

**Case 17: University of North Carolina**

John Mueller

February 21, 2014

On March 3, 2006, a young Iranian-American man, a recent graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, returned to his alma mater in a rented Jeep Grand Cherokee equipped with four-wheel drive, drove to a central assembly area, and tried to run over as many of this former fellow students as he could. He injured nine on his rampage, none seriously, killed no one, and then drove off a short distance, parked, dialed 911 on his cell phone, and calmly told the operator, “Sir, I just hit several people with a vehicle....You can come and arrest me now.” Asked why he had done this, he replied, “Really, it’s to punish the government of the United States for their actions around the world.”

Assuming he would be killed or captured in the act (and armed with a knife so he could go down fighting), he left a letter in his apartment not only printed on paper but also thoughtfully saved on a computer memory card “so the police would have an electronic version.” It is included as an appendix to the case study. Mostly an autobiographical ramble, and it does not really say much more about his motives in carrying out his bizarre act than his response to the 911 operator. In it, he asserts that Allah made him do it, that he completed his degree at the university “so that the world will know that Allah’s servants are very intelligent,” and that the Quran “is completely validated by modern science and also mathematically encoded with the number 19 beyond human ability.”

Later, he issued several “meditations,” as he called them, from prison. These disclosed that he became outraged at American foreign policy in the aftermath of the Gulf War of 1991 (which occurred when he was seven), and, raised in a non-religious household, that he didn’t really discover Islam until 2003. At some point he contemplated going to Iraq or Afghanistan to fight against American forces there, but was discouraged by visa restrictions. He also thought about becoming a pilot in the U.S. Air Force so that he could drop a nuclear bomb on Washington, but his eyesight was too poor to qualify for the position. His first choice of weapon to kill people at the university was a pistol, but to obtain the permit to purchase one, he would have to find three friends who could attest to his good moral character and, something of a loner, he found this challenge to “out of my reach at present.”<sup>1</sup>

As Andrew Braun notes, his relation to Islam was rather idiosyncratic and somewhat muddled. He refused to face Mecca when saying his prayers and never learned any Arabic—perhaps a prejudice carried over from his Persian background.

A rather strange aspect of this case is that it is often considered not to be an act of terrorism. The university, as Braun suggests in an appendix to the case study, had an incentive to downplay the significance of the event, and the fact that no one was killed or even seriously injured helps some in this quest. But more than almost any case in this book, the perpetrator went out of his way to document

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are so Few Muslim Terrorists?* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 5, 17.

the political point of his attempt at mayhem, to point out that it was fully premeditated, and to assure everyone that he was out to kill: “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.”

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### 1. Overview

“The Pit” is the beloved name of a special spot on the campus of The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill which serves as the center for campus society.<sup>1</sup> On a typical day, the activity trickling throughout this area ranges from friends stopping to catch up over coffee to organizations campaigning to gain the attention of potential members to students trying to get some last minute studying in. In short, The Pit is a high traffic area for UNC students, which is probably one of the reasons recent alumni Mohammed Reza Taheri-Azar chose it as a place to attack on the not so typical afternoon of March 3, 2006.

On this day around 12:00pm Taheri-Azar, age 22, drove a rented silver 2006 Jeep Grand Cherokee through The Pit with the intent to kill American citizens in order to “avenge the deaths of Muslims” around the world, according to campus officials.<sup>2</sup> While not readily accessible to vehicular traffic beyond a narrow service road, the barricades that normally prevent cars from approaching the Pit were not in place on the day of the attack. Taheri-Azar’s top speed while attacking was estimated to be between 40 to 45 miles per hour.<sup>3</sup>

Although Taheri-Azar explicitly stated that his intent to kill, nobody was seriously injured in the attack. However, nine people were hit. and Taheri-Azar’s his actions, coupled with his intent to murder shook up the community and stirred up controversy about ‘terrorism’ and its relation to Islam.<sup>4</sup> Of the nine individuals struck by the SUV, 6 were transported to the hospital for treatment and released while the other 3 declined medical treatment.

After his attack on The Pit, Taheri-Azar drove to nearby Plant Road and called authorities in order to turn himself in for his crimes. It was reported that he calmly admitted to being the perpetrator behind the attack, telling the dispatcher his location so that the police could come and arrest him. He also disclosed to the dispatcher that there was a letter detailing the reasons for his actions left on his bed in his apartment in nearby Carrboro, North Carolina. Taheri-Azar was taken into custody when police arrived and he did not resist such action. Suspicious at the open invitation to inspect the suspect’s apartment, police sent a bomb squad from the State Bureau of Investigation to check the residence for any immediate threat of explosives.<sup>5</sup> None were found, but the letter that baited the police to the apartment was recovered.

When Taheri-Azar appeared in an Orange County courtroom on March 6, 2006, he was charged with nine counts of attempted first-degree murder, and nine counts of assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill. He was then taken to be

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<sup>1</sup> “The Pit: The University Of North Carolina At Chapel Hill,” HeelsHousing.com, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Fausset, “SUV Attack Prompts Debate Over ‘Terrorism’ and Islam,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Dana Franks and Kamal Wallace, “FBI Joins Investigation of UNC Hit-And-Run,” WRAL.com, March 4, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Fausset, “SUV Attack Prompts Debate Over ‘Terrorism’ and Islam.”

<sup>5</sup> Franks and Wallace, “FBI Joins Investigation of UNC Hit-And-Run.”

jailed in Central Prison located in Raleigh, NC on a bond totaling 5 and a half million dollars.<sup>6</sup> A few months later on May 3, 2006, a grand jury indicted him on nine counts of attempted first-degree murder, four counts of assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill, and five counts of assault with a deadly weapon to kill inflicting serious injury. In 2008, he pleaded guilty to nine counts of attempted first-degree murder and was sentenced to a prison term of at least 26 years and 2 months, but up to 33 years.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Nature of the adversary

Mohammed Reza Taheri-Azar was born in Tehran, Iran, in 1983 but moved to the United States with his family at the age of 2 and spent the rest of his life in America. Though foreign-born, he eventually became an American citizen. His parents, named Lily and Latif, were married in Tehran in 1972 but eventually divorced in 2003.<sup>8</sup> Taheri-Azar was the middle child with older and younger sisters. His family was not very religious and when they moved to North Carolina, the family attended services at a Baptist church. Thus Taheri-Azar did not grow up Muslim, but converted later in life when he became more interested in his ancestral roots. Now his family is very spread out. His father lives and works in California and his mother in Afghanistan, while his older sister, Laila Taheri-Azar, is studying in a Miami cosmetology school and his youngest sister is in college in Charlotte.<sup>9</sup>

Taheri-Azar attended elementary, middle, and high school in North Carolina. He attended South Mecklenburg High School in Charlotte, where he was described as a socially awkward honors student, “not to the point that he would shy away from people, but he would never make an effort to go out,” said high school and college classmate John Kirschbrown who also happened to work at a Best Buy with Taheri-Azar.<sup>10</sup> As a high school student, Taheri-Azar had a fascination with fast cars. A South Mecklenburg yearbook caption labeled him “South’s Speedster.” In his souped-up Eagle Talon, Taheri-Azar would race on Charlotte’s highways, often topping 100 mph, friends said. “I think he had the fastest car in school,” said Cordova, who remembered watching Taheri-Azar lose control in a street race, resulting in two 360-degree turns on a Charlotte highway.<sup>11</sup>

Between 2001 and 2003, Taheri-Azar was ticketed four times for “unnecessary honking, driving down the middle of two lanes of traffic, and failure to obey directions at a police checkpoint.”<sup>12</sup> He was last ticketed in June 2003 for traveling at 74 mph in a 45-mph zone along N.C. 54 in Carrboro. It is not too surprising then, that after the frustration of not being able to buy a gun, Taheri-

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<sup>6</sup> Eyewitness News WTVD.com, March 14, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> “State of North Carolina v. Taheri-Azar, Mohammed Reza,” [Investigativeproject.org/case/176](http://Investigativeproject.org/case/176).

<sup>8</sup> “Mohammed Taheri-azar, His Letter and Biography,” March 18, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Daniel Pipes, “More on the North Carolina Jihadi, Mohammed Taheri-Azar,” [Danielpipes.org](http://Danielpipes.org), March 14, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Stancill and Jessica Rocha, “Taheri-Azar Expects Life in Prison,” [Newsobserver.com](http://Newsobserver.com), March 16, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Stancill and Rocha, “Taheri-Azar Expects Life in Prison.”

<sup>12</sup> Stancill and Rocha, “Taheri-Azar Expects Life in Prison.”

Azar chose a car as his weapon. Cars had played a large in his life and in his identity, he was known for his affinity for speeding and all around recklessness.

When the time came to go to college, Taheri-Azar chose UNC Chapel Hill in 2001 where he studied Psychology and Philosophy, eventually graduating in December of 2005.<sup>13</sup> He remained socially marginalized in college as in his high school days. Although he started out his first year by spending time with high school friends, it quickly became apparent that maintaining long term friendships were difficult. His roommate was a high school friend but in living together, they did not get along well, and Taheri-Azar moved out in fall of 2001, eventually dropping out of UNC the next semester only to reenroll that summer. He was supposed to live with another high school acquaintance, Philip Brodsky in his sophomore year, but Taheri-Azar started to hang out with a different crowd and Brodsky rarely saw him from then on. At one point around the time of his sophomore year, Taheri-Azar completely unexpectedly sent an email to some old friends saying something along the lines of “we haven't talked in a while but we used to be friends. I just wanted to say if I ever did anything to offend you, I'm sorry,” according to Brodsky.<sup>14</sup> Such an attempt to reach out to past friends in such an unconventional way seems to indicate a sense of loneliness and isolation, if not possible suicide ideation and an attempt to right any past wrongs before some dramatic attempt on his own life.

Brian Copeland, a fellow student of Taheri-Azar's at UNC who had taken a history of philosophy class with him and worked with him in a sandwich shop was surprised by the act of violence Taheri-Azar committed on March 3, 2006. In class, Copeland recalls being impressed by Taheri-Azar's knowledge of classical Western thought but did not remember him speaking about Islam. “He was kind and gentle, rather than aggressive and violent,” Copeland said.<sup>15</sup> However, not all those who encountered Taheri-Azar agreed on such a positive reflection of his character. Chancellor James Moeser said that although Taheri-Azar was a good student and deserved being admitted into UNC, he was also “totally a loner, introverted and into himself.”<sup>16</sup>

In addition to his lack of strong social skills and tendencies towards introversion, Taheri-Azar was considered an outcast in the Muslim community at UNC's campus for several reasons that exemplified religious fanaticism and a lack of regard for basic tenets of Islam. Although he was not really accepted by others who practiced his own faith, he was well into his own version of Islam, a version which he created tailor-made to himself and his ideologies. His devotion to this version was expressed in a letter to a media outlet requesting an interview in which he said “I've read all 114 chapters about 20 times since June of 2003 when I started reading the Koran.”<sup>17</sup> To further describe the intensity of which Taheri-Azar has invested in his faith, it is quoted that he once said “If Allah wills,

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<sup>13</sup> “Mohammed Taheri-Azar's Letter to Police,” *Heraldsun.com*, March 24, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Stancill and Rocha, “Taheri-Azar Expects Life in Prison.”

<sup>15</sup> Fausset, “SUV Attack Prompts Debate Over ‘Terrorism’ and Islam.”

<sup>16</sup> Jane Stancill, “Moeser Will Not Label SUV Attack,” *Newsobserver.com*, March 10, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Pipes, “More on the North Carolina Jihadi, Mohammed Taheri-Azar.”

I will plead guilty to all 18 charges currently against me and I expect a life term in prison,” in a letter to a *News & Observer* reporter.<sup>18</sup>

While attending UNC, Taheri-Azar frequented the student union prayer room, but he refused to pray facing towards Mecca, which is traditionally considered to symbolize the unity of Muslims worldwide. His rejection of this unity emphasizes his unorthodox beliefs and tendency towards self-reliance and loneliness. He also refused to recite his prayers in Arabic, which is standard practice in Islam. Although 90% of the world’s Muslims do not speak Arabic as their native tongue, most try to at the very least learn the basics so that they can recite prayers in Arabic. This is incredibly important to the faith because the Qur’an was originally communicated in the Arabic language and although it has been translated to many languages, most Islamic scholars agree that to understand the text in its full glory and intention it must be read through the Arabic language. Reciting prayers in the language also allows Muslims again to form one community undivided by racial, cultural, or linguistic terms and Taheri-Azar’s anti-Arabic stance played a big role in distancing himself from the UNC Muslim community. “His prayer was obviously very, very different from the norm,” said Atif Mohiuddin, a UNC-CH sophomore from Valdese who ran into Taheri-Azar several times last year in the prayer room. Taheri-Azar would not respond to “Assalaam Alaikum,” a common Arabic greeting. “He never had any intention to learn Arabic,” Mohiuddin said. “I never heard of a Muslim who was so anti-Arabic.”<sup>19</sup>

Taheri-Azar used his take on Islam to skew the meaning of the Qur’an to fit his perspective. He claimed that the holy book gave him permission to drive a Jeep Grand Cherokee into The Pit in order to punish the United States government for their treatment towards Muslims all over the world. He claimed that these people supported the government by not actively trying to usurp them and was thus justified in trying to kill them.

In fact, Taheri-Azar’s knowledge about the Muslim faith and about interpreting the Quran in terms of Muslim relations in the world was severely underdeveloped. Charles Kurzman points out that he apparently did not know the difference between Sunni and Shia Islam or that al-Qaeda, where his role model Atta came from, does not recognize him as a follower of the faith because he is Shia. As Kurzman also notes, Taheri-Azar repeatedly misspelled al-Qaeda in the many letters he wrote while in prison as “Al-Quaeda.” These letters also detail his favorite songs and albums while, as Kurzman continues, “Islamist militants frown upon Western music as frivolous and sinful.” Thus, “he “knew next to nothing about the Islamist ideology that he was willing to kill and die for.”<sup>20</sup> Taheri-Azar scarcely seems to be the intelligent individual that he sought to be by going through and graduating from UNC. Instead, he appears to be a naïve young man

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<sup>18</sup> Stancill and Rocha, “Taheri-Azar Expects Life in Prison.”

<sup>19</sup> Stancill and Rocha, “Taheri-azar Expects Life in Prison.”

<sup>20</sup> Charles Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs: Why There Are so Few Muslim Terrorists?* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 19.

whose credibility and interpretations of the Quran are invalidated by the lack of knowledge about the Muslim faith in general.

However, Taheri-Azar is by no means insane or psychotic or suffering from any other mental health condition. Rather, he is completely in control of what he is saying and what he is trying to say to the point of being calculated and articulate. If you listen to the phone call Taheri-Azar made to authorities after his attempted murder streak, you can hear how incredibly calm his voice is as he is in control of the situation and speaks clearly and efficiently about what he has just done so that the police can come and arrest him.<sup>21</sup> He was even quoted to have said the following in a letter to a journalist from *The Herald Sun* “I turned myself in to assure the world that I wasn't some insane person who went on a killing rampage suddenly.”<sup>22</sup> This shows that there was meaning behind Taheri-Azar’s actions and there was intent. He thought that he had the right to murder innocent United States citizens because of the U.S. government’s role in the Middle East. He was not insane; his act of violence was methodical, criminal, intentional, and pre-meditated.

His thought processes however cannot exactly be counted as normal. This is evident in the extremity of his religious convictions. His role models were also atypical from his peers. Taheri-Azar idolized Mohamed Mohamed El-Amir Awad El-Sayed Atta, one of the hijackers of the infamous American Airlines Flight 11 that crashed into the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. In one letter, Taheri-Azar wrote that he was “aiming to follow in the footsteps of one of [his] role models, Mohammed Atta.”<sup>23</sup>

Although he sympathized with Al Qaeda and was inspired by Atta, Taheri-Azar acted completely independent of any terrorist organization. His actions were solely his own, and he had no accomplices throughout his planning process and on the actual day of the execution of his plan. In others words, he acted as a ‘lone wolf’, a phenomenon that many experts believe is an emerging wave of terrorism. To be more specific, a person qualifies as a lone wolf if they are someone “who commits, attempts, or prepares violent acts in support of a group, movement or ideology, but who does so alone, outside the context of any command structure and without material assistance from any group.”<sup>24</sup>

Terrorism expert Jeffrey D. Simon addresses this rising issue in his book *Lone Wolf Terrorism: Understanding the Growing Threat*.<sup>25</sup> Those like Taheri-Azar are considered to be more dangerous than conventional terrorists who work within umbrella structures of terrorist organizations because they just as dangerous as these groups but much harder to track and survey. Simon argues that lone wolves, as individual terrorists can be particularly innovative, creative, and dangerous. In an email correspondence about the book between Simon and Mark Thompson of *Time Magazine*, Simon makes the point that these types of attackers

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<sup>21</sup> The phone call is at [www.newsobserver.com/2006/03/06/90672/police-release-teheri-azar-911.html](http://www.newsobserver.com/2006/03/06/90672/police-release-teheri-azar-911.html)

<sup>22</sup> Pipes, “More on the North Carolina Jihadi, Mohammed Taheri-Azar.”

<sup>23</sup> Pipes, “More on the North Carolina Jihadi, Mohammed Taheri-Azar.”

<sup>24</sup> “DailyTube - Lone Wolf (terrorism) - Wiki Article.” *DailyTube*, August 25, 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey D. Simon, *Lone Wolf Terrorism: Understanding the Growing Threat*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2013.

are responsible for the first major midair plane bombing and for, vehicle bombings, hijackings, product contamination, and anthrax attacks within the United States.<sup>26</sup> They are forced to think outside the box because that is where they live their lives: on the outskirts of society. They are loners who operate independently, which means there is no group pressure to go in a certain direction that would stifle any creativity.

This is certainly the case for Taheri-Azar. When he was denied access to a gun, he thought outside of the box on what kind of weapon would be best to kill as many people as possible in a high pedestrian area like The Pit, and came up with a car. Although cars are commonly used in combination with explosives by terrorists, the use of the car simply to drive into and run over victims is quite distinct and unique to Taheri-Azar's case. This is thus quite frightening because all it takes to commit an act of violence is access to a car.

In his research, Simon says that lone wolves absolutely love to talk about their extremist beliefs and plans. He says he did not expect this because one of the advantages that lone wolves have over terrorist groups and cells is that there are no communications among members for the authorities to intercept and thus lead to the identification, arrest, or capture of these terrorists.<sup>27</sup> However, they indeed do love to talk, and they do so using the internet, whether it be chat forums, blog postings, or other media. This is why Simon refers to the Internet as a double-edged sword for lone wolves. On one hand, information about tactics, targets, weapons, ideology, causes, detailed instructions on bomb-making and so forth is readily available to them. However, on the other hand, authorities can track and identify those who visit these types of sites by monitoring their Internet activity.

An unusual thing about Taheri-Azar, then, is that he chose not to talk about his plans to anyone at all. He never consulted anyone on how he should carry out his plans via chat rooms and there has been no indication that he reached out or had any contact with anyone in planning his attack. Although Simon makes the case of trying to dispel the myth that little can be done about lone wolves by advocating the use of innovative strategies like Internet monitoring, Taheri-Azar defies this debunking by showing how lone wolves can potentially rise up completely on their own initiative without any help and without visiting websites that pin them as a red flag by the United States government. Taheri-Azar is an example of how dangerous a lone wolf can be: one who shows no concrete indication of attacking and one day fulfills their plans without warning.

### 3. Motivation

One factor that seems to be key in the understanding of the behaviors and motivations of many terrorists and the atrocities they commit is the role of religion. Religious systems tend to dominate thinking patterns and weigh heavily in decision making processes and determining a terrorist's course of action. As Martha Crenshaw has observed, "The actions of terrorist organizations are based

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<sup>26</sup> Mark Thompson, "The Danger of the Lone-Wolf Terrorist," *US The Danger of the Lone Wolf Terrorist Comments*, February 27, 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Thompson, "The Danger of the Lone-Wolf Terrorist."

on a subjective interpretation of the world rather than objective reality.”<sup>28</sup> For those whose decisions are impacted by faith, religion tends to highly influence their cognition. In psychology, cognition is the general process by which people come to know about and make sense of the world and includes specific processes such as thinking, knowing, remembering, judging, and problem-solving. For religious people who practice faith through terrorism, religion invades every aspect of the cognitive process. It extends into all areas of life and does not allow for the separation of the private and political realms. For these religious terrorists, their actions are not seen as self-interests for themselves or their group affiliation (if one exists) but as moral imperatives for the sake of their religion and their God. Thus religion is one way that terrorists and their organizations are motivated to the use of violence to accomplish their goals.

This is certainly the case for Mohammed Taheri-Azar, whose motivations spurred from his own interpretation of Islam and the Quran. Because he thought that he was going to die on the day of the attack due to the potential of retaliation by police forces, he left a letter in his apartment explaining his exact reasoning and intentions for his attempted murder scheme. He begins the letter with the following: “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.” Already in the first paragraph, Taheri-Azar has admitted his attempt to murder these people not just injure, a statement that was eventually used in court to indict and convict him of nine incidences of attempted murder. His direct mention of Allah begins to tie in religion to his motivations and the role religion plays becomes more present as the letter develops. Knowing that retaliation either in the form of death or imprisonment was going to result from his attack, Taheri-Azar admits in the letter that he no longer wanted to pursue being a student due to his lack of any desire to amass the impermanent and temporary fame and wealth of the material world. However, he made the decision to finish his degree to prove to the world that Allah’s servants are very intelligent. In addition to ideology and his twisted and violent view of Islam, Taheri-Azar was partially motivated by the actions of the United States government towards Muslims worldwide. His letter states “Due to the killing of believing men and women under the direction of the United States government, I have decided to take advantage of my presence on United States soil on Friday, March 3, 2006 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.”<sup>29</sup>

This shows his actions were, in his eyes, a retaliation meant to send a message to the United States government about their choice of foreign policy. Taheri-Azar used religion to justify his violent actions. In a later letter sent from prison, he bluntly defends his actions in saying, “people who fight in the cause of

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<sup>28</sup> Rex Hudson, “The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism,” *Terrorist Rationalization of Violence*, September, 1999.

<sup>29</sup> “Mohammed Taheri-Azar's Letter to Police.” The full letter is included in an appendix to this case study.

Allah are not guilty if and when they have no intention of killing more persons among their enemies than their enemies have killed among the believers."<sup>30</sup> Thus he uses his own interpretation of Islamic ideology in order to convince himself that he is right and just in murdering noncombatant and innocent U.S. citizens.

Several theories seek to develop reasons for the existence of violence and for people's predispositions toward it. These theories are not directly related to terrorism but provide general commentary on the concept of violence which can be applied to terrorist actions and behaviors. One such theory is the frustration-aggression hypothesis which states that every incident of frustration (from not being able to engage in some behavior) leads to aggression that builds up over time until an act releases the stress by some form of catharsis. For some, this catharsis is brought about by terrorism. One proponent of this hypothesis, Joseph Margolin, argues that "much terrorist behavior is a response to the frustration of various political, economic, and personal needs or objectives."<sup>31</sup> These are people who are tired of the current government or political climate and see no other means of making a change than by performing terrorist attacks and this climate is what contributes to their motivation. Taheri-Azar was unhappy with the current state of affairs and with how the United States government treated Muslims worldwide. From his perspective, the only way to change anything was to revert to violence.

#### **4. Goals**

Taheri-Azar's goals were specifically set out in the letter he left in his apartment. Although no casualties resulted after his attack, the letter clearly states that he had the intention of killing U.S. citizens by running them over in his SUV and potentially stabbing them to death, if Allah would provide that opportunity. Thus one very clear cut goal was murder. There was a more overarching goal behind this very specific and concrete objective, and that was to punish the United States government for their treatment of Muslims throughout the world. In his planning effort, Taheri-Azar had the goal of choosing a site that would allow him to target and kill several people before being killed himself or sent off to prison. He ended up choosing The Pit because of its high traffic qualities and chose an SUV because he figured he would be able to more damage with it.

#### **5. Plans for violence**

Some sources say that Taheri-Azar intended to perform some type of attack on U.S. soil two years in advance to the actual date of his crime. However, he only started to plan out the details of his attack a few months prior.<sup>32</sup> As note, part of his plan was to surrender himself to authorities if they did not respond by shooting him. He had always planned on turning himself in, so technically the police never really disrupted his plan, but rather fit into it as can be seen in the way he only drove a short distance away from the attack and then called the police to come and arrest him.

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<sup>30</sup> Schuster, "What Is Terrorism?"

<sup>31</sup> Hudson, "The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism."

<sup>32</sup> Pipes, "More on the North Carolina Jihadi, Mohammed Taheri-Azar."

Although none of the nine people Taheri-Azar hit were killed, some were obviously still injured to varying degrees. Most of them had some scraping and bruising, two arms, a finger, and an ankle were broken, and one victim was given a black eye received some stitches. Nicholas Altman, who was having coffee nearby, said that one man was hit and thrown onto the hood of the SUV and then taken away on a stretcher.<sup>33</sup> Six of the victims were taken to UNC hospitals for treatment of minor injuries and all were later released, whereas the other three declined treatment on site at The Pit. Eight of the victims were UNC students and one was a visiting professor.

The targets of Taheri-Azar's attack were any U.S. citizens or sympathizers. Since he believed he was entitled him to run over anybody not trying to overtly overthrow the federal government, his victims could be selected at random: no one was singled out. No training was necessary for Taheri-Azar because he used a car as his weapon.

During his first court appearance, where he was appointed a public defender, Taheri-Azar did not deny the accusations against him. When he left court that day, he told reporters "The truth is my lawyer."<sup>34</sup> When asked whether or not he was trying to kill people, he replied that he had that intention. On May 3, 2006, a grand jury indicted him on nine counts of attempted first degree murder, four counts of assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill, and five counts of assault with a deadly weapon with intent to kill inflicting serious injury.

Taheri-Azar had been planning to plead guilty to all of these counts. but on his court date on January 24, 2007, he did the exact opposite of what he had been saying he would and what everyone was expecting he would do: he pled not guilty to all counts.

On March 5, 2007, he exhibited extremely inappropriate behavior in a hearing and was committed to Dorothea Dix Hospital for psychological examination. The hearing was supposed to be about several letters Taheri-Azar had sent to Judge Carl Fox over the past two weeks, but his snide comments quickly got him kicked out of the courtroom. Before even entering the court, Taheri-Azar was seen making obscene gesticulations and cursing foully. When he got inside the courtroom, he disrupted the hearing by saying such things as "I hate all Americans and all Jews,"<sup>35</sup> and even called his own lawyer a moron. His attorney, James Williams later told media sources "I think the behavior you witnessed was the behavior of a severely disturbed mentally ill person."<sup>36</sup>

Taheri-Azar apologized for his behavior later in a letter dated March 20, 2007, saying that he would "never again in [his] life display such poor, ignorant behavior." He went so far as to ask to be released from prison so that he could pursue his goal of living and working in California where he would like to get a job in his father's contracting company so that he could "re-establish [himself] as

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<sup>33</sup> Franks and Wallace, "FBI Joins Investigation of UNC Hit-And-Run."

<sup>34</sup> "Warrant: Suspect In Pit Attack Was Disappointed With Outcome," WRAL.com, March 7, 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Kamal Wallace, "UNC 'Pit' Attack Suspect Lashes out in Court," WRAL.com, March 5, 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Wallace, "UNC 'Pit' Attack Suspect Lashes out in Court."

a good, caring and productive member of society.”<sup>37</sup> The request was, of course, not granted.

In June of 2007, he was deemed competent to stand trial after his mental health examination at Dorothea Dix Hospital. However, he attempted to offer the court a defense of insanity, mental infirmity, and or diminished capacity according to a court noticed filed by Williams.<sup>38</sup> On August 12, 2008, Taheri-Azar pleaded guilty to nine counts of attempted first degree murder, and on August 26, he was sentenced to at least 26 years and 2 months in prison but up to 33 years by the Orange County Superior Court.

## **6. Role of Informants**

Although informants often play a critical role in the unveiling of a terrorist plot, none were involved in this case.

## **7. Connections**

Although Taheri-Azar never had any personal contact with al-Qaeda or any other terrorist organization, he did consider one of 9/11 hijackers (Mohamed Atta) a role model not only because of his jihadist acts but also because he obtained a doctorate degree, something that inspired Taheri-Azar to stay in school and graduate from UNC to prove to the world that Muslims are intelligent people.

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

Local Muslim leaders condemned the attack and the attempt by Taheri-Azar to connect the Quran to his murderous intentions. His actions were vehemently opposed by the Muslim community including UNC Chapel Hill’s Muslim Student Association which released a statement stating, “Regardless of what his intentions prove to be, we wholeheartedly deplore this action. Our relationship with him was limited to the few appearances he made in a prayer room.”<sup>39</sup>

Several leaders in the Muslim community spoke out against Taheri-Azar’s interpretation of the Quran saying it was wrong and that it misrepresents the true beliefs of Muslims worldwide. Representatives from N.C. State, the Islamic Association of Raleigh, and UNC Chapel Hill said that although they were angry at Taheri-Azar and his actions, they also prayed to God to forgive his misinterpretation. One representative, Dr. Ihab Saad was quoted to have said the following: “We should feel angry because this has tarnished the image of Islam. But we should be angry as a father or mother does when their son or daughter does something wrong.”<sup>40</sup>

When asked about how Taheri-Azar should be punished for his actions, members of the Muslim community firmly agreed that the law would punish him accordingly.

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<sup>37</sup> Pipes, “More on the North Carolina Jihadi, Mohammed Taheri-Azar.”

<sup>38</sup> Pipes, “More on the North Carolina Jihadi, Mohammed Taheri-Azar.”

<sup>39</sup> “Pedal-to-the-Metal Terror,” LarryFlynt.com, December 20, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> Amber Rupinta, “Muslim Leaders Respond to Taheri-Azar’s Letter,” March 16, 2006.

## 9. Depiction by the authorities

The authorities, from the police force who arrested Taheri-Azar, to Moeser, the UNC Chancellor, all tried to depict Taheri-Azar and his actions as criminal while not giving in to the view of many students that Taheri-Azar was a terrorist. Thus he was not labeled as an Islamic terrorist by the authorities like many people wanted him to be. The police were cautious in the beginning of the case when following up on Taheri-Azar's assertion that he had left a letter explaining his actions in his bedroom: they sent a bomb squad to check out his apartment as an extra precaution. Although it might be a popular belief that Taheri-Azar was insane, an examination by psychiatric professionals confirmed that he was not insane but rather "articulate and perfectly in control of what he is saying."<sup>41</sup>

## 10. Coverage by the media

The coverage of Mohammad Taheri-Azar and his attack by reporters and news sources is overall very fair and competent. The stories display a holistic view and characterization of Taheri-Azar, taking into account experiences from birth such as his move to the America, to his high school years, all the way up through his time at UNC Chapel Hill. Most articles focused on presenting facts of the developing case and stories or anecdotes of those involved in the case either directly or indirectly. People who both staunchly opposed Taheri-Azar's character and those who defended him were represented in articles. This included disapproving members of UNC's MSA and former classmates like Brian Coleman who claimed Taheri-Azar was "kind and gentle, rather than aggressive and violent."<sup>42</sup> An article, updated several times, by David Pipes entitled "More on the North Carolina Jihadi, Mohammed Taheri-Azar," presents a very useful timeline of events from the beginning of the case to Taheri-Azar's sentencing, and it also provides several letters Taheri-Azar wrote to different media outlets to get a better of idea of who the man is.

## 11. Policing costs

Policing costs are low because Taheri-Azar was not on anyone's radar until the time of the attack: it came as a surprise to all, including the authorities. In addition, there was little cost in apprehending him because he turned himself in almost immediately.

## 12. Relevance of the internet

The internet did not play a truly relevant role in this case. Taheri-Azar never sought outside help for his plans of violence over the internet and carried out his plan completely by himself. In terms of acquiring information, he first began to learn more about Al-Qaeda as a terrorist organization after discovering an anthology of writings about terrorism compiled by famed expert on terrorism, Walter Laqueur.<sup>43</sup> But this happened via book at Davis Library. Taheri-Azar

<sup>41</sup> Pipes, "More on the North Carolina Jihadi, Mohammed Taheri-Azar."

<sup>42</sup> Fausset, "SUV Attack Prompts Debate Over 'Terrorism' and Islam."

<sup>43</sup> Kurzman, *The Missing Martyrs*, 17.

became very interested in this anthology, particularly the Al-Qaeda chapters, so much so that he decided to become less open about his religious views, even to the friend who introduced him to the Quran just a few years earlier. He continued to read books in this category including some on the Oklahoma City bomber and the sarin poison-gas attack that killed 12 subway riders in Tokyo in 1995.

### 13. Are we safer?

Even though Taheri-Azar failed to kill or seriously injure anyone, the public is safer with him behind bars simply because his intention was to murder innocent people, as indicated in his letter to the police. Although he was deemed competent to stand trial, this does not mean that Taheri-Azar can be described as having a normal mentality: anyone who attempts to kill as many people as possible by driving through a congested area belongs in jail. His actions shook the UNC Chapel Hill community and, although the physical damage done to the victims and community was quickly absolved, the emotional toll was not. All of the victims expressed feelings of tension upon hearing a car behind them after the incident. Still, though these emotional stresses may never completely fade, especially for the victims, UNC Chapel Hill is once again the safe place it claimed to be before this horrible attack.

### 14. Conclusions

Even though nobody was actually killed or seriously injured in this case, it does suggest the potential threat that lone wolf terrorists can present as (or if) these kinds of attacks become more frequent. When individuals keep their plans to themselves and stay off websites that are tracked by government agencies, their plans are much more likely to take the community by surprise as happened in this case. It is also important to note that when Taheri-Azar was unable to get a gun and go on a shooting spree, he simply rented a car and hit as many people as he could. This demonstrates that it doesn't take a gun or a bomb to carry out terrorism. In the future other unconventional weapons may be used, whether cars or biochemical weapons.

Interestingly enough, two copycat episodes of running over innocent people occurred after Taheri-Azar's infamous attack. First, in August of 2006, just a few months after the UNC attack, Omeed Aziz Popal, a 29 year old Afghanistan-born American who grew up in America went on a rampage in an SUV killing one man and injuring over a dozen. The events started in Fremont, where Popal lived. In less than an hour, he was across the bay in San Francisco "ramming into people in an onslaught that lasted 14 minutes" in the middle of the day.<sup>44</sup> Officials found no evidence of a link to terrorism. San Francisco Mayor, Gavin Newsom stated that "The victims [were] of all ethnicities and of all ages. There seems to be no pattern. We make no assertions that this was a hate crime or that anyone else was involved."<sup>45</sup> Rather than terrorism, the impetus appears to have come from psychological stress. Popal had gone to Afghanistan for an

<sup>44</sup> Lee Romney and Maria La Ganga. "Bay Area Driver Goes on Rampage." *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Romney and La Ganga, "Bay Area Driver Goes on Rampage."

arranged marriage just two months prior to the attack and showed signs of mental stress over the marriage just one month before the attack according to Popal's cousin Hamid Nekrawesh.<sup>46</sup> Unlike Taheri-Azar, Popal was not motivated by religion and was actually found not guilty by reason of insanity whereas Taheri-Azar was deemed competent to stand trial.

Second, Ismail Yassin Mohamed, a 22 year old Somali-American, stole a car in Minneapolis in January of 2007. He also went on a driving rampage, ramming the stolen car into other vehicles, then stealing a van and continuing to ram other cars. Apparently he kept repeating "Die, die, die, kill, kill, kill" throughout the rampage. When asked why he did what he did, he responded, "Allah made me do it."<sup>47</sup> Like Taheri-Azar, Mohamed may have been motivated at least in part by religion similar. However, like Popal, he ended up being found not guilty by reason of mental incompetence.

Whether or not these two 'copycat' cases were inspired by the events at the University of North Carolina is unclear. But it is clear is that, regardless of motive, the use of a car to run over and kill innocent people can be a serious threat and these cases may inspire others to participate in similar violent acts. These cases serve as instances that remind us that terrorism doesn't always have to have improvised explosive devices and also that not every act of violence is terrorism. These cases also show how dangerous one man can be and that you don't need a terrorist cell to commit terrorist acts.

### **Appendix: The debate over definitions of terrorism**

After Taheri-Azar's plow through the pit, his action was debated on campus as to whether or not it could be considered an act of terrorism. Many students wanted to declare it as such, but campus authorities, including UNC Chapel Hill Chancellor James Moeser shied away from labeling it a full-fledged terrorist attack, claiming that it was up to the U.S. attorney to decide, not him and his colleagues.

Soon after the attack, a small group of conservative students rallied together to protest the university administration's on-the-fence position. They carried signs saying "Call it what it is" and "Support love, condemn terror." One student, Luke Farley, speaker of the student congress at UNC Chapel Hill stated that, "The chancellor should be out here with us" in support of their desire to label the act as terrorism.<sup>48</sup> The chancellor responded that he understood the students' feelings and where they are coming from. "I agree, this could feel like terrorism, especially if you're standing in front of a Jeep that's heading toward you trying to kill you," Moeser said. "As we have investigated this, we've come more and more to the conclusion that this was one individual acting alone in a criminal act."

Some students felt that the mainly conservative protestors were targeting Muslims by insisting that this event be considered an act of terrorism due to Taheri-Azar's association with the Islamic faith. They counter-demonstrated that

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<sup>46</sup> Romney and La Ganga, "Bay Area Driver Goes on Rampage."

<sup>47</sup> Robert Spencer, "FrontPage Magazine - Salt Lake Jihad?" February 15, 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Stancill, "Moeser Will Not Label SUV Attack."

the declaration of terrorism “[wasn’t] community building!”<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Pourzal, an Iranian American added: “You’re strengthening the prejudices people have against Muslim people.” Sara Aghajanian concurred saying “I am Iranian-American, and [the suspect] does not represent me at all, OK?”

One of the leaders of the rally responded to the concerns of the counter-demonstrators. “OK,” stated Stephen Mann, “If we don’t call it terrorism, what do we call it?” This open ended question suggests the pejorative nature of the issue and leaves the decision about whether or not to declare it a terrorist or criminal attack up to the discretion of those who examine the case. Usually there is broad agreement in terrorist cases that the acts committed are terroristic in nature; however the UNC case is not so clear cut to many, and continues to present ambiguity.

Another reason that the Chancellor might have stopped short of calling this attack a full-fledged terrorist attack is that having a label like could have a very negative impact on enrollment at the University. Moeser claimed that UNC, regardless of this instance, was still a very safe place to be and that students should be more concerned about safety while traveling on spring break the next week.<sup>50</sup>

Henry Schuster, a senior producer in CNN’s Investigative Unit and author of “Hunting Eric Rudolph,” interviewed Marc Sageman, a forensic psychiatrist and the author of “Understanding Terror Networks,” a groundbreaking book that examined why young men are inclined to join terrorist organizations, about whether Taheri-Azar’s case can be considered terrorism. At Schuster’s request, Sageman examined the letters written by Taheri-Azar and concluded that Taheri-Azar was convinced of what he was doing and knew why he did it. The emotionally uncharged and detached tone in the letters led Sageman to conclude that Taheri-Azar seemed “decontextualized” and that his mental health was a central issue. It is important to stress, however, that Sageman did not have access to Taheri-Azar in making his determination, only on reading the letters. Sageman stopped short of calling the attack on The Pit an act of terrorism, but then offered his own definition of the term: “terrorism is propagated by the deed and is designed to inspire young people to join [a certain] movement.”<sup>51</sup> For purposes of comparison, the FBI defines terrorism as activities that appear intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping.<sup>52</sup> Taheri-Azar’s actions can certainly be seen as falling into this definition: it was his clear intent to kill innocent people to send a message to the U.S. government.

### **Appendix: Taheri-Azar’s letter to the police**

<sup>49</sup> Fausset, “SUV Attack Prompts Debate Over ‘Terrorism’ and Islam.”

<sup>50</sup> “Chancellor: Not School’s Role to Call Attack Terrorism,” *Gun and Game Firearms Forums* RSS, March 10, 2006.

<sup>51</sup> Henry Schuster, “What Is Terrorism?” CNN.com, May 25, 2006.

<sup>52</sup> “Definitions of Terrorism in the U.S. Code,” *FBI*, August 20, 2013.



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## **Mohammed Taheri-Azar's letter to police**

The Herald-Sun (Durham, Chapel Hill, NC)

March 24, 2006 9:20 pm

*This is a transcript of the letter Mohammed Taheri-Azar left in his apartment for police to find after he drove into nine people with an SUV in The Pit at UNC on March 3:*

<http://www.heraldsun.com/orange/10-716750.html>

In the name of Allah, the merciful, the compassionate.

To whom it may concern:

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.

I did intend to use a handgun to murder the citizens and residents of Chapel Hill, North Carolina but the process of receiving a permit for a handgun in this city is highly restricted and out of my reach at the present, most likely due to my foreign nationality.

I am a servant of Allah. I am 22 years of age and I was born in Tehran, Iran. My father, mother and older sister immigrated to the United States in 1985 when I was two years of age and I've lived in the United States ever since.

I attended elementary, middle and high school in North Carolina and I was accepted into the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I began my college career in August 2001 and graduated in December 2005 with a bachelor's degree in psychology and philosophy with Allah's help.

I do not wish to pursue my career as a student any further because I have no desire to amass the impermanent and temporary fame and material wealth this world has to offer. However I made the decision to continue my studies and to graduate from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill so that the world will know that Allah's servants are

very intelligent.

Due to the killing of believing men and women under the direction of the United States government, I have decided to take advantage of my presence on United States soil on Friday, March 3, 2006 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.

In the Qur'an, Allah states that the believing men and women have permission to murder anyone responsible for the killing of other believing men and women. I know that the Qur'an is a legitimate and authoritative holy scripture since it is completely validated by modern science and also mathematically encoded with the number 19 beyond human ability. After extensive contemplation and reflection, I have made the decision to exercise the right of violent retaliation that Allah has given me to the fullest extent to which I am capable at present.

I have chosen the particular location on the University campus as my target since I know there is a high likelihood that I will kill several people before being killed myself or jailed and sent to prison if Allah wills. Allah's commandments are never to be questioned and all of Allah's commandments must be obeyed. Those who violate Allah's commandments and purposefully follow human fabrication and falsehood as their religion will burn in fire for eternity in accordance with Allah's will.

Sincerely yours,

Mohammed Reza Taheri-Azar

URL for this article: <http://www.heraldsun.com/orange/10-716750.html>

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