown to Suspect in Chelsea Bombing,” *nytimes.com*, September 24, 2016.

¹⁰ Santora et al., “Ahmad Khan Rahami Is Arrested.”

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Niko Pittore

December 8, 2017

1. Overview

On the morning of September 17, 2016, a pipe bomb devised by Ahmad Khan Rahimi, a 28 year old naturalized Afghan-American, exploded in Seaside Park, New Jersey. Later that day, a homemade pressure cooker bomb filled with small bearings or metal BBs, also by Rahimi, went off in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, New York City, and a second Rahimi pressure cooker bomb was discovered four blocks away in Manhattan. Late the next day, on September 18, several more of his bombs were discovered near the train station in Elizabeth, New Jersey. There were no deaths, but over two dozen people were injured in the Chelsea explosion.¹

Working with evidence from the bombs and from surveillance cameras, the police quickly identified Rahimi and sent his picture and description to the public. He was soon spotted by the owner of a local bar in Linden, New Jersey.²

Linden police arrived fifteen minutes later and, after a brief shootout and chase that left Rahimi and two police officers wounded, he was arrested.³

Rahimi was described very favorably by his peers growing up, especially in high school, where he is remembered as being quiet and respectful and with a solid sense of humor. However, things started to change when he left high school. His father, upset at his “American” ways (including having a non-Muslim girlfriend who became pregnant) started taking him on family trips to Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁴ His classmates reported that when he came back from those trips, he started to become more conservative and religious and grew a long beard. He also began to be radicalized, by Islamist terrorist propaganda, becoming particularly hostile to US military policy in the Middle East. However, despite their concerns, the fact that he turned into the most wanted man in the United States was a complete shock to those who knew him. No one figured he was a capable of such a crime like this.

Rahimi’s trial lasted two weeks and, after deliberating for four hours, the jury found him guilty on all counts.

2. Nature of the adversary

Ahmad Khan Rahimi is an Afghan-American born on January 23, 1988 in Kandahar, Democratic Republic of Afghanistan.⁵ He came to the United States

¹ Marc Santora, William K. Rashbaum, Al Baker, and Adam Goldman, “Ahmad Khan Rahimi Is Arrested in Manhattan and New Jersey Bombings,” *nytimes.com*, September 19, 2016.

² Evan Perez, Shimon Prokupez, Emmanuella Grinberg, Holly Yan, “NY, NJ bombings: Suspect charged with attempted murder of officers,” *cnn.com*, September 19, 2016.

³ Tom Haydon and Jessica Remo, “‘We caught a terrorist’ says proud new Linden chief.” *NJ.com*, September 20, 2016.

⁴ Scott Bronstein and Drew Griffin, “Ahmad Rahimi’s lifelong feud with family and identity,” *cnn.com*, September 22, 2016.

⁵ Naftali Bendavid and Tamara Audi, “Ahmad Khan Rahimi Took Long Path to Radicalization,” *wsj.com*, September 23, 2016. Reports have listed his last name as “Rahimi” and once or twice as

with his family in 2000⁶ when he was just twelve years old and was naturalized 11 years later in 2011.⁷ He is a native Pashto speaker (a dialect of the broader Persian language family) and has seven siblings.⁸ He graduated from Edison High School in New Jersey in 2008.⁹ In high school, people who knew him and spoke to reporters had nothing but positive feelings about him. They were all stunned he was capable of committing this kind of act. Brian Konya, a former classmate of his had this to say about him: “Nothing out of the ordinary,” he said. “We remember him being well-dressed, and when he did talk, it was not abrasive, it was funny. It’s a complete mystery what happened to Ahmad between graduating in the summer of 2007 and last weekend...the time span from going from blending into being the most wanted man in America in less than 10 years is pretty shocking to me.”¹⁰

Rahimi’s congenial attitude toward his classmates soon caught the ire of his more conservative and traditional father who was becoming disappointed in how “American” his son had become: he did not dress in typical conservative fashion and did not frequently attend mosque. While in high school, he had a girlfriend, a non-Muslim from the Dominican Republic, and she unexpectedly became pregnant and then dropped out of high school to have the baby. Rahimi’s father, unspeakably irate about that, refused to meet the family of his son’s girlfriend. After graduating from high school, Rahimi enrolled at Edison Community College, with his eyes set on a future in law enforcement.¹¹

A family friend, who requested only to be identified as Ehsan, says the pregnancy and Rahimi’s apparent inability to move forward prompted his father to take the entire family to Afghanistan after his son had graduated from high school. From there, Ehsan said, they moved on to Pakistan. During the trip, Mohammed Rahimi abandoned Ahmad alone. As Ehsan recounted, the young man “told me he was basically left there.... He had to find his own way back ... I’m sure that traumatized him for life ... I’m sure that scarred him.” Ehsan said Rahimi told him that his father took his passport while he was sleeping.¹²

Another friend confirmed this story. He remembers getting a strange phone call from Rahimi, who said he was stuck in Pakistan and needed money. It is unknown who enabled Rahimi to return to the United States, but he eventually

“Rihimi.” He later corrected it to be “Rahimi.” I will use Rahimi except in quotes where it is spelled differently.

⁶ Brian Ross, Ronda Schwartz, Mike Levine, Stephanie Wash, Michael Edison Hayden, JJ Gallagher, and Emily Shapiro, “Details Emerge About NYC Bomb Suspect Ahmad Khan Rahami,” abcnews.com, September 19, 2016.

⁷ Ray Sanchez, “Bombing suspect Ahmad Khan Rahimi pleads not guilty,” CNN.com, October 13, 2016.

⁸ Kim Barker, Pir Zubair Shah, Joseph Goldstein, and Jessica Silver-Greenberg, “Journey From Class Clown to Suspect in Chelsea Bombing,” nytimes.com, September 24, 2016.

⁹ William Arkin, Alex Johnson, Corky Siemaszko, Tracy Connor, Chelsea Bailey, and Becky Bratu, “Ahmad Rahami: What We Know About N.Y., N.J. Bombings Suspect,” NBCnews.com September 19, 2016.

¹⁰ Caitlin Dickson, “Ahmad Khan Rahami high school classmate recalls bomb suspect as ‘funny’; calls allegations ‘shocking’,” yahoo.com, September 19, 2016.

¹¹ Bronstein and Griffin, “Ahmad Rahami’s lifelong feud with family and identity.”

¹² Bronstein and Griffin, “Ahmad Rahami’s lifelong feud with family and identity.”

made it and moved back into a tumultuous existence in the cramped apartment above his father's chicken restaurant.¹³

After helping run a restaurant called "Tasty Pizza and Fried Chicken," Mohammad opened up his own shop calling it "First American Friend Chicken," named for the United States because it had been generous enough to accept him and his family as refugees. Within two years, he joined a Kennedy Fried Chicken franchise in Asbury Park, New Jersey. Soon after, other relatives opened chicken restaurants, and Mohammad had all his sons work at them, sometimes long hours well into the night.¹⁴

However, at some point, things at the restaurant began to go south. In July 1998, Mohammad received a gas bill for \$242 and did not pay it for six years, at which point the gas company sued him. He was also sued by a man who claimed he broke a tooth on a hamburger. In addition, his daughter Aziza was arrested on suspicion of stealing \$565 worth of jewelry and perfume from a Filene's store, and the local newspaper ran a story about the episode.¹⁵

In 2004, Mohammad filed for bankruptcy. He owed around \$46,000 for expenses including charges on a Macy's card, medical bills and payments on a 1999 Chevrolet Suburban. He claimed he only earned \$1447 a month and spent \$200 of that on food for 10 people.¹⁶

In addition, the family clashed with some neighbors over the long hours kept by the restaurant: they often stayed open until 2am or later. They were also cited frequently for code violations by the municipality. In 2011, the Rahimi sued the town and its police force, saying they were being harassed and intimidated. The lawsuit also named a neighbor, James Dean McDermott, saying he had made derogatory comments such as "Muslims make too much trouble in this country." The lawsuit was dismissed in 2012.¹⁷

As Rahimi and his brothers grew older, they hung out around Elizabeth and neighboring towns, sometimes making trips into New York City for fun.¹⁸ Also during this time, Rahimi and a brother, Mohammad, made multiple trips to Afghanistan and Pakistan. At one point, they stayed in Pakistan for nearly a year. Ultimately, Rahimi and his brother returned to their traditional values, and married two conservative Pakistani cousins. Notably, during one those trips to Pakistan, he spent a lot of time in Quetta, which was known to be a stronghold for the Taliban.¹⁹

Rahimi's wife, Asia Bibi Rahimi, was one of his cousins. They were married in 2011 when he was in Pakistan, and the couple eventually had a baby.

¹³ Bronstein and Griffin, "Ahmad Rahami's lifelong feud with family and identity."

¹⁴ Barker et al., "Journey From Class Clown to Suspect in Chelsea Bombing."

¹⁵ Barker et al., "Journey From Class Clown to Suspect in Chelsea Bombing."

¹⁶ Barker et al., "Journey From Class Clown to Suspect in Chelsea Bombing."

¹⁷ Barbara Demick, Del Quentin Wilber, Vera Haller and Matt Pearce, "Suspect in New York-area bombings had traveled to Afghanistan and Pakistan, latimes.com," September 19, 2016.

¹⁸ Bronstein and Griffin, "Ahmad Rahami's lifelong feud with family and identity."

¹⁹ Jane Onyanga-Omara, "What we know about Ahmad Khan Rahami, suspect in NYC-area bombings," usatoday.com, September 20, 2016.

Around 2014, she was able to make it to the United States.²⁰ They moved into an apartment in Perth Amboy, but soon found they couldn't afford it. After they were evicted, they moved back in with the rest of the family above the chicken restaurant.²¹

After one of Rahimi's trips abroad, friends noticed a difference about him. Flee Jones, who grew up with Rahami and remembers playing basketball with him in the park as a kid, noticed significant changes in Rahimi upon his return from an extended trip to Afghanistan in 2012: "He grew a beard, wore traditional Muslim garb, and would pray in the back of the restaurant. Not only did he look different, but Rahimi had become less easygoing: "It's like he was a completely different person....He got serious and completely closed off."²²

At one time, Rahimi was licensed to carry firearms. In August 2014, when living in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, he was charged with aggravated assault and unlawful possession of a weapon. The charges arose from allegations that Rahimi had stabbed his brother in the leg after he and another brother attempted to stop Rahimi from assaulting their mother and sister "for no apparent reason." Rahimi was reported by two of his siblings the next day and spent three months in the Union County Jail, but was reported to have been bailed out. A grand jury declined to make an indictment, and the charges were dropped on September 22, 2014.²³

Rahimi and his estranged girlfriend had also been involved in court battles. He owed her more than \$3,000 in child support in 2015, and she had previously gotten a restraining order against him. On September 20, 2016, after Rahimi's arrest on terrorism charges, she filed a petition in a New Jersey state court seeking full custody of their child. She also filed to change her child's name. The petition for custody was granted the following day. However, the request to change the daughter's name was denied as was her request for the media not to contact her: the court said it lacked the authority to grant the requests.²⁴

3. Motivation

About two years before the 2016 attack, Mohammad Rahimi reported to the authorities that he believed his son was a terrorist. This prompted a review from the Federal Bureau of Investigation which involved checking databases, contacting other agencies, and conducting interviews. The review concluded that

²⁰ Catherine E. Shoichet, "Ahmad Khan Rahami: What we know about the bombing suspect," cnn.com, September 20, 2016.

²¹ Bronstein and Griffin, "Ahmad Rahami's lifelong feud with family and identity."

²² Dickson, "Ahmad Khan Rahami high school classmate recalls bomb suspect as 'funny'."

²³ William Arkin, Alvin Johnson, Corey Siemaszko, Tracy Connor, Chelsea Bailey, and Becky Bratu, "Ahmad Rahami: What We Know About N.Y., N.J. Bombings Suspect," nbcnews.com, September 19, 2016. Tom Haydon, "Details emerge of Ahmad Khan Rahami's alleged history of violence toward family," nj.com, September 28, 2016. N.R. Kleinfield, "Ahmad Rahami: Fixture in Family's Business and, Lately, a 'Completely Different Person'," nytimes.com, September 19, 2016.

²⁴ Tracy Connor, "Ex of Bomb Suspect Ahmad Rahami Awarded Custody of Their Child," nbcnews.com, September 21, 2016.

there was no basis for a more in-depth inquiry.²⁵ Mohammad claims he informed the FBI that his son was watching videos of the Taliban and al-Qaeda and asked him to stop. However, the FBI claimed Mohammad never mentioned the video-watching.²⁶

Rahimi's sympathies toward radical Islamic ideology burgeoned in the last months before the attack. Post-attack investigations, including a review of a blood-stained journal found on his person at the time of his arrest, revealed that he took inspiration from "Brother Osama bin Laden" and other international terrorists.²⁷ Domestic terrorists helped serve as a breeding ground for Rahimi as well: he mentioned Nidal Hasan who shot and killed 13 people at Fort Hood, Texas as another inspiration for his planning of the Chelsea attack.²⁸ Also included were the Boston Marathon bombers, Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev.²⁹ Most notably, aside from bin Laden, Rahimi's journal praises Anwar al-Awlaki whose lectures and jihadist declarations are widely available on the web.³⁰ Although killed in a drone strike ordered by President Obama in 2011, Awlaki remains a powerful influence on would-be jihadists, especially in the English-speaking West. Also mentioned is *Inspire* magazine, which has published detailed instructions for making pipe bombs as well as more sophisticated explosive devices using pressure cookers and Christmas lights, the components used in the New York-area bombs. He also wrote that he wanted to "kill the kuffars (non-believers)."³¹

Rahimi's journal also contains screeds against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.³² This suggests that he felt very strongly about the wars and that the wars were highly influential in his decision to plan and carry out this attack.

4. Goals

Notes in his journal gave some idea of a goal in this attack. One stresses that this was an attack on the United States Government: "You (USA Government) continue your slaughter against the mujahedeen be it Afghanistan, Iraq, Sham [Syria], Palestine." He also writes about the past FBI investigation: "The F.B.I. & homeland security [unintelligible] looking for me [unintelligible] my heart I pray to the beautiful wise ALLAH. To not take JIHAD away from. I beg [unintelligible] for shahadat [martyrdom] & Inshallah this call will be answered." In reference to the instructions of terrorist leaders that, if travel is

²⁵ Marc Santora and Adam Goldman, "Ahmad Khan Rahami Was Inspired by Bin Laden, Charges Say," *nytimes.com*, September 20, 2016.

²⁶ "NYC bombing suspect's family may have also had pro-jihadist views," *cbs.com*, September 23, 2016.

²⁷ *United States of America v. Ahmad Khan Rahami*, Southern District of New York, September 20, 2016.

²⁸ Bronstein and Griffin, "Ahmad Rahami's lifelong feud with family and identity."

²⁹ Ellen Nakashima, Matt Zapposky and Mark Beran, "The FBI looked into suspected bomber Ahmad Rahami in 2014 and found no 'ties to terrorism,'" *washingtonpost.com*, September 20, 2016.

³⁰ Pictures of the journal can be found at <https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/ahmad-khan-rahami-journal>

³¹ *United States of America v. Ahmad Khan Rahami*, Southern District of New York.

³² Santora et al., "Ahmad Khan Rahami Is Arrested in Manhattan and New Jersey Bombings."

infeasible, to attack nonbelievers where they live, he wrote: “But [unintelligible] this incident show the risk are [unintelligible] of getting caught under [unintelligible] I looked for guidance. Guidance came. Sheikh Anwar said it clearly attack the Kuffar [non-believers] in their backyard.”³³

The journal ends with a prayer and with threats: “Inshallah (A close English equivalent would be ‘hopefully, if god wills’) the sounds of the bombs will be heard in the streets. Gun shots to your police. Death to your oppression.”³⁴

Thus, his goal was to punish the US government for what he considered to be its sins against the people in the Middle East. And, if he was not able to travel, he was instructed by Anwar al-Awlaki to kill non-believers wherever they may live. The US government punished innocent Middle Eastern civilians so Rahimi was going to punish US civilians for the actions of their federal government. Needless to say, compared to the violence he actually was able to commit, his dreams were quite overly ambitious.

5. Plans for violence

Rahimi had been meticulously planning his attack for at least four months prior to the attack. He often acquired the materials he used to construct his weapons via eBay, where he was registered as “Ahmad Rahimi.” One official noted that, although items like “Ammo Slingshot Steeles” and electric igniters used for fireworks displays might seem harmless, they were combined to create tools of potential carnage. Two days before the bombing in Chelsea, Rahimi bizarrely recorded video of himself igniting an incendiary device in his backyard. The lighting of a fuse is followed by billowing smoke and laughter before Rahimi is seen entering the frame and picking up the device.³⁵ What purpose the video served was never made clear.

One law enforcement official said that the bomb technicians involved in the investigation believed that Rahimi constructed all the devices and that his handiwork raised the possibility that he had received training from someone with experience building improvised explosive devices. “If you’re working off the premise that the guy made all these devices,” the official said, “then the guy is a pretty good bombmaker. And you don’t get that good on the internet.”³⁶ Officials said HMTD, an explosive compound, served as the detonator and a compound similar to a commercial explosive known as Tannerite served as the main charge in some devices.³⁷ No accomplices were ever charged or even accused, so exactly how Rahimi gained his bombmaking expertise, which some officials consider impossible off the internet, remains unexplained.

On September 19, 2016, Rahimi exploded two bombs: a pipe bomb in Seaside Park in northern New Jersey which caused no casualties, and a homemade pressure cooker bomb in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan

³³ United States of America v. Ahmad Khan Rahami, Southern District of New York.

³⁴ Michael Wilson, “A Year Later, Trial to Begin in Chelsea Bombing Case,” nytimes.com, October 1, 2017.

³⁵ Santora and Goldman, “Ahmad Khan Rahami Was Inspired by Bin Laden, Charges Say.”

³⁶ Santora et al., “Ahmad Khan Rahami Is Arrested in Manhattan and New Jersey Bombings.”

³⁷ Santora et al., “Ahmad Khan Rahami Is Arrested in Manhattan and New Jersey Bombings.”

which injured over two dozen, but killed none. The pressure cooker bomb was filled with small bearings and metal BBs and was triggered by flip phones and Christmas lights. The next day a second pressure cooker bomb was discovered by a couple of onlookers four blocks away from the first in Manhattan, and a backpack containing explosive devices, including pipe bombs was discovered when police reviewed surveillance video not far from where the Rahimi family ran a restaurant in Elizabeth, New Jersey. According to Elizabeth mayor J. Christian Bollwage, while trying to secure these devices, law enforcement officials using robots accidentally detonated one of them.³⁸

Rahimi was successful in escaping police after the attack. However, city streets were soon locked down and surveillance video of the area was carefully scrutinized. Attached to the second pressure cooker was a cell phone which contained information about Rahimi's communications as well as his whereabouts prior to the bombings. In addition, surveillance video collected by investigators showed Rahimi on West 27th Street without his backpack, but pulling a patterned bag and leaving it beside a mailbox. Soon police also discovered a fingerprint on one of the Manhattan bombs that matched one in an arrest record from Rahimi's stabbing of his siblings a couple of years earlier.³⁹

The police searched the restaurant and all other addresses where Rahimi was reported to have spent time. At 3:05am, Anthony Rodriguez, who lives across the street from the restaurant, heard an officer yell, "Come down! Come down!" After the yell, the police stormed up the stairs that led to the two apartments above the restaurant. Officers brought down some of the suspect's relatives and questioned them.

The NYPD then took a step typically reserved for major weather events: they activated the emergency notification system, altering the whole city about Rahimi and also tweeted pictures of him. The emergency notification system sent a text message providing details about Rahimi as well as the bombing to every New Yorker and surrounding New Jerseyan. Soon, millions of people were on the lookout for him.⁴⁰

It came to a conclusion when Harinder Bains, owner of Merdie's Tavern in Linden, New Jersey, said he spotted Rahimi sleeping in the doorway of his bar the morning of September 19, two days after the attack. Bains said he recognized Rahimi after seeing pictures of the suspect on CNN.⁴¹ Police arrived fifteen minutes later. Officer Angel Padilla ordered Rahimi to show his hands, but Rahimi pulled a 9mm Glock, and a shootout and a chase ensued, wounding Rahimi and two police officers. Rahimi was soon subdued and arrested.⁴²

He was charged in state and federal courts.

He was charged in New Jersey Superior Court with five counts of attempted murder of a law enforcement officer. He was also charged with

³⁸ Santora et al., "Ahmad Khan Rahami Is Arrested in Manhattan and New Jersey Bombings."

³⁹ Santora et al., "Ahmad Khan Rahami Is Arrested in Manhattan and New Jersey Bombings."

⁴⁰ AJ Willingham, "The Amazingly Quick Capture of Ahmad Rahami," cnn.com September 20, 2016.

⁴¹ Shoichet, "Ahmad Khan Rahami: What We Know About the Bombing Suspect."

⁴² Shoichet, "Ahmad Khan Rahami: What We Know About the Bombing Suspect."

second-degree unlawful possession of a weapon and second-degree possession of a weapon for an unlawful purpose, both in relation to the handgun found in his possession. His bail was set at \$5.2 million.⁴³

He was charged in a federal court in Manhattan and Newark, New Jersey with four federal crimes: use of weapons of mass destruction, the bombing a place of public use, the destruction of property by means of fire or explosives, and the use of a destructive device during and in furtherance of a crime of violence.⁴⁴ He pleaded not guilty to all charges.⁴⁵

The presiding judge, US District Judge Richard Berman in Manhattan initially had set March 27, 2017 for Rahimi's trial in Manhattan. However, Rahimi's defense attorney argued for more time to prepare.⁴⁶ Rahimi was allowed to skip trial on Fridays in observance of Muslim prayer.⁴⁷

On the first day of the trial in October 2017, Rahimi was thrown out of court. When he stood and asked to speak during the prosecutor's opening statements, Judge Berman told him to sit down or he'd be removed. He tried again, and the marshal in the room proceeded to toss him out.⁴⁸ During the trial, Assistant public defender Sabrina Shroff did not deny evidence linking Rahimi to the 23rd Street bomb, but asked jurors to question whether Rahimi really intended for the 27th Street bomb to go off. She asked the jury to be light on Rahimi, including dismissing three charges that would result in a mandatory life prison sentence.⁴⁹

The trial lasted for two weeks. The jury only deliberated for about four hours and, dismissing the plea from Rahimi's defense team, he was subsequently found guilty on all counts.⁵⁰ He faces a mandatory life sentence in prison but will not be officially sentenced until January 18, 2018.⁵¹ His defense team has indicated he will appeal the ruling.⁵²

Acting Manhattan U.S. Attorney Joon H. Kim called the verdict "a victory for New York City, a victory for America in its fight against terror, and a victory for all who believe in the cause of justice." Acting Assistant Attorney General

⁴³ Adam Withnall, Samuel Osborne, Rachael Revesz, and Justin Carissimo, "Ahmad Khan Rahimi: Suspect Held on Five Attempted Murder Charges of Cops and \$5.2 million bail," independent.co.uk, September 18, 2016.

⁴⁴ United States of America v. Ahmad Khan Rahami, Southern District of New York.

⁴⁵ Joseph Ax, "Accused New York City bomber pleads not guilty," reuters.com, November 17, 2016.

⁴⁶ MaryAnn Spoto, "Accused bomber Ahmad Rahimi has federal trial postponed," nj.com, February 11, 2017.

⁴⁷ Wilson, "A Year Later, Trial to Begin in Chelsea Bombing Case".

⁴⁸ "Accused bomber Ahmad Khan Rahimi thrown out of court during trial," nj.com, October 2, 2017.

⁴⁹ "Chelsea Bomber Trial Verdict, Ahmad Khan Rahimi convicted in New York Blast That Injured 30," cbsnews.com, October 16, 2017.

⁵⁰ Ellie Kaufman, Lauren del Valle and Lawrence Crook III, "Ahmad Rahimi found guilty in Chelsea bombing trial," cnn.com, October 16, 2017.

⁵¹ U.S. Attorney Office for Southern District of New York, "Chelsea Bomber Ahmad Khan Rahimi Convicted In Manhattan Federal Court For Executing September 2016 Bombing In New York City," justice.gov, October 16, 2017.

⁵² "Chelsea Bomber Trial Verdict, Ahmad Khan Rahimi convicted in New York Blast That Injured 30."

Dana J. Boente said, “Ahmad Khan Rahimi constructed bombs with high explosives and shrapnel to inflict maximum damage to innocent victims in multiple locations...I would like to commend all of the agents, detectives, analysts and prosecutors who made this result possible.” And NYPD Commissioner James P. O’Neill added, “Ahmed Rahimi deliberately placed two bombs on the streets of Chelsea in the dark of night with the intention of maiming and killing innocent New Yorkers enjoying a September Saturday night... Today’s verdict is the most forceful deterrent for anyone considering waging terror in our City. We will investigate; we will find those responsible; and justice will prevail.”⁵³

Ten days after the attack, investigators visited Rahimi at the Intensive Care unit (ICU) at the University Hospital in Newark, New Jersey for interrogation. However, Rahimi was sedated and was being treated with a breathing tube. The agents required him to respond using a head nod. After initially being uncooperative (or unresponsive depending on if you’re his defense team or the prosecution), he began to answer. “Did you create any other bombs” No. “Did anyone help you make the devices” No. “Were any of your family members involved in creating or setting off the bombs?” No.⁵⁴

This was the first of four interrogation sessions over the course of three days, with the first interview ending only after Rahimi faded into unconsciousness. His defense team soon filed a motion with Judge Berman asking for those interrogations to be thrown out, on the grounds of they were made under “severe medical stress”: “He was encumbered by needles and restraints, often unconscious and effectively held incommunicado, deprived of the assistance of an attorney, family or friends.” They also claimed a hair sample taken from Rahimi should be tossed out because the FBI had misled a sedated Rahimi into believing they were on his defense team. Rahimi also stated, calling into question the validity of his testimony, “Days blend in my memory, and I cannot distinguish one day of questioning from the next.”⁵⁵

Moreover, he was not read his Miranda rights. Under law, there is a “public exception” to the Miranda Rule. If there is a suspect who is an immediate threat to the public’s well-being, police are able to forgo informing him of his constitutional rights to remain silent, appoint an attorney, and so on.⁵⁶

6. Informants

There were no informants in the traditional sense of police officers and agents paying an individual to extract information from a suspect. However, tips, particularly that from Harinder Bains, owner of the tavern in Linden, New Jersey, were important in the case.

⁵³ U.S. Attorney Office for Southern District of New York, “Chelsea Bomber.”

⁵⁴ Benjamin Weiser, “Chelsea Bombing Suspect Wants Hospital Interviews Suppressed,” *nytimes.com*, May 7, 2016.

⁵⁵ Weiser, “Chelsea Bombing Suspect Wants Hospital Interviews Suppressed.”

⁵⁶ Wilson, “A Year Later, Trial to Begin in Chelsea Bombing Case.” For more information on the public-safety exception, see Carl A. Benoit, “The Public Safety Exception to Miranda,” *leb.fbi.gov*, February 2011.

7. Connections

After thorough investigations, no connections to al-Qaeda, ISIS, or any other Islamic terrorist group were revealed. It was apparent certain individuals connected to terrorism had inspired him, both domestic and international. But there were no direct connections. He was entirely self-motivated.

8. Relation to the Muslim Community

Hamdullah Mohib, Afghanistan's ambassador to the U.S., said his government strongly condemned the bombings: "We stand ready and willing to help with this matter if U.S. authorities request our cooperation. Afghanistan and its people desire peace above all else, and stand in solidarity with Americans against all forms of hatred and violence."⁵⁷ The Council on American-Islamic Relations, often under criticism for allegedly pursuing an Islamist agenda,⁵⁸ was lightning-quick to welcome the arrest of Rahimi saying, "American Muslims, like all Americans, reject extremism and violence, and seek a safe and secure nation. Our nation is most secure when we remain united and reject the fear-mongering and guilt by association often utilized following such attacks."⁵⁹ There was no evidence he had any direct or indirect accomplices.

It is unknown exactly how often he attended mosque. That his father was very disappointed for how "American" he had become in high school, suggests he did not go very often and if he did, he did not take it very seriously. After his multiple trips to Afghanistan and Pakistan, it became clear he had converted, even if not officially, into being quite a devout Muslim, which we can infer from this that he most likely began to attend quite frequently, though this cannot be confirmed.

9. Depiction by authorities

FBI Agent Bill Sweeney sought to calm any potential worry about whether a large-scale cell or networking was operating: "I have no indication that there's a cell operating in the area or in the city," Sweeney said. The NYPD police commissioner added: "Right now we're not actively seeking anyone."⁶⁰ President Obama praised law enforcement and the people of New York, and warned against the spread of unconfirmed reports and rumors. He added that he

⁵⁷ Renae Merle, Matt Zapposky, Amy B. Wang, Mark Berman and Ellen Nakashima, "Suspect in N.Y., N.J. bombings arrested after shootout; FBI says 'no indication' of terror cell," washingtonpost.com, September 19, 2016.

⁵⁸ A small band of critics have made a determined but unsuccessful effort to link CAIR to Hamas and Hezbollah, which have been designated as terrorist organizations by the State Department, and they have gone so far as calling the group an American front for the two. Neil MacFarquhar, "Scrutiny Increases for a Group Advocating for Muslims in U.S.," nytimes.com, March 14, 2007.

⁵⁹ Merle et al., "Suspect in N.Y., N.J. bombings arrested after shootout; FBI says 'no indication' of terror cell."

⁶⁰ Haroon Siddique and Martin Pengelly for the original posting on September 19, 2016 and Alan Yuhas for the updated version on July 14, 2017, "New York bombings: Ahmad Khan Rahami charged with attempted murder – as it happened," guardian.com, September 19, 2016, updated July 14, 2017.

saw no connection between Rahimi and a mass stabbing attack in Minnesota (case 86) that had happened on the same day.⁶¹

Initially, Mayor Bill de Blasio was hesitant to call it an act of terrorism, and officials cautioned against linking the attack to the explosion in New Jersey.⁶² However, once Rahimi was captured, he changed his tune and said: “authorities have every reason to believe that this was an act of terror.”⁶³ A major problem with these kinds of attacks is that people (officials, media, everyday citizens) are quick to jump to conclusions about the cause. Not coming out and establishing a motive like Mayor de Blasio was the responsible action. Waiting for the capture is a recommended strategy when dealing with this kind of situation. In order to attempt to improve morale, de Blasio added, “Whatever the cause, New Yorkers will not be intimidated.”⁶⁴

Hillary Clinton urged Americans to be “vigilant but not afraid” and pointed out that “It is crucial that we continue to build up trust between law enforcement and Muslim American communities.”⁶⁵ Politics aside, this was a very important statement to make. Scare mongering is an ineffective, even counterproductive, method for combating terrorism, so she did a quality job.

Unfortunately, in typical politician form, presidential candidates Clinton and Donald Trump also tried to pander for political gain. Clinton accused Trump of giving “aid and comfort” to terrorists by linking their crimes to Islam and embracing extreme anti-immigrant proposals. Trump insisted Clinton and Obama had emboldened terrorists all over the world by “not taking ISIS seriously enough”—even though investigators had found no link between any terror group and Rahimi.⁶⁶ Trump repeated his call for an ideological test for immigrants and said that his plan to defeat the terrorists was to “knock the hell out of ‘em.”⁶⁷

New York Governor Cuomo released a statement which said, “We are closely monitoring the situation and urge New Yorkers to, as always, remain calm and vigilant.”⁶⁸ He also suggested, unnecessarily and rather irresponsibly, that “foreign connections” might be discovered “in the course of the investigation.”⁶⁹

10. Coverage by the media

The media referred to Rahimi as “Chelsea bomber” saying he detonated bombs. They generally eschewed the use of terrorist. The main source using terrorist was the New York Daily News after the trial.⁷⁰ When the media maybe

⁶¹ Siddique et al., “New York bombings: Ahmad Khan Rahami charged with attempted murder.”

⁶² Santora et al., “Ahmad Khan Rahami Is Arrested in Manhattan and New Jersey Bombings.”

⁶³ Eyder Peralta, Bill Chappell, “Police Arrest Suspect Ahmad Khan Rahami Over Bombs In New York Area” npr.org, September 19, 2016.

⁶⁴ Christopher Mele, Al Baker, and Michael Barbaro, “Powerful Blast Injures at Least 29 in Manhattan; Second Device Found,” nytimes.com, September 17, 2016.

⁶⁵ “New York bombing suspect named as Ahmad Khan Rahami,” bbc.com, September 19, 2016.

⁶⁶ In the article, his name is spelled “Rahani.”

⁶⁷ New York bombings: Ahmad Khan Rahami charged with attempted murder – as it happened.”

⁶⁸ Mele et al., “Powerful Blast Injures at Least 29 in Manhattan; Second Device Found.”

⁶⁹ Siddique et al., “New York bombings: Ahmad Khan Rahami charged with attempted murder.”

⁷⁰ See Victoria Bekiempis and Stephen Rex Brown, “Chelsea bomber Ahmad Rahimi found guilty of all charges,” nydailynews.com, October 16, 2017.

was trying to hint at it without deliberately calling Rahimi a terrorist, they would say he was “inciting terror” or “creating terror.”

11. Policing costs

Police costs were low. The investigation was over in two days. Court and detention costs were higher as there was a gap of over a year before the first day of trial.

12. Relevance of the internet

The internet has become an increasingly useful vehicle for terrorists to get their message out. In this case, Rahimi was impelled in considerable part by materials put out by “Brother bin Laden” and Anwar al-Awlaki. It seems likely that Rahimi’s multiple trips to Pakistan and Afghanistan aided in his radicalization. However, his plans to commit violence may never have come to fruition without the help of lectures from bin Laden and al-Awlaki.

13. Are we safer?

Safety is suggested in this case by the fact that people were able to quickly identify Rahimi as the suspect and within a matter of hours after the public was made aware of the identity of the suspect, he was arrested after a brief shootout with police. We see the power of technology working here for the betterment of the public

However, there are aspects of this case that are troubling. Mohammad, Rahimi’s father, notified police he believed his son was a terrorist. He also says he informed the authorities that he had witnessed Rahimi watching videos and had asked him to cease watching. With this information, authorities should have gone to a judge to ask for a warrant to keep an eye on Rahimi. However, the FBI insists they were never informed about the video watching. In their analysis, they did not find enough evidence for continuing the investigation and perhaps added information about video-watching would have changed that. As is now apparent, of course, that there was absolutely a need to keep a closer eye on him.

Determining whose story is true is entirely impossible. On the one hand, Mohammad had no incentive to withhold this level of information from authorities. He presumably wanted to ensure his son was properly dealt with as he was positive his son was engaged in viewing terrorist propaganda. In a normal circumstance, one would expect that the father would have mentioned it. However, as we’ve seen thus far, this case is anything but “normal,” and the father doesn’t exactly have a record of unblemished rectitude in his business dealings. The FBI has every incentive to act when suspicions are great enough, and perhaps the added information would have provided that in this case. However, they have followed up literally millions of terrorism leads since 9/11 and have likely encountered irate fathers before whose testimony has proved to be questionable. Nonetheless, it is not comforting to know there was some miscommunication between the two parties in this case.

14. Conclusion

This violent act was clearly terrorism. Rahimi made multiple references to the United States government slaughtering the mujahideen. So, while the symbolic targets were the innocent bystanders in New Jersey and New York, the direct one was the United States government.⁷¹ In addition, he approvingly cited “Sheikh Anwar” with his insistence on killing the non-believers and his stipulation that, if one could not travel, one should simply target the ones nearest to you. Moreover, he mentioned jihad several times and prayed to Allah to not take him away before he committed his ambitious plans.

Second, there must be a better connection between federal intelligence agencies and tipsters. As noted, there was clearly major miscommunication between the FBI and Rahimi’s father, Mohammad. As a result, the FBI concluded there was no basis to continue the investigation when in reality it turned out that there were substantial grounds for continuing.

Third, politicians must not take advantage of crises like this and spin it for their own political advantage. Politicians like Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump sought to appeal to their bases and make themselves more electable, instead of focusing on discovering the true motivation behind these attacks and learning how best to combat them. Such infighting only makes it more difficult by creating distractions.

Fourth and finally, one must be careful to not establish a possible connection between lone wolves and foreign terrorist organizations before all the facts have come to light. Governor Cuomo came close to doing this, inflating the potential threat when he suggested after the attack that a connection might be established. This creates unnecessary fear. If a terrorist organization is thought to have a significant presence, directly or indirectly, in a specific area when they do not, they become stronger.

⁷¹ Credit to my sociology professor Dr. Edward Crenshaw of Ohio State for teaching me the difference between symbolic and direct targets. It’s a slight but noticeable difference which could change any analysis.