

Dean C Alexander explains how police traffic stops can prove to be a powerful counter terrorism tool, and outlines some key indicators that might indicate terrorist activity

TERRORISTS: STOP!

The recent revelation that a traffic stop for speeding in Pakistan involved al-Qaeda courier and Osama bin Laden bodyguard Ibrahim al Kuwaiti, sometime during 2002 or 2003, underscores the importance of traffic stops in undermining terrorism. During the encounter, Al Kuwaiti settled the issue quickly with the compliant Pakistani traffic police officer. It is not known what transpired (a payoff or some other settlement), but al Kuwaiti, bin Laden – who apparently was clean-shaven – and the other passenger in the car drove off, eluding the detection of the most wanted terrorist in history. Only in May 2011 did bin Laden meet his death during the US military raid at his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

Law enforcement has used traffic stops to detect criminal activity for decades. Its use in the terrorism context gained greater resonance since the 9/11 attacks, when it was discovered that three of the four pilot hijackers – Mohammed Atta, Ziad Jarrah, and Hani Hanjour – passed through traffic stops in the US.

Pilot ringleader Atta was stopped twice during traffic stops in Florida. In April 2001, he received a ticket for driving without a license. When Atta was ticketed for speeding in July 2001, the arrest warrant for his failure to show up for his hearing on the previous citation was not entered into the police database. Meanwhile, in August 2001, Hani Hanjour was stopped for speeding in Virginia. On 9 September 2001, Ziad Jarrah was stopped for speeding in Maryland. Within days, Jarrah piloted United Airlines flight 93, which crashed near Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Earlier on the road to 9/11, in April 2001, hijacker Nawaf al Hazmi was stopped for speeding in Oklahoma. 9/11 pilot Hanjour is believed to have been in the car with al Hazmi during the traffic stop. If these three men had been detained, leaving only one of the four 11 September pilots available that fateful day, world affairs during the past dozen years would have been completely different.

Two days after 9/11, in Peoria, Illinois, Ali al Marri was stopped for not having his child in a child restraint. The sheriff's deputy who stopped al Marri noticed that he had an outstanding warrant for driving under the influence. Inconsistencies in al Marri's story were later referred to the FBI. Ultimately, al Marri, who was sent to the US by 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to providing material support to al-Qaeda.

In July 2006, Naveed Haq was stopped and ticketed in Washington for driving on a street where only buses were allowed. Later that day, Haq killed one and injured several others in a violent jihadi attack at the Seattle Jewish Federation office. At the time of the traffic stop, Haq had two guns and ammunition in his vehicle. Similarly,



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in September 2009 Michael Finton was stopped the day before he was planning to undertake the bombing of a federal building in Springfield, Illinois, on behalf of al-Qaeda. While the sheriff's deputy who stopped Finton was unaware of Finton's plans, he did impound Finton's car. Finton was able to get to the target location the following day. Fortunately, Finton was the subject of an FBI sting operation, and was arrested after trying to detonate inert explosives under the careful watch of an undercover FBI agent. Still, had Finton's collaborator in the plot not been law enforcement, then the "missed opportunity" during the traffic stop would have proven weighty. Ultimately, Finton pleaded guilty in May 2011 to attempting to bomb the building and was sentenced to 28 years.

In January 2011, an Arizona Department of Game and Fish officer conducted a traffic stop on Jared Loughner for running a red light. Loughner had a valid driver's license and no outstanding warrants. When the officer told Loughner he would be receiving an oral warning and no citation, Loughner was thankful and cried. The officer asked Loughner if he felt well enough to drive, and Loughner said yes.

Later that day Loughner took a taxi to attend a constituent's event of US Congresswomen Gabrielle Giffords at a Safeway supermarket. There, Loughner, who embraced antigovernment and militia tenets, shot and killed six people, including a federal judge and nine-year-old girl, while injuring 12 others, including Giffords.

Hezbollah-linked brothers Mohamad and Chawki Hammoud led an elaborate, North Carolina-based cigarette smuggling operation. In 2000, the cabal was stymied after a long investigation spurred by an off-duty police officer, who observed two men using bags of cash to purchase large amounts of cigarettes at tobacco discount outlet. This organised criminal/terrorist syndicate hired women to ride along with them during their trips from low cigarette tax North Carolina to high cigarette tax Michigan. On several occasions these drivers were stopped for traffic stops without any revelation that their trips funded the movement of money and dual-use technologies to Hezbollah. To the officers conducting the traffic stops, the inclusion of women as passengers plus the fact that bicycles were strapped to the back of the minivans – which unbeknownst to the officers were hauling contraband cigarettes – gave the impression that the occupants were on a family vacation.

In retrospect, whether additional inquiries by police during these traffic stops would have prevented the aforementioned incidents is unknown, although the traffic stop in Pakistan involving bin Laden certainly reinforces the need for viewing traffic stops as a tool for interdicting terrorism and extremism. There have, however, been instances of police undermining prospective terror plots or capturing terrorists during traffic stops. A few such noteworthy cases are listed below. For example, Timothy McVeigh, convicted terrorist of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, was stopped during a traffic stop for not having a license plate on his vehicle. The stop took place on an Oklahoma highway after McVeigh left the scene of the bombing. McVeigh was in the custody of authorities from that point until his death sentence was carried out in 2001.

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In April 1998, police arrested Yu Kikumura of the Japanese Red Army while he was sleeping at a New Jersey Turnpike rest stop, when they saw explosives in his vehicle. Kikumura had planned to bomb a US Navy recruitment station in New York City. He served around 18 years in prison for explosives-related and other violations.

In 1999, Algerian al-Qaeda member Ahmed Ressaym was in Canada, on his way to attack Los Angeles airport, around the millennium. A US Customs officer at the Canada-US border interacted with Ressaym, who acted suspiciously. During a subsequent search of Ressaym's vehicle explosives were found in the trunk. Ressaym tried to flee on foot, but was captured by government authorities. Ressaym pleaded guilty to his terrorist plans and was sentenced to 37 years in prison.

In August 2007, Ahmed Mohamed was stopped for a traffic stop for speeding by county sheriff's deputies near Goose Creek, South Carolina. A consent search of the car yielded explosives materials and his laptop. Law enforcement discovered that Mohamed's laptop contained many files on how to manufacture of bombs, rockets and other explosives as well as videos of such items being used against US military forces abroad. Also on the hard drive was a video of Mohamed explaining how a remote-control toy could be converted and rewired to serve as a bomb detonator. Mohamed said he uploaded the video to YouTube so that "martyrs" could use this knowledge when fighting the US military, which he characterised as "invaders". In December 2008 Mohamed was sentenced to 15 years in prison for providing material support to terrorists.

During a traffic stop, police officers should carefully examine the driver's license, vehicle registration and insurance. Red flags of possible criminal and/or terrorist activity include: the driver's license and vehicle registration not being from the same state; an altered or forged license or title; driver's license photos that do not match; and vehicle registration that is different than the name of the driver.

Also, if a passport and international (or foreign) driver's license are given to the officer, careful review of the documents are warranted as they may also indicate illegal entry into the country. Terrorists may also travel abroad, including to terrorist-supporting countries or where terror-training camps exist. The possession of multiple identification instruments and different names is often a

serious indicator of other wrongdoing.

During a traffic stop, officers should look for things that are inconsistent or incongruous. One such example might be a driver claiming to be on a long vacation or business trip but possessing no luggage. Additionally, the number of vehicle occupants, demeanour and behaviour (for example vehicle activity indicative of reconnaissance at a government building or school), basis of the stop (speeding, driving erratically, or driving without a licence) are part of the totality of circumstances that officers should weigh.

Most importantly, officers should consider requesting consent searches when circumstances warrant. As police officers rarely ask to obtain consent to search a car during a traffic stop, a paradigm shift is necessary as searches can stymie terrorist and extremist activities. The occupants of the vehicle may also give off clues. Officers should look for dissonance such as inappropriate clothing. Terrorists may wear long sleeve shirts or coats in hot weather to conceal weapons, explosives (such as a suicide bomb belt), illegal drugs, documents, and cash.

Terrorists may travel considerable distances from where they live to raise funds, recruit other members or carry out terrorist attacks. Drivers and passengers who travel great distances may appear overly fatigued. Najibullah Zazi, convicted of plans to commit a suicide bombing in New York City in 2009, drove from Colorado to New York with explosives in his vehicle. Similarly, some terrorists might travel with others in their group, including in single or multiple cars or vans.

Other factors in adducing a potential terrorist during a stop include plain view of weapons or components, unusual or large quantities of specific products such as disposable cell phones, fertilisers (without an agricultural nexus), or bumper stickers with violent, extremist messages. These possible indicators may have officer safety benefits as they provide notice of a potential dangerous individual.

While a future traffic stop in the United States or elsewhere may not yield the FBI's current most wanted terrorist, al-Qaeda leader Ayman Zawahiri, it might undermine known or unknown terrorist or extremist operatives, who travel our highways and byways on the way to wreak havoc.

Held up: 9/11 pilots Mohamed Atta, Hani Hanjour and Ziad Samir Jarrah were all pulled up at police stops prior to the attack, but allowed to proceed

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