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APF Analysis

The Texas Hostage Crisis & The Legacy of Aafia Siddiqui

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Executive Summary

On 15 January 2022, police were called to Congregation Beth Israel, a synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, where a man had taken four people hostage including the rabbi, Charlie Cytron-Walker. There were few attendants because the service was being streamed online, with people watching from home due to the pandemic.

The hostage-taker, identified as British national Malik Faisal Akram, had arrived in New York two weeks prior to the incident. He somehow managed to acquire a gun upon his arrival. He then travelled to Texas and visited Congregation Beth Israel the morning of the incident, claiming that he was homeless, and was invited into the synagogue. Soon after, Akram took the congregants hostage at gunpoint.

An FBI rescue team quickly arrived on the scene, with the standoff ultimately lasting almost eleven hours. Law enforcement agents engaged in negotiations with the hostage-taker, which resulted in one hostage being released. During the hostage crisis, Akram ranted about the United States and displayed antisemitic views as he discussed his anger towards “Jews and Israel.” The Texas hostage crisis had eerie similarities to the 2008 Mumbai siege attacks when the Pakistani terrorist

group, the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), stormed the Jewish Chabad House and took six American Jews hostage including a rabbi and his wife. They hostages were eventually brutally murdered.

During the live stream, Akram could be heard demanding the release of Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist suspected of having ties to al-Qaeda, who was convicted in 2010 of trying to kill U.S. military officers while in custody in Afghanistan. Akram had specifically chosen the synagogue because it was a place where Jews assembled nearest to Siddiqui, who is currently serving an 86-year sentence in federal prison at the Federal Medical Center, Carswell in Fort Worth, Texas. Siddiqui, had become a cause célèbre for many jihadists with Akram being the latest example.

Eventually, Rabbi Cytron-Walker threw a chair at the perpetrator and escaped alongside the remaining two individuals. Akram was shot dead shortly thereafter. His family, who claimed he had been experiencing mental health issues, say there was nothing else that could have been done to convince him to surrender.

Joe Biden decried the incident as an ‘act of terror,’ and it raises very serious concerns over the influence Siddiqui still carries amongst jihadists. The Colleyville standoff is not the only case to involve the use of terrorism to demand Siddiqui’s release, and sadly, it will not be the last one either. With extremists elements growing in size across Afghanistan and Pakistan, there is a danger that terrorist groups and lone actors will rally to warped causes as they are becoming increasingly emboldened by the perception that the West was defeated in Afghanistan.

Investigations are ongoing and have taken on a transatlantic character, with the British side being led by officers from Counter Terrorism Policing North West and supported by CTP International Operations. The full dynamics of Aafia Siddiqui’s legacy and ties to trans-national terrorism have not been explored—until now.

Who Is Aafia Siddiqui?

Born in Pakistan on 2 March 1972, Aafia Siddiqui moved with her family to Zambia briefly during her childhood before returning to Karachi. She moved to the United States to begin studying at the University of Houston in early 1990 and then transferred to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to complete her undergraduate degree in biology. This period marks when her journey to radicalisation began.

During her second year of study at MIT, Siddiqui received the Carroll L. Wilson award of \$5,000 to travel to Pakistan and carry out research on a project entitled “Islamization in Pakistan and its Effects on Women.” Throughout her undergraduate career in the early 1990s, she became heavily involved with MIT’s association for Muslim students and preoccupied with the war in Bosnia. Siddiqui started working with the Brooklyn-based Al Kifah Refugee Center, helping them to fundraise, distributing their pamphlets, and encouraging fellow students to do the same. That organisation was discovered to have ties to Osama bin Laden’s Maktab al-Khidamat (MAK), a precursor to al-Qaeda that raised money for mujahideen causes abroad.

Siddiqui's peers recall the strange views she held, which appeared to be gradually developing into a more violent ideology. She allegedly took a ten-hour National Rifle Association (NRA) shooting course at the local Braintree Rifle & Pistol Club by herself, and suggested that other students join her in the lessons. During one meeting of local students, one person remembered that Siddiqui stated they should donate guns to Muslims in Bosnia rather than basic amenities like food or clothing, and that should would be "proud to be on the Most Wanted list because it would mean I'm doing something to help our Muslim brothers and sisters."

Siddiqui married Amjad Khan at the end of 1995 over the telephone as part of an arrangement set up by their respective families. Khan claims that he witnessed Siddiqui's increasing radicalisation as she began studying for her PhD in neuroscience at Brandeis University in 1996. Over time, Siddiqui started dressing more conservatively and became seemingly obsessed with religion and attempting to convert people. She would inappropriately bring up Islam during her studies, asserting that the purpose of science was to reveal the wisdom of the Qur'an. Meanwhile, she persisted in her pursuit to raise money for the causes in Kosovo and Chechnya, whilst her marriage began falling apart.

After 9/11, Khan alleges that Siddiqui became increasingly restless and begged him to leave the United States with her. In early 2002, the FBI questioned Siddiqui and her husband about their suspicious purchases of large amounts of night-vision goggles, books about weapons, and body armor. Siddiqui's then-husband claimed the supplies—totalling over \$10,000—were for camping and hunting. Later that year, the couple returned to Pakistan and divorced soon after.

At one time, Siddiqui was part of the Banaat-e-Ayesha, the women's wing of al-Qaeda's affiliate in Pakistan, the Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and moved to Balakot where JeM had a training camp. Siddiqui also represents the first woman who transcends the JeM relationship with al-Qaeda. This is particularly unusual as al-Qaeda has tended to avoid using women in its organisation.

On 25 December 2002, Siddiqui made a trip back to the U.S., using academic job searching as a cover story. In reality, she went there to open a mailbox for al-Qaeda agent Majid Khan, to enable him to enter the country. Siddiqui was at the centre of an al-Qaeda cell based in Karachi between 2002 and 2003 and led by 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM), who wanted to build on the success of 9/11 by planning new attacks in the United States and United Kingdom. Siddiqui's role was to obtain safe-houses provided by the JeM, and give organisational support for the operation.

Around February 2003, Siddiqui married Pakistani national and KSM's nephew, Ammar al-Baluchi, who was ultimately apprehended by American counter-terrorism officers in the Pakistani urban city of Rawalpindi close to a military headquarters. Shortly thereafter, Siddiqui set off for Karachi airport with her three children, without specifying to her family where she was going. This was the last time Siddiqui was seen for quite a while, and marks the beginning of her so-called 'gap years' from 2003 to 2008, during which her mother alleges strangers visited her home and made threatening remarks about her daughter's whereabouts.

Siddiqui claimed in her trial that she spent time in Pakistan doing research on biological weapons for the country's defense capabilities, having been commissioned to do so in a fatwa issued by a

man called Abu Lababa. Her oldest son, Ahmed, who was with her at the time of her arrest, says that Siddiqui was meeting with jihadists during this time and travelling across the border to Afghanistan to search for her husband, al-Baluchi. KSM claimed Siddiqui was a courier for al-Qaeda in interrogations after his capture in 2003.

Amjad Khan, Siddiqui's ex-husband, offered his explanation for Siddiqui's whereabouts during her gap years. He claims that she was in hiding and constantly travelling between Karachi, Quetta, and Iran, and that her movement was being monitored by the Pakistani ISI, who he says briefed his family regarding Siddiqui. Khan states that Siddiqui had her children with her during this time, but what remains unclear are the fates of her two youngest, Mariam and Suleman. Siddiqui's family insist that Khan is lying, and was abusive towards his ex-wife, which she also alleged, according to statements made by her defence attorneys.

In July 2008, Siddiqui was detained by the U.S. military in Ghazni, Afghanistan with her young son, Ahmed. In her possession, she had two pounds of sodium cyanide, a poisonous substance that can be lethal in small quantities. She also had papers that included handwritten notes referencing attacks on American landmarks, as well as material that had been printed out. According to court records, more specifically, these consisted of *"a number of handwritten notes (in English and Urdu) that referenced 'enemies—including the United States—and that discussed the construction of various types of weapons; a number of pre-printed materials that contained instructions on making various types of explosives; and a computer thumb drive containing various electronic documents, certain of which referenced 'enemies' (including the United States) and discussed various ways to create weapons with chemical compounds."*

Excerpts from her written notes can be found below:

Do the unthinkable: Attack enemies on gliders. . . . Attack using laser beams.

Need booby traps + 'dummy' shelters (metal deposits) to fool enemy's radar.

a 'mass casualty attack' . . . NY City monuments: Empire State Bld., Statue of Liberty, Brooklyn Bridge, etc.

Dirty Bomb: Need few oz. radioactive material (e.g. cobalt 60 from food irradiation facility) . . . wrap cobalt 60 around a [w/i] bomb, detonate it & shower a city w deadly fall out. . . . To detect dirty bombs, gamma and other radiation sensors @ airports [or] seaports [or] police depts (but still not all covered in America). . . . Practical dirty bomb would work by causing FEAR, not much deaths.

It is better to die while fighting infidels than to die or become handicapped by one's own negligence and carelessness when making weapons . . . If, despite exercising cautions, God has willed that the person gets wounded or becomes a martyr from his own weapons, then let it be! God is great!

[i]n your area, about 30 miles from Kabul, there is a long strip of land where high quality of copper deposits is available in abundance, which is being stolen by the infidel occupiers, and being taken to their countries!

Siddiqui was subsequently taken to an Afghan National Police facility for questioning following her arrest. A team of American personnel was sent in, and as the U.S. Chief Warrant officer put down his M4-A1 rifle next to him, Siddiqui grabbed it, shouting exclamations like, “I want to kill Americans” and “Death to America,” according to some witnesses, before an interpreter tackled her, and an American officer shot her in the stomach. Siddiqui went down quite literally kicking and screaming and was eventually hospitalised and ultimately nursed back to health.

She faced seven charges, including attempted murder of U.S. nationals, attempted murder of U.S. officers and employees, armed assault of U.S. officers and employees, discharge of a firearm during a crime of violence, and three counts of assault on three U.S. officers and employees. She was convicted on all counts and sentenced to 86 years in prison, which some consider unusually excessive for her crimes. A conspiracy within jihadist circles eventually grew that Siddiqui had been tortured and abused, which evolved into a powerful myth and narrative for terrorist groups, and is made all the more potent by the imagery of a chaste woman being ‘defiled’ by the West.

During her trial, Siddiqui spoke of a Zionist conspiracy that meant she would not receive a fair trial and claimed that Israel was behind 9/11. It is alleged that Siddiqui had attempted to dismiss her lawyers due to their Jewish background, and stated that Jews are “cruel, ungrateful, [and] backstabbing people.” Above all, the most startling comment to have arisen from Siddiqui’s trial was her assertion that “Israel masterminded 9/11.” Following comments and views like these, it is unsurprising that people like Malik Faisal Akram targeted a synagogue and suggests that future attacks may also take place against places of similar importance to Jews in the U.S.

There is a great degree of uncertainty regarding Siddiqui’s mental health status, with some experts deeming her mentally ill and others accusing her of malingering, or feigning a mental disorder. Her defense team argued she is so cognitively incompetent that she would not even be of use to terrorist organisations due to her disorganised nature. Her erratic manner of speaking can be gleaned from her statements during her trial and sentencing, as documented in court records. Most of her testimony is quite incoherent, as she often gives conflicting or contradictory information and answers. Ultimately, Siddiqui was considered mentally fit to stand trial, and is serving out her 86-year sentence in Fort Worth.

The Terrorist Cause Célèbre

When outlining his sole demand during the Colleyville hostage crisis, the hostage-taker Malik Faisal Akram referred to Siddiqui as his ‘sister’ which some initially interpreted as a blood relationship with Siddiqui but instead reflected the profound ideological importance that she carries for extremist organisations and individuals alike for being a fellow ‘soldier.’ Since being sentenced to 86 years in prison, Siddiqui has attracted the attention of many significant individuals in a wide array of Islamist groups. Similarly to Akram, in 2010, the then-leader of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Hakimullah Mehsud, also made reference to Siddiqui as his “sister in Islam,” a trend that has continued into the following decade.

In a communique delivered by al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri to its media wing As-Sahab in November 2010, the Egyptian spoke of the “oppression” practiced by America towards “sister

Aafia Siddiqui.” Al-Zawahiri added that the “Islamic Ummah (community) [would] respond strike for strike and kill for kill, and destruction for destruction, and attack for attack,” a message that has resonated with jihadist groups since its proclamation 12 years ago. The second half of al-Zawahiri’s statement was aimed at the “Muslim nation in Pakistan” and, in true al-Qaeda fashion, called upon all Muslims to respond with violence to “the Americans and their Crusader allies [that] are occupying [Muslim] countries and killing [Muslim] families.” The crucial purpose of al-Zawahiri’s agenda was to identify and highlight the “humiliation” of the Muslim world at the hands of the U.S. and its allies. It was made clear by al-Zawahiri that the U.S. was “imprisoning” and “violating” Muslim women without any repercussions, and therefore the only appropriate response to “those who practice [this] oppression” was to wage jihad against them. In 2011, al-Zawahiri demanded Siddiqui be freed in exchange for the release of Warren Weinstein, who worked with the U.S. Agency for International Development and was captured by al-Qaeda in Lahore, Pakistan.

Although it is unknown whether Akram had ever encountered this particular message, it is highly likely that he was made aware of the importance of Siddiqui by one of the many terrorist organisations that latched onto Siddiqui’s case in the following years. What is certain is the notion that Siddiqui’s imprisonment needed ‘righting’ or ‘avenging’ and that some felt it was their duty to call for her release. This applied to Akram.

Although Siddiqui has sometimes been nicknamed as ‘Lady al-Qaeda,’ ISIS have also sought an affiliation. In fact, al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and ISIS separately offered the U.S. an exchange of prisoners in order to secure Siddiqui’s release. In 2012, the Taliban sought to trade Bowe Bergdahl, a U.S. soldier who had been captured by the Haqqani Network in 2009, for Siddiqui, while the al-Qaeda affiliate in the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP, similarly attempted to include Siddiqui and the Blind Sheikh—Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman—in a hostage exchange offer of their own.

The most notable attempted prisoner exchange, however, involved ISIS and their offer to include journalist James Foley in negotiations for Siddiqui’s release. This is a key example, as Foley would go on to infamously become the victim in a barbaric execution video that circulated online in 2014 and significantly increased ISIS’ notoriety and popularity, catapulting them into the mainstream for hopeful extremists looking for a means of waging jihad. Considering the importance that Foley would have to ISIS and their hopes of recruitment and expansion, it may appear strange that the group attached equal—if not more—importance to Siddiqui. The value of Siddiqui to jihadist groups all over the world must not be understated.

Aafia Siddiqui embodies a major opportunity for global jihadist groups to increase recruitment and sympathy for their cause, by instigating and exploiting feelings of genuine anger amongst Muslims in Pakistan and throughout the world. The key elements of all the statements and comments made by terrorist groups demanding Siddiqui’s release have been to draw upon ideas of community—referring to Siddiqui as their ‘sister’—and ideas of the U.S. mistreating and abusing an innocent female Muslim prisoner.

Al-Qaeda had initially intended to enrage ordinary people to consider an act of violence against the U.S. or U.S. interests for Siddiqui’s sake. In doing so, the group hoped that new recruits would begin to make themselves available for al-Qaeda and restore its operational capacity following the

devastating U.S. War on Terror that had raged throughout the early 2000s. Al-Qaeda, and subsequently ISIS, also hoped to encourage lone actor attacks, like Akram's, in the U.S. itself from people who had received their messages and wished to take matters into their own hands without travelling to Afghanistan or Iraq and Syria to receive training and assistance prior to their attacks.

By consistently appearing to stand up for Siddiqui and her rights, al-Qaeda and ISIS have attempted to use propaganda to portray themselves as honourable groups that are simply fighting for justice against a country that has violated the human rights of a Muslim woman. In doing so, these organisations hoped to inspire new supporters and recruits, whilst simultaneously challenging the notion that the U.S. are the force for good that they have long claimed to be. Ultimately, Siddiqui's case symbolises al-Qaeda's core ideology and doctrine: that the U.S. is partaking in a campaign against innocent Muslims all over the world, in an attempt to eradicate the religion.

Siddiqui also possesses significant propaganda value to terrorist groups that wish to carry out attacks against the U.S. Siddiqui was convicted for having drawn an automatic weapon on a U.S. soldier and survived, despite being subsequently shot. With these facts, jihadist organisations have been able to portray Siddiqui as having stood up to the West. Such groups have also been keen to harness the reputation that Siddiqui gained for herself in the early 2000s, when she was one of the seven most wanted people in the world according to the FBI. These events have allowed Siddiqui's infamy to grow amongst global jihadists of all generations, and the attack in Colleyville, Texas has confirmed that this legend has well and truly survived into the post-pandemic era.

In Pakistan, several prime ministers have lobbied the U.S. for Siddiqui's release in an attempt to appease their own extremist elements, many of which ironically have been created by the state itself. Current prime minister Imran Khan has also long campaigned for Siddiqui's release which has been in line with the perception that he is also a supporter of the Taliban and enabler of the extremist group Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) whose unmitigated violence has enabled them to extract political concessions from Imran Khan's government.

In July 2019, Imran Khan visited Washington D.C. and told the Trump administration that Pakistan wanted to exchange Siddiqui, for Shakeel Afridi, the Pakistani doctor who helped the U.S. track Osama bin Laden in a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Afridi was subsequently detained by Pakistani authorities and imprisoned for aiding the U.S. He remains incarcerated.

Despite the bizarre lobbying by Imran Khan, Pakistan is well-aware that Siddiqui will not likely have her prison sentence cut short by the U.S. and is therefore only superficially demanding she be freed. In doing so, Khan, and those that came before him, hope to divert the attention of extremist groups away from their own country and towards the U.S. regarding this particular case.

The Western withdrawal from Afghanistan may also have inspired the attacker symbolically rather than operationally. Whilst Akram did not travel to Afghanistan or receive any operational support as a result of the Taliban's takeover of the country, it is likely that those events will have provided extra impetus on Akram to strike the U.S. at home. Furthermore, Siddiqui has previously stated her affection for the Taliban and her desire to live under their control whilst she claimed she was on the run from law enforcement.

Assessment

Future attacks with the same motivation of freeing Aafia Siddiqui will likely continue for the remainder of her life. This case has revealed that Siddiqui still holds substantial importance among all kinds of extremists. Additionally, the failure of Akram's plot—not only its goal of achieving Siddiqui's release, but also its failure to kill anyone—will embolden terrorist groups and lone actors alike to plot and carry out far more devastating acts for Siddiqui's cause. To such organisations and individuals, it is evident that the U.S. position has not changed in the aftermath of this hostage situation.

Perhaps even more worrying for U.S. law enforcement is the significance of Akram targeting a synagogue in Siddiqui's name. Siddiqui's antisemitic comments and conspiracy theories were well-documented throughout the course of her trial.

Those terrorists with a desire to carry out an attack for the release of Siddiqui will deem now the optimal moment to threaten the U.S. into making such a concession, however unlikely it may appear. For this reason, future attacks of a similar nature must not be discounted and should be expected.

Lone Actors cannot be stopped completely, but their numbers can be curtailed if they can be kept 'lonely.' A key goal has to be to keep potential plotters apart as well as from jihadist groups operating online provide direction and training. The challenge is that many of the online recruiters are feeling growing confidence that they are safer to operate in the post-Pandemic era, partly based on a perception that the coronavirus has distracted society, and radicalised many, but also motivated that the West no longer has a viable counter-terrorism apparatus in Afghanistan.

Following the lockdowns, individuals like Akram, whether vulnerable to radicalisation or already radicalised, will now be venturing back into public life. It is therefore essential to flag behaviour deemed to be worrying before any more lone actors are able to carry out attacks.

As lockdowns and restrictions ends across the world, coupled with the events in Afghanistan, counter-terrorism policing will potentially need to be placed on an emergency footing. Law enforcement will have to deal with the potential fallout of those that during self-isolation were exposed to radical online literature and propaganda, calling for terrorism by any means possible.

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