

Posted 3/4/11

A DANGEROUS LOSER

Did a Saudi student come to America with murder in his heart?

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. On February 24 FBI agents in Lubbock, Texas arrested [Ali-M Aldawsari](#) for attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction, a crime that could land him in prison for life. Described by an FBI agent as a “guy [who] apparently had the intent and knew how to go about it,” the twenty-year old college student from Saudi Arabia was reportedly a lone wolf who had been set on wreaking havoc on the Great Satan since his high school days.

Whether that’s true we’ll get to in a moment. But first let’s make it clear that this wasn’t another of the FBI’s [rope-a-dope](#) deals. No informer had enticed Aldawsari to prove his manly creds by doing Jihad. No FBI undercover agent had offered to provide the bomb and a vehicle in which to plant it. Indeed, had it not been for the intervention of an alert trucking company worker, a plot described as “the only [current] case of its type in terms of insider threat in this country” would likely still be in progress. (DHS claims that they had already alerted the FBI about suspicious bank transfers by Aldawsari, but such warnings are common.)

According to the [criminal complaint](#) and other sources, Aldawsari arrived in the U.S. in 2008 on a student visa. After studying English at Vanderbilt he enrolled at Texas Technical University in Lubbock with a major in chemical engineering. Academic problems apparently led to his premature departure in 2010, but he kept his visa in effect by transferring to a local two-year institution, South Plains College, where he studied business.

Aldawsari didn’t pop up on the FBI’s radar until January 2011, when he ordered phenol over the Internet from a North Carolina supplier. Among other things, phenol is one of the three ingredients of a powerful explosive, picric acid. Company policy was to ship phenol only to a commercial address, so Aldawsari asked that it be sent to a freight line terminal, where he would pick it up. (It turned out that he had previously received nitric acid, another component of picric acid, in this way.) This time, though, a freight line employee got suspicious and refused delivery. Not only that, he called the cops, who in turn alerted the FBI.

That’s when the real investigation began. At the FBI’s request, the chemical distributor called Aldawsari to ask why he wanted phenol. The youth said he was with Texas Tech and needed it for research. He later told an FBI agent posing as an employee

POLICEISSUES.ORG

that he wanted to develop an odorless cleaning fluid so that he could get into a bigger university. What he didn't say was that he had already left TTU. Aldawsari subsequently canceled his order, telling the supplier that he had another source.

By mid-February 2011 the FBI knew a lot about Aldawsari. Aside from obtaining chemicals under pretext, he had started posting Jihadist rants on the Internet. FBI agents monitoring his e-mails under court order discovered that Aldawsari was researching possible terrorist targets, including dams and reservoirs. He had e-mailed himself highly detailed instructions for making picric acid and was buying items such as glass beakers, a soldering gun and even a Hazmat suit online. Agents who surreptitiously searched his apartment found the suit as well as the shipping containers for nitric acid. More chillingly, they also found three gallons of concentrated sulfuric acid, the third component of picric acid.

And that wasn't all. Agents discovered a diary, written in Arabic, that laid out his scheme and purpose in considerable detail. It all began, he wrote, when he was a teen:

I excelled in my studies in high school in order to take advantage of an opportunity for a scholarship to America....And now, after mastering the English language, learning how to build explosives, and continuous planning to target the infidel Americans, it is time for Jihad.

Aldawsari set out a "synopsis of important steps." Among these were obtaining a forged U.S. birth certificate, applying for a passport, getting different driver licenses, traveling to New York, renting several cars, equipping each with a remotely-detonated bomb, strategically placing the vehicles during rush hour, and then finding a safe place from which to unleash his destruction.

In 2009 [Najibullah Zazi](#) and two friends hatched a plot to bomb New York City subways. But they didn't manage to produce any explosives before the Feds closed in. Last year [Faisal Shahzad](#) went them one better, actually crafting a makeshift bomb and planting it in a vehicle he parked at Times Square. Alas, the device fizzled out, as did Shahzad's attempt to flee the U.S. So now there's another lonely sad-sack with chemicals, a Hazmat suit and a wildly ambitious to-do list. We say "lonely" because soon after landing in the U.S. Aldawsari [blogged that he was in love with an English tutor](#). "She is gorgeous that I can't forget her just right away... I am asking Allah the great to convert her to Islam and marry me."

If one can believe what Aldawsari posted during his first two years in the U.S., he appeared to be a fervent admirer of all things American; after all, what red-blooded boy wouldn't dream of working at Google? His radicalism didn't surface until he was leaving

POLICEISSUES.ORG

Texas Tech. Perhaps it was a failed academic career rather than any preconceived notions of Jihad that prompted what *The Tennessean* called Aldawari's "radical change in tone." Aldawsari wasn't here on his own dime but on a full scholarship from a Saudi industrial concern, so one can appreciate the embarrassment he must have suffered when it became necessary to explain to his family and sponsors that a prestigious degree was out of reach.

Aldawsari, Zazi and Shahzad don't look anything like committed terrorists, say, the 9/11 hijackers. Looking for fame, fortune and, perhaps, a buxom blond spouse they found themselves struggling in a competitive environment where only the fit prosper. It's hardly a stretch to think of them as ordinary losers who sought to polish their tattered self-image by turning to Islamic radicalism. Really, they're little different from the disaffected wannabes whom the Feds gave been roping in for years. Looking back in time, they're also not unlike those hate-filled domestic fanatics (Timothy McVeigh comes to mind) who railed against a system that was passing them by.

Aldawsari was clearly delusional – just look at his "synopsis." Whether or not he was capable of carrying through on his plot, though, three gallons of concentrated sulfuric acid can make anyone dangerous. So it's a good thing that he was stopped. We note with satisfaction that the FBI moved in quickly and used special terrorism statutes and investigative tools to excellent effect. [As we've pointed out](#), giving law enforcement expanded authority to intercept communications and conduct secret searches in cases of suspected terrorism doesn't threaten privacy – considering the far more intrusive alternatives, it can help *preserve* it.

Yet one glaring weakness remains. We're grateful that police were notified when Aldawsari tried to acquire a potentially dangerous chemical in an irregular way. But whether authorities should be alerted in such cases shouldn't be left to citizen discretion. After all, the other components *did* get through. Our lackadaisical approach towards regulating the distribution of hazardous substances has long been a serious problem. If we're really serious about preventing terrorism, here's hoping that this episode serves as a wake-up call.