

Case 32: Texas

John Mueller

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At any one time over 30,000 citizens from Saudi Arabia are studying at U.S. colleges or universities. In 2010, one of them, the 20-year-old Khalid Ali-M Aldawsari, apparently turned to violent extremism at about the time he was flunking out of Texas Tech. He publicly recording the change on his blog posts and Facebook profile which previously had shown, in contrast, a distinct attraction to, and fondness for, America and the girls within, as well as a desire to get a job at Google, a “dream” he deemed to be “not impossible.”

In his new mood he condemned American foreign policy in the Middle East: “if this is the West’s version of freedom, and their peace policy, we have our own policies in freedom and it is war until...the infidels leave defeated,” condemned both the Saudi regime and Israel’s policies in Gaza, and prayed, “You who created mankind and who is knowledgeable of what is in the womb, grant me martyrdom for Your sake and make Jihad easy for me.”

He accordingly began to accumulate materials to make bombs and to select targets. Among the targets: three Americans who served in the U.S. military and at some point were stationed in the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, twelve reservoirs and hydroelectric dams, nuclear power plants, and—the one most noted by the media— “TYRANT’S HOUSE,” otherwise known as the Dallas residence of former President George W. Bush. He apparently was also giving deep thought to detonating explosive-laden rental cars by remote control on crowded streets during rush hour in New York.

Curious complications developed with one of his chemical purchases, and the FBI, tipped off by the vendor, began an investigation, one that presumably included checking out Aldawsari’s blog and Facebook materials. After the arrest, the FBI Special Agent in charge asserted, “This was a close call.” Noting some research by Michael Kenney, however, David Bernstein, though concerned about how close Aldawsari came to making a bomb, observes that, although Aldawsari had accumulated some relevant chemicals, he did not possess the training, experience, or education needed to overcome other challenges in building either bombs or remote detonating devices.¹

¹ Michael Kenney, “Beyond the Internet,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22(2), 2010. See also Anne Stenersen, “The Internet: A Virtual Training Camp?” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20(2), 2008.

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David Bernstein

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1. Overview

On late Wednesday night, February 23, 2011, Khalid Ali-M Aldawsari was arrested after an FBI investigation led agents to believe that he was attempting to build an explosive to use in an act of terrorism against a target in the United States.² Aldawsari, 20, a Saudi citizen who began studying in the United States on a student visa in September 2008, was arrested after the investigation found that he had acquired or was attempting to acquire necessary ingredients and equipment to build an explosive.³ At the time of his arrest, Aldawsari was studying business at South Plains College near Lubbock, Texas.⁴

According to the criminal complaint, he was attempting to create an explosive by producing trinitrophenol (TNP), also called picric acid, which can be used to create an improvised explosive device (IED). The FBI became aware of Aldawsari's actions after he attempted to purchase \$435 worth of concentrated phenol—a chemical when properly added to nitric and sulfuric acids can produce TNP—from the chemical supply company Carolina Biological Supply.⁵ Complications with the order caused the chemical supply firm to grow suspicious and inform the FBI of Aldawsari's attempted order on February 1, 2011.⁶ Additionally, reports have emerged that the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI had received prior tips on Aldawsari from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) regarding “suspicious banking activity.”⁷

Following the tip from the chemical supply company, the FBI began an investigation of Aldawsari that involved 24-hour surveillance and two secret searches of his apartment in Lubbock, Texas.⁸ After an initial February 14, 2011 search of Aldawsari's apartment failed to properly determine the amount of progress in Aldawsari's attempt to create an explosive and failed to determine if he had other accomplices, a second search was conducted that convinced agents Aldawsari was acting as a “lone-wolf” terrorist.⁹ According to the FBI affidavit that detailed passages of a journal written by Aldawsari in Arabic, Aldawsari

² “Texas Resident Arrested on Charge of Attempted Use of Weapon of Mass Destruction,” Department of Justice Office of Public Affairs, February 24, 2011.

³ Charlie Savage and Scott Shane, “U.S. Arrests Saudi Student in Bomb Plot,” *New York Times*, February 24, 2011.

⁴ Peter Finn, “FBI: Saudi student bought materials for bomb, considered Bush home as target,” *Washington Post*, February 25, 2011.

⁵ Savage and Shane, “U.S. Arrests Saudi Student.”

⁶ Savage and Shane, “U.S. Arrests Saudi Student.”

⁷ Mike H. Ahers, “DHS says it had suspicions about terror suspect before companies’ tip,” CNN, March 3, 2011. No mention of suspicious banking activity was made in the criminal complaint against Aldawsari, but it may be brought up during trial.

⁸ Barton Gellman, “Is the FBI Up to the Job 10 Years After 9/11?” *Time*, April 28, 2011. For his article, Gellman shadowed FBI Director Robert Mueller to gain a better view on the Director's job. During his time with Mueller, the FBI was in the middle of its investigation of Aldawsari.

⁹ Gellman, “Is the FBI Up to the Job.”

wrote “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.”¹⁰ Additionally, the search turned up extensive internet research conducted by Aldawsari over potential targets and instructions for developing his bomb, prompting the FBI to arrest Aldawsari at his apartment a week later on February 23, 2011.

Aldawsari was charged with the attempted use of a weapon of mass destruction which carries the potential sentence of life in prison and a \$250,000 fine.¹¹ After being indicted on March 28, 2011, Aldawsari pled not guilty. His trial was initially scheduled to begin May 2, 2011 but was postponed after prosecutors asked the District Court to slow down court proceedings because it is a “complex case.” The trial is now currently scheduled to begin on October 24, 2011.¹²

2. Nature of the adversary

Khalid Ali-M Aldawsari was born in Saudi Arabia on April 24, 1990.¹³ Whether he came to the United States as a student to commit terrorism or became inspired to do so after his arrival is impossible to determine. However, Aldawsari was granted a scholarship from the Saudi Basic Industries Corporation, whose majority owner is the Saudi government.¹⁴ Saudi officials have commented since Aldawsari’s arrest that he had no prior criminal record.¹⁵

With the scholarship providing him financial means to study at American universities, Aldawsari began his studies at Vanderbilt University in September 2008 studying English as a second language.¹⁶ After spending much of the summer of 2009 in Saudi Arabia, he chose to return to the United States to continue his studies.¹⁷ He then transferred to Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas in August 2009 to study chemical engineering.¹⁸

While at Texas Tech, he was assigned to live in student housing dorms and shared a suite with two other roommates. Those who knew Aldawsari while he was studying at Texas Tech described him as an extremely private, shy person who shunned requests to spend time with others. According to his roommates, he would only be seen coming to or from class, preparing food in a shared kitchen, and would politely decline their invitations to spend time with them or run shared

¹⁰ Savage and Shane, “U.S. Arrests Saudi Student.”

¹¹ “Texas Resident Arrested,” Department of Justice.

¹² James Clark, “Lubbock’s Aldawsari terror case put off until October,” KCBD11 News, April 6, 2011.

¹³ Jeremy Pelofsky, “Factbox: Details of bomb plot in U.S. by Saudi national,” Reuters, February 24, 2011.

¹⁴ Jason Trahan and Todd J. Gillman, “Saudi terror suspect who allegedly targeted Bush appears in Lubbock court,” *Dallas Morning News*, February 25, 2011.

¹⁵ Finn, “FBI: Saudi Student.”

¹⁶ Trahan and Gillman, “Saudi terror suspect.”

¹⁷ James C. McKinley and Sarah Wheaton, “Saudi Student to Be Arraigned in Bomb Plot,” *New York Times*, February 25, 2011.

¹⁸ Savage and Shane, “U.S. Arrests Saudi Student.”

errands together.¹⁹ His roommates also said that his door was almost always locked and they could hear him in the mornings having phone conversations in Arabic and watching Arabic newscasts on his computer in the afternoon.²⁰ His roommates also noted that Aldawsari did not appear to be outwardly religious and, except for celebrating Ramadan, did not appear to partake in any other Islamic traditions including ritual daily prayer, refraining from shaving, or wearing traditional Muslim clothing.²¹ As he was always polite and extremely private with his roommates, Aldawsari's roommates said that they were shocked when he was arrested for allegedly preparing an explosive for a future terrorist act. One roommate, Dwaine Fombuh said, somewhat jokingly, in reference to Aldawsari's extremely private demeanor that "Friends who would come over would be like, 'Man, he's probably a terrorist.' But he never was a threat to us. He didn't seem like a bad guy at all."²²

Aldawsari also kept himself private from the Muslim and Saudi student communities at Texas Tech. According to the imams at the main local mosque and a smaller mosque for Texas Tech students, Aldawsari never attended either mosque while living in Lubbock. Furthermore, according to Almohannad Ali Aghandi, president of the Saudi Student Association at Texas Tech, Aldawsari declined several invitations to attend meetings of the student group or join in their activities.²³

In July 2010, Aldawsari moved into a Lubbock apartment by himself and then transferred to South Plains College in January 2011.²⁴ According to the FBI, Aldawsari flunked out of Texas Tech and somehow avoided a review of his student visa that should have been conducted before he was able to transfer to South Plains College.²⁵

Beginning in December 2008, Aldawsari published a blog, entitled "From Far Away," in which he wrote about his time studying in America, sometimes in Arabic and sometimes in broken English. From late 2008 until the summer of 2009, Aldawsari made many blog posts regarding his growing fondness for America and depictions of multiple girls that he became infatuated with while studying at Vanderbilt and Texas.²⁶ In an August 23, 2009 post, Aldawsari said that he was beginning to love Lubbock.²⁷ In others he expressed an interest in a future career in America. For example in a May 11, 2009, blog post, Aldawsari wrote "This is an opportunity to be in the US to achieve my dream that I am working very hard and I am doing my best to catch it, that dream is mainly and simply to be an employee in google which is not impossible to achieve even if it

¹⁹ Elliot Blackburn, "Roommates: Aldawsari shy, aloof," *Amarillo Globe-News*, February 26, 2011.

²⁰ Savage and Shane, "U.S. Arrests Saudi Student."

²¹ Blackburn, "Roommates."

²² Trahan and Gillman, "Saudi terror suspect."

²³ McKinley and Wheaton, "Saudi Student."

²⁴ Trahan and Gillman, "Saudi terror suspect."

²⁵ Gellman, "Is the FBI Up to the Job?"

²⁶ McKinley and Wheaton, "Saudi Student."

²⁷ <http://fromfaraway90.blogspot.com/2009/08/i-arrived-in-lubbock-tx-one-week-ago.html>

is hard but it is still not impossible because there is nothing impossible for me.”²⁸ From many of his blog entries and from descriptions by his roommates, Khalid Aldawsari would not appear to be the lone wolf terrorist that attempted to construct a powerful explosive.

However, in 2010, he stopped writing blog entries in English and also moved out of student dorms to even further isolate himself from those around to him, possibly indicating he was beginning on his path to try to commit a terrorist act against the United States.

3. Motivation

Many details have yet to emerge about Aldawsari’s path to terrorism, but some factors that demonstrate his motivation for becoming a jihadi can be seen on his blog, his private journal that was discovered during an FBI search of his apartment, e-mails he sent to himself from separate e-mail addresses, and even his Facebook page. Despite initially using his “From Far Away” blog to discuss his time in America, movies he had seen, and American girls who had caught his affection, he began writing angrier and more radical blog posts in 2010.

According to the FBI affidavit in support of the criminal complaint against Aldawsari, his blog posts in 2010 began to show his growing discontent with the United States and growing support for radical Islam. In one from March 11, 2010, Aldawsari wrote:

You who created mankind and who is knowledgeable of what is in the womb, grant me martyrdom for Your sake and make Jihad easy for me only in Your path, for You have no partner, and make me reside in the high heaven eternally forever, and shield me in Your shadow on the day when there is no shadow, but Yours. My God, You are the one who responds to supplication.²⁹

Furthermore, on April 8, 2010, probably discussing American foreign policy in the Middle East, Aldawsari wrote “if this is the West’s version of freedom, and their peace policy, we [Muslims] have our own policies in freedom and it is war until...the infidels leave defeated.”³⁰ These posts demonstrate that Aldawsari saw bringing jihad to the United States as an ultimate goal of his and show that Aldawsari saw himself committing terrorism as an act of Allah’s will.

When the FBI conducted secret searches of Aldawsari’s apartment on February 14 and 17, 2011, they discovered and photographed his private journal which shows even more examples of Aldawsari’s discontent with the United States and his desire to commit an act of violence while in the United States. In one excerpt, in a verbatim translation by the FBI from the original Arabic writing, Aldawsari wrote

²⁸ http://fromfaraway90.blogspot.com/2009_05_01_archive.html

²⁹ United States of America v. Khalid Ali-M Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, United States District Court for the Northern District of Texas, February 23, 2011, 6. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/documents/khalid-aldawsari-complaint-affidavit.html?sid=ST2011022406551>

³⁰ U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, 6.

I excelled in my studies in high school in order to take advantage of an opportunity for a scholarship to America, offered by the Saululi government and its companies, so I applied with [Saudi corporations], and with the Traitor of the Two Holy Places scholarship program, and was accepted to all of them, thank God. I chose [a specific Saudi sponsoring corporation] for two reasons. First, it sends students directly to America...Second, the financial scholarship is the largest, which will help tremendously in providing me with the support I need for Jihad, God willing. 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. I put my trust in God, for he is the best Master and Authority.³¹

In this journal, assuming the FBI's translation is proven accurate in court, Aldawsari essentially spells out that he came to the United States to learn the necessary skills, and to be able, to conduct an act of terrorism in the United States. In other entries, Aldawsari also noted that he was inspired by the speeches of Osama bin Laden and that the attacks of September 11, 2001 produced a "big change" in his thinking.³²

Furthermore, his post explaining his reasons for coming to the United States also demonstrate Aldawsari's discontent with the Saudi monarchy. He called the Saudi monarchy the "Saululi government," a derisive term for the Saudi royal family, and accused the Saudi King, often called the Custodian of the Two Holy Places, of being the "Traitor of the Two Holy Places." Furthermore, on Aldawsari's Facebook personal profile, he lists a group called "STOP Israel's War Crimes in Gaza" and several anti-monarchy Saudi dissident groups as his interests.³³

4. Goals

Aldawsari was arrested in possession of several ingredients and equipment necessary to create his own explosive device. However, he had not fleshed out a plan that included specific targets or plans of action. Instead, Aldawsari was arrested as he was conducting research on potential targets and weaknesses in the United States. In his private writings and e-mails to himself, Aldawsari revealed many potential goals that he had for himself. According to the criminal complaint and FBI affidavit against Aldawsari, his intent, as outlined in the passage in his private journal, was to come to the United States to learn the skills necessary to carry out an attack in the United States. In an e-mail Aldawsari sent to himself, he wrote "one operation in the land of infidels is equal to ten operations against occupying forces in the land of Muslims."³⁴

Furthermore, in his private journal, Aldawsari expressed his desire to create a terrorist organization that would fall under the umbrella of al-Qaeda. According to the FBI affidavit, Aldawsari wanted to create "Jamaat Jund al-

³¹ U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, 9-10.

³² U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, 10.

³³ Savage and Shane, "U.S. Arrests Saudi Student."

³⁴ Finn, "FBI: Saudi Student."

Islam” to be able to train, fund, and assist members of his group to carry out his, and al-Qaeda’s, agenda.³⁵

5. Plans for violence

Although Aldawsari was arrested before he had obtained all of the materials necessary to create an explosive, he had made significant steps toward reaching that goal. He also conducted extensive internet research on how to create the explosives and on potential targets for attack. In his private journal, he also had outlined the next steps he presumably would have taken in his would-be terrorist plot had he not been arrested. While conducting research, Aldawsari used three e-mail addresses to send himself the summaries of his internet research so that they would be stored in a common location.³⁶ As his trial has yet to begin, the account of his actions that led to his arrest are based upon the FBI affidavit that led to his indictment on the charges of attempted use of weapons of mass destruction.

According to FBI electronic surveillance conducted on their raids of Aldawsari’s apartment, he was first noted conducting research on potential targets for attack in September 2010. In a September 22, 2010 e-mail that Aldawsari sent to himself entitled “Targets,” Aldawsari noted the names and addresses of three American citizens who served in the U.S. military and at some point were stationed in the Iraqi Abu Ghraib prison. Again in October, Aldawsari expanded his targets to more significant points of American infrastructure. In three separate e-mails that Aldawsari sent himself on October 25, 2010, he listed the names of twelve reservoirs and hydroelectric dams, nuclear power plants, and an internet link that shows real time New York City traffic cameras. The reservoirs and hydroelectric dams were sent in an e-mail with the subject “NICE TARGETS.” However, Aldawsari likely never picked a specific target for attack and aroused intense media interest from a February 6, 2011 e-mail he sent to himself with the subject line “TYRANT’S HOUSE” that contained former President George W. Bush’s Dallas, Texas home address.³⁷

Although his intended target is not exactly clear from the evidence collected by the FBI investigation, what is clear is that Aldawsari desired to create an explosive device using trinitrophenol, TNP. TNP is a chemical compound comprised of phenol, sulfuric acid, and nitric acids that, when processed together in the correct manner, can produce a powerful explosive.³⁸ Aldawsari came dangerously close to obtaining all the necessary chemicals and equipment to produce this explosive and, as found in his private journals, showed a desire to use these explosives for violent purposes.

On December 6, 2010, Aldawsari ordered three gallons of concentrated sulfuric acid from an Amazon.com online merchant and received the shipment a

³⁵ U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, 10.

³⁶ U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, 5. Aldawsari developed the pseudonym “Abu Zidan Al Najdi” in his personal journal and used the abu.zidan00@live.com e-mail address when researching potential targets.

³⁷ U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, 12.

³⁸ “Texas Resident Arrested,” Department of Justice.

week later. On December 13, 2010, he ordered 30 liters of concentrated nitric acid from Qualichem Technologies. Because the company required a non-residential address for shipping, Aldawsari had the chemicals delivered to a FedEx-Kinko's Store located near his apartment. From December 2010 to the end of January 2011, he acquired many materials and equipment necessary for building a bomb from sources he found on the internet including a soldering iron kit, electric wire, a stun gun, a battery tester, an alarm clock, and a screwdriver set from Amazon.com and a Hazmat suit from Ebay.com.³⁹ All of these materials were found during the February 14 and February 17, 2011 FBI searches of his apartment.

When Aldawsari sought to acquire the key and final ingredient for producing TNP, phenol, his terrorist intent was discovered by the FBI. On January 30, 2011, Aldawsari attempted to purchase 10 500-ml bottles of phenol from Carolina Biological Supply (CBS) for \$434.57. As earlier with Qualichem Technologies, Aldawsari was unable to ship the chemical to his apartment because it was a residential address. Aldawsari then attempted to have the phenol shipped to a Lubbock Con-way Freight office. However, Con-way returned the shipment to CBS and informed Aldawsari that he was not allowed to use Con-way as a shipping address. Because of difficulties with the shipment and because of Aldawsari's attempt to have the chemical sent to a residential address, CBS notified its security department of the "suspicious" purchase by Aldawsari, and the security department then notified the FBI of the purchase on February 1, 2011.⁴⁰ In addition, Con-way Freight notified the Lubbock Police Department when they received the shipment of phenol, and the police relayed this information to the FBI.

These two tips spurred a three week intense FBI investigation of Aldawsari. Four shifts of FBI agents conducted round-the-clock surveillance of Aldawsari, including following his car using vehicles containing StingRay transceivers that could record his cell phone conversations. Finally, with a search warrant issued by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, the FBI conducted the searches of Aldawsari's Lubbock apartment on February 14 and February 17, 2011.⁴¹ The first search was prematurely interrupted and a complete observation of suspicious materials in the apartment and of his computer was not completed until the second.

Once the FBI became aware of Aldawsari, they worked with CBS to further divine what his purpose for the ordered phenol was. On February 8, 2011, an FBI agent, under the guise of a CBS employee, contacted Aldawsari and asked him why he wished to purchase phenol from CBS. Aldawsari answered that he was associated with Texas Tech and wanted the phenol for "off-campus, personal research." However, at the time, Aldawsari was not attending Texas Tech anymore and was studying business at South Plains College. He then contacted CBS on February 10 and cancelled the order after voicing his frustrations for being continually bothered by CBS. However, this did not end Aldawsari's search

³⁹ U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, 5-9.

⁴⁰ U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, 3.

⁴¹ Gellman, "Is the FBI Up to the Job."

for phenol as the FBI investigation turned up a February 12, 2011 e-mail he sent to himself with instructions for producing phenol from aspirin.⁴²

In addition to finding the materials necessary to build Aldawsari's desired explosives and the research of targets for attack, the FBI investigation also found e-mails and journal entries listing Aldawsari's next steps in his desire to carry out jihad in the United States. A December 8, 2010 e-mail Aldawsari sent to himself contained detailed instructions with step-by-step pictures for turning a cell phone into a remote detonating device. A January 12, 2011 e-mail Aldawsari sent to himself also contained instructions on how to booby trap vehicles.⁴³ Additionally, in February, Aldawsari conducted internet searches of Dallas nightclubs' policy on bringing in backpacks and also of baby dolls, leading investigators to believe that he may have been planning to attack a nightclub with concealed explosives.⁴⁴

Among many other things, Aldawsari's journal listed his next steps for a possible future terrorist attack. These included obtaining a forged U.S. birth certificate, acquiring a U.S. driver's license and passport, traveling to New York City for at least a week, and scheduling car rentals for NYC online. While in New York City, the journal suggests, Aldawsari would alter his appearance and clothing before picking up each car rental and then, after booby-trapping the rental cars, placing them in crowded traffic centers during rush hour and simultaneously setting off explosions.⁴⁵ Aldawsari then hypothesized that he would need a place to hide after the bombings.

Although Aldawsari had acquired all but one of the chemicals necessary to begin producing his explosives, he was far from being able to conduct a real terrorist attack. His wide range of targets from hydroelectric dams to New York City traffic jams show that he was still at the beginning stages of a terrorist plot when he was discovered by the FBI. The FBI discovered all the materials and electronic research conducted by Aldawsari during their February searches and arrested him a week later at his apartment when they became certain that he was acting alone and before he could cause any harm to the American public.⁴⁶ As his bomb materials were still packed away when he was arrested, Aldawsari's capabilities at constructing an explosive device or ability to carry out an attack with the explosives is unknown. Although he flunked out of chemical engineering at Texas Tech, TNP can be produced with basic chemistry kits and skills.⁴⁷

Also important in determining the danger Aldawsari presented is to assess his bomb-making capabilities. In a study of whether the internet and its vast resources are as valuable to terrorists as the media has suggested, especially in terms of bomb-making, terrorism expert Michael Kenney found that while the internet is an excellent source for finding abstract technical knowledge on weapons manufacturing, it is not useful for getting the necessary experiential and

⁴² U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, 4-5.

⁴³ U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, 8-9.

⁴⁴ Savage and Shane, "U.S. Arrests Saudi Student."

⁴⁵ U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, 10.

⁴⁶ Gellman, "Is the FBI Up to the Job?"

⁴⁷ U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, 3.

practical knowledge terrorists need in executing plots involving weapons of mass destruction. Furthermore, Kenney wrote “one cannot become an effective bomb-maker simply by reading online manuals or watching instructional videos, no matter how detailed and reliable their preparations.” To have even a chance of success, he continues, a bomb maker would need advanced technical knowledge and a great deal of practical experience, usually gained through a professional science education, to build a bomb. Although Aldawsari studied chemical engineering at Texas Tech University because, as he had suggested in his writings, he wanted to learn how to build explosives, he flunked out of the class and was only taking a non-degree seeking, pre-engineering curriculum. Because he attended Texas Tech for such a short time and never was enrolled in the chemical engineering school, one could easily infer that Aldawsari never gained the necessary experience that Kenney argues is needed to be a competent bomb-maker. However, as Kenney says “Some internet-directed amateurs may succeed in building crude devices with the power to maim and kill, but the quality—and lethality—of these munitions will be limited by the perpetrators’ lack of technical knowledge and practical experience. The danger we face from Islamist terrorism comes less from virtual dilettantes and more from local militants that receive paramilitary instruction from knowledgeable veterans.”⁴⁸

This suggests that, even if Aldawsari was capable of producing the chemical explosive from raw ingredients, he did not possess the training, experience, or education to overcome other obstacles in building the bombs or remote detonating devices.

6. Role of informants

An FBI informant was not used against Aldawsari, as he was discovered by Carolina Biological Supply after placing the order for phenol. The only contact an FBI employee had with Aldawsari prior to his arrest was when an agent placed a call to him on February 8, 2011, under the guise of a CBS employee, asking why he wanted to purchase phenol. Aldawsari became angered with CBS after this call and cancelled his order for phenol.⁴⁹

7. Connections

According to the FBI investigation, Aldawsari did not appear to have any terrorist connections or other operatives involved in his bomb making plot. Despite being a Saudi transfer student, the investigation did not turn up any connections or contacts in the United States or abroad.⁵⁰ Although Aldawsari discussed his desire to create a terrorist organization in the United States that would fall under the umbrella of al-Qaeda, he was likely simply stating improbable dreams as he seemingly never attempted to recruit anyone and has been described as a loner.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Michael Kenney, “Beyond the Internet,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22(2) (2010), 192.

⁴⁹ U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, 4.

⁵⁰ McKinley and Wheaton, “Saudi Student.”

⁵¹ U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, 10.

8. Relation to the Muslim community

Despite being a Saudi citizen studying in the United States and a somewhat observant Muslim, Aldawsari never made any contacts with the local Muslim communities in which he was living. According to the imams at the mosques in Lubbock, Texas, they had never seen Aldawsari and he had never attended services. Additionally, Aldawsari did not seem to make connections with fellow Saudi-born students at the universities he attended. According to Almohannad Ali Aghamdi, president of the Saudi Student Association at Texas Tech, Aldawsari declined several invitations to attend meetings of the student group or join in their activities.⁵²

Aldawsari's arrest has spurred media interest into other Saudi students studying in the United States and into the student visa process for studying in the United States. According to the Saudi embassy, about 30,000 Saudi citizens are studying at U.S. colleges or universities under Saudi-government funded scholarships while approximately another 3,000 are studying in the U.S. on privately-funded ventures, like Aldawsari who received a financial scholarship package from BASIC, a Saudi corporation.⁵³ According to Nail al-Jubeir, a spokesman at the Saudi embassy, no other Saudi students have been arrested on terrorism-related charges in the United States since September 11, 2001.⁵⁴

9. Depiction by the authorities

From the onset after his arrest, Aldawsari has been depicted by authorities as a violent threat to the United States who was luckily caught before he could cause harm to American citizens. According to Robert E. Casey, Jr., FBI Special Agent in charge of the Dallas field office, "He was taking steps by himself, and it appeared that he intended to detonate the bombs on his own in the United States. This was a close call."⁵⁵

Additionally, Aldawsari's arrest has caused many members of the federal government to question the process by which Aldawsari obtained his student visa which enabled him to come to the United States and begin to plan a terrorist plot. House Homeland Security Chairman Peter King (R-NY) said in a Fox News interview "I think we have to realize that if they come here from these countries, they're going to be subjected to more surveillance than others. If they fit a certain profile, if you're coming from Saudi Arabia and you want to major in chemistry...I think you should be able to monitor the Internet and be able to see what these people are doing."⁵⁶ However, the ranking Democrat on the House Select Committee on Intelligence, Rep. C.A. "Dutch" Ruppertsberger (D-MD) responded to these comments with "We don't want to discourage people coming from other countries to come to our education systems, because that makes us stronger as a country. [Foreign students] are going to other countries, like China

⁵² McKinley and Wheaton, "Saudi Student."

⁵³ Trahan and Gillman, "Saudi terror suspect."

⁵⁴ Savage and Shane, "U.S. Arrests Saudi Student."

⁵⁵ McKinley and Wheaton, "Saudi Student."

⁵⁶ Jordy Yager, "Is arrest of Saudi student a 'see something' win, or security flaw?" TheHill.com, February 27, 2011.

and Russia, who I believe are a big threat to us from a military and power point of view. We can't discourage students from other countries coming to our country."⁵⁷

10. Coverage by the media

Because Aldawsari was conducting a lone wolf terrorist plot and had lofty goals for attacking targets ranging from New York City to former President George W. Bush's Dallas home, his arrest received heavy media coverage. From the onset, the media has depicted him as a violent terrorist threat. For example, in three separate *New York Times* articles, the alleged Aldawsari quote "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" has been highlighted as a sign of his violent intent before Aldawsari's trial presented the opportunity to contest the validity or accuracy of his Arabic journal entries.⁵⁸

Because of this, his defense attorney, Rob Hobson has argued that media coverage on Aldawsari has been one-sided and that it might not be possible for Aldawsari to receive a fair trial in Lubbock. After Aldawsari's first court hearing prior to his indictment, Hobson argued "This is not Alice in Wonderland, where the Queen said 'first the punishment then the trial.' This is America, where everyone is entitled to the presumption of innocence."⁵⁹

Because of the intense media coverage, U.S. District Court Judge Sam Cummings ordered all parties involved in the case to not speak with the news media following Aldawsari's indictment.⁶⁰ Cummings argued that the case had already received intense media coverage and further statements "could prejudice a fair trial."⁶¹

11. Policing costs

According to the Department of Justice Press Release following Aldawsari's arrest, the investigation and arrest was conducted by the FBI's Dallas Joint Terrorism Task Force, with assistance from the Lubbock Police Department. Additionally, the prosecution is being conducted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Richard Baker and Denise Williams from the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Northern District of Texas, and Trial Attorney David Cora from the Counterterrorism Section of the Justice Department's National Security Division.⁶² Aldawsari first appeared in court on February 25, 2011 and was indicted on March 28, 2011. His trial was scheduled to begin on May 2, 2011 but was delayed at the request of prosecutors until October 24, 2011.⁶³

⁵⁷ Yager, "Is arrest of Saudi student."

⁵⁸ McKinley and Wheaton, "Saudi Student." Savage and Shane, "U.S. Arrests Saudi Student." and Timothy Williams, "In Texas Courtroom, Saudi Denies Plotting Bomb Attacks," *New York Times*, March 28, 2011.

⁵⁹ McKinley and Wheaton, "Saudi Student."

⁶⁰ Logan G. Carver, "Aldawsari pleads not guilty, case set for trial," *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*, March 28, 2011.

⁶¹ Carver, "Aldawsari pleads not guilty."

⁶² "Texas Resident Arrested," Department of Justice.

⁶³ Clark, "Lubbock's Aldawsari terror case."

Following the FBI discovery of Aldawsari from a tip from the Carolina Biological Supply chemical firm, the FBI began a nearly month long intense investigation of Aldawsari.⁶⁴ The investigation consisted of 24-hour surveillance of Aldawsari by four shifts of FBI agents, including following his car using vehicles containing StingRay transceivers that could record his cell phone conversations. Additionally, with a search warrant issued by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, the FBI conducted two secret searches of Aldawsari's Lubbock apartment on February 14 and February 17, 2011.⁶⁵

12. Relevance of the internet

The internet was extremely relevant to the case. Aldawsari used common websites, such as Amazon.com and eBay.com, to obtain the necessary equipment and chemicals to begin building his explosive. He also used the internet to find and attempt to purchase phenol from Carolina Biological Supply and nitric acid from Qualichem Technologies.⁶⁶

Furthermore, he conducted his research on targets and found instructions for producing the explosives, constructing a remote detonator, and booby-trapping vehicles all from the internet. He stored all of the information he acquired in three separate e-mail accounts that have all been linked back to him.⁶⁷

Also relevant is his internet blog, "From Far Away."⁶⁸ Initially he wrote posts about enjoying being a student in the United States and about different girls that he had developed an affection for, and subsequently posted radical material in Arabic.

13. Are we safer?

Aldawsari's arrest has caused the American government, public, and FBI to increase their alertness against suspected Islamic radicals living in the United States. According to James T. Jacks, U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Texas, "yesterday's arrest demonstrates the need for and the importance of vigilance and the willingness of private individuals and companies to ask questions and contact the authorities when confronted with suspicious activities."⁶⁹ A *Time* article that shadowed FBI Director Robert Mueller during the FBI investigation of Aldawsari noted, "Good luck and shoe leather led the FBI to Aldawsari, the Saudi student. One of the trip-wire programs rolled out after 9/11 invited vendors of hazardous goods to report unusual purchases to the fed."⁷⁰

Furthermore, Aldawsari's arrest has caused many in the media and government to re-examine the danger of "lone-wolf" terrorists. The *Time* article noted "More than a year ago, Mueller raised some eyebrows when he testified that "homegrown and lone-wolf extremists pose an equally serious threat." But that message did not take root in the body politic or even in the national-security

⁶⁴ Gellman, "Is the FBI Up to the Job."

⁶⁵ Gellman, "Is the FBI Up to the Job."

⁶⁶ U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit, 5-6.

⁶⁷ U.S. v. Aldawsari, Criminal Complaint and Affidavit.

⁶⁸ <http://fromfaraway90.blogspot.com/>

⁶⁹ "Texas Resident Arrested," Department of Justice.

⁷⁰ Gellman, "Is the FBI Up to the Job."

establishment.”⁷¹ Michael Leiter, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center, recently told the Senate Homeland Security Committee that lone-wolf terrorists are what “keeps me up at night.”⁷² In an article discussing the lone-wolf terrorist threat, terrorism expert Max Abrahms noted that all four successful terrorist attacks on U.S. soil since September 11, 2001 have been conducted by operatives outside of any chain of command of a known terrorist organization. However, Abrahms later says “Instead of looking like Sept. 11, which required 19 men and other resources from the al-Qaida leadership, most lone wolf attacks kill just a single, unlucky bystander or nobody at all. American politicians and counterterrorism officials are particularly afraid of lone wolves operating within the United States. To date, however, such homegrown terrorists have taken just six Americans a year. Any deaths are too many, of course, but their low numbers from lone wolves hardly amount to a national nightmare.”⁷³ Abrahms concludes that, though lone-wolf attacks have resulted in successful, violent attacks against Americans, lone-wolf attacks do not represent a significant danger to the United States and instead show that al-Qaeda is experiencing an organizational demise if they are urging their followers to partake in lone-wolf attacks against Western nations instead of trying to recruit them and launch their own terrorist violence.

After Aldawsari’s arrest, federal lawmakers also debated whether his arrest is a signal of victory for Homeland Security, or a sign that there are still vulnerabilities in the government’s surveillance on terrorists. The chairman of the House Select Committee on Intelligence, Mike Rogers (R-Mich.), best sums up arguments made by Congressmen and argued for further vigilance when he said “from what we’ve heard so far it looks like this was a nice piece of work by the FBI and some alert citizens in preventing a potential terrorist attack. This case also highlights the need for continued vigilance against ‘lone wolf’ terrorist threats, as well as the need for Congress to make the ‘Lone Wolf’ provision of FISA [Foreign Intelligence Security Court] permanent so the FBI has this crucial tool at its disposal for use against precisely this type of threat.”⁷⁴

Regardless of whether Aldawsari’s arrest is a telling sign of homeland security weaknesses or of the authorities’ continued excellence in counterterrorism, his arrest and imprisonment is a clear victory for public safety. Assuming the FBI’s affidavit of their investigation proves accurate, he wanted to create weapons of mass destruction and let them loose on the American public. His arrest is a clear victory for the FBI in their attempts to protect the American public against violent would-be jihadis. Whether the FBI needs to take further steps and increase vigilance in their counterterrorism efforts remains to be seen, but if the American public stays alert against suspicious activity like the employees at Carolina Biological Supply and Con-way Freight, terrorists in the United States will have a much harder time executing any plot that would cause massive damage and injury to the United States.

⁷¹ Gellman, “Is the FBI Up to the Job.”

⁷² Max Abrahms, “Fear of ‘lone wolf’ misplaced,” *Baltimore Sun*, January 5, 2011.

⁷³ Abrahms, “Fear.”

⁷⁴ Yager, “Is arrest of Saudi student.”

14. Conclusions

The foiling of Khalid Ali-M Aldawsari's terrorist plans show promise that counterterrorism authorities and the general public are alert against possible terrorist actions that would be conducted against the United States. The FBI-tipoff by Carolina Biological Supply, in conjunction with the Lubbock Police Department notification by Con-way Freight, of Aldawsari's suspicious activity show that American companies are serious about catching suspicious behavior.

However, Aldawsari's case demonstrates how an individual can come dangerously close to creating a weapon of mass destruction with ease and relative anonymity. Only when Aldawsari attempted to purchase phenol were his actions discovered by the authorities. If he had at first produced phenol from aspirin or found another, less vigilant chemical vendor, as he was planning, he could have been able to produce an explosive and cause extreme harm to the American public. Furthermore, his arrest has caused many to question the large number of foreign students studying in the United States from countries known to harbor terrorists or to have terrorist connections. This becomes even more alarming when the fact that Aldawsari somehow avoided a required student visa review after flunking out of Texas Tech is taken into account.⁷⁵

Aldawsari's arrest has caused many American lawmakers to question the availability, process, and oversight of foreigners in the United States under student visas. As argued by House Homeland Security Chairman, Rep. Peter King (R-NY), "In this case, you have a student from Saudi Arabia, home of 15 of the 19 9/11 hijackers, on a student visa studying chemistry, with an interest in explosives. I believe we need to better screen student visa applicants, certainly those from countries like Saudi Arabia. Then once they are here studying we need to have a way to more closely monitor them."⁷⁶

Another issue to come from Aladawsari's arrest is America's need to be vigilant against lone-wolf terrorism. Although terrorism expert Max Abrahms concluded that lone-wolf terrorists are not to be as feared as the media and government officials have suggested, the government is growing warier of such types of attacks as they seem to be increasing in frequency. Regardless of Abrahms' conclusions, law enforcement authorities should, if they already have not, continue to evolve and develop their monitoring of lone-wolf terrorists. Whether or not they represent a serious threat to the American public will only be known with time. Law enforcement and the American people need to maintain vigilance against potential lone-wolf jihadis.

Regardless of an individual's feeling on this issue, Aldawsari's arrest shows the success of American counterterrorism efforts and opens up discussion of additional venues for monitoring to prevent even more terrorist plots in the United States. Although no definitive answer exists on the best way to police against lone-wolf terrorism in the United States, open discussion aids in developing new techniques and raising public awareness to the potential threat against violent jihadis from entering and attacking our country.

⁷⁵ Gellman, "Is the FBI Up to the Job."

⁷⁶ Yager, "Is arrest of Saudi student."