FBI investigates California attack as act of terror

Associated Press

SAN BERNARDINO, Calif. — The FBI announced Friday that it is investigating the mass shooting at a Southern California office party as an act of terrorism, but the agency's director said there is no indication the husband and wife who killed 14 people were part of a larger plot or members of a terror cell.

If the investigation confirms those initial suspicions, the attack would be the deadliest inspired by Islamic extremism on U.S. soil since Sept. 11.

While authorities did not cite specific evidence that led them to the terrorism focus, a U.S. law enforcement official said that the wife, Tashfeen Malik, had under a Facebook alias pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group and its leader. A Facebook official said Malik praised Islamic State in a post at 11 a.m. Wednesday, around the time the couple stormed a San Bernardino social service center and opened fire.

Malik and her husband, Syed Farook, died in a fierce gunbattle with authorities several hours after their commando-style assault on a gathering of Farook's colleagues from San Bernardino County's health department.

An Islamic State-affiliated news service called Malik and Farook "supporters" of their Islamist cause but stopped short of claiming responsibility for the attack.

FBI Director James Comey would not discuss whether anyone affiliated with ISIS communicated back to Malik, but he said there was no indication yet that the plot was directed by any other foreign terror group. He also declined to rule out that future possibility.

"The investigation so far has developed indications of radicalization by the killers and of potential inspiration by foreign terrorist organizations," Comey said. He cautioned that the investigation has not yet shown evidence the couple was part of a larger group.

Despite mounting signs of the couple's radicalization, there "is a lot of evidence that doesn't quite make sense," Comey said in a nod to the fact that the investigation was just two days old.

Attorneys representing Farook's family urged the public and media to wait for specific evidence before jumping to conclusions. They said none of his relatives had any indication either Farook or his wife held extremist views.

AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

A note, flowers and candles are placed at a makeshift memorial site honoring the victims of Wednesday's shooting rampage on Friday in San Bernardino, Calif.

David Bowdich, head of the FBI's Los Angeles office, said "a number of pieces of evidence" point to terrorism and that the agency was focused on that idea "for good reason." He would not elaborate.

The U.S. official who revealed the Facebook post was not authorized to discuss the case publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity. The Facebook official, who also spoke on condition of anonymity because the person was not allowed under corporate policy to be quoted by name, said the company discovered Wednesday's post on Thursday, removed the profile from public view and reported its contents to law enforcement.

Bowdich said he was not aware of the IS-affiliated Aamaq news service report but was not surprised IS would attempt to link itself to the attack. He said investigators were looking carefully to determine if there is an IS connection.

Farook and Malik rented a townhome where investigators said they found an arsenal of ammunition and homemade bombs. On Friday morning, the property's owner allowed reporters inside in an unusual scene broadcast live on cable TV.

Bowdich said the FBI was done with the scene. Analysts were trying to retrieve data from two cellphones found nearby that had been crushed in an apparent attempt to destroy the information inside.

"We hope that will take us to their motivation," he said.

Until Friday, federal and local law enforcement officials said terrorism was a possibility but that the violence could have stemmed from a workplace grudge.

Attorneys for Farook's family urged the public not to rush to judgment.

"If the most evidence there is to any affiliation is a Facebook account under another person's name ... then that's hardly anything at all," attorney David Chesley said.

Chesley and another attorney described Malik as a housewife who closely followed religious traditions. They said Farook's mother, who lived with the couple, never saw any of the weapons or bombs authorities found. The FBI questioned her Wednesday night and, according to the attorneys, said they would not release her until Farook's siblings came for questioning.

The couple's orphaned 6-month-old daughter is in the care of child protective services and the family will try to recover her next week.

Farook had no criminal record, and neither he nor his wife was under scrutiny by local or federal law enforcement before the attack, authorities said.

Malik, 27, was a Pakistani who grew up in Saudi Arabia and came to the U.S. in 2014 on a fiancée visa. Farook, a 28-year-old restaurant health inspector for the county, was born in Chicago to Pakistani parents and raised in Southern California.

Law enforcement officials have long warned that Americans acting in sympathy with Islamic extremists — though not on direct orders — could launch an attack inside the U.S. Using slick propaganda, the Islamic State in particular has urged sympathizers worldwide to commit violence in their countries.

Others have done so. In May, just before he attacked a gathering in Texas of people drawing cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad, a Phoenix man tweeted his hope that Allah would view him as a holy warrior.

Two weeks ago, with Americans on edge over the Islamic State attacks in Paris that left 130 people dead, Comey said that U.S. authorities had no specific or credible intelligence pointing to an attack on American soil.

Since March 2014, 71 people have been charged in the U.S. in connection with supporting ISIS, including 56 this year, according to a recent report from the George Washington University Program on Extremism. Though most are men, "women are taking an increasingly prominent role in the jihadist world," the report said.

It was not immediately clear whether Malik exhibited any support for radical Islamists before she arrived in the U.S. — or, like scores of others arrested by the FBI, became radicalized through online or in-person associations after arriving.

Friends of the soft-spoken Farook who knew him from his daily prayers at a mosque in San Bernardino said they saw nothing to make them think he was violent. They said Farook reported meeting his future wife online.

To receive her visa, Malik was subjected to a vetting process the U.S. government describes as vigorous. It includes in-person interviews, fingerprints, checks against terrorist watch lists and reviews of her family members, travel history and places where she lived and worked.

Foreigners applying from countries that are home to Islamic extremists — such as Pakistan — undergo additional scrutiny before the State Department and Homeland Security approve their applications.

Latest shooting doesn't fit into familiar gun debate

WASHINGTON (AP) — As investigators search for a motive behind the deadly rampage in San Bernardino, politicians are searching for a way to talk about it.

The details of the California massacre at a holiday party — pointing at a possible link to Islamic militants and raising questions about domestic extremism — quickly knocked both Republicans and Democrats off their talking points, upending what has become a grim and predictable ritual in American politics.

Democrats who have vowed to use every mass shooting as a moment to call for new gun laws were tempering there rallying cries. Republicans who point to mental health services as the solution had begun to blame extremist views.

In an interview Friday morning, Florida Sen. Marco Rubio said "we have a violence problem in America" but added it's not exclusive to guns. A U.S. citizen with a clean background but extremist views is perhaps the most significant threat, he said.

"That is a very significant, difficult threat to confront," the Florida Republican said on "CBS This Morning."

Hillary Clinton also moved carefully in that direction. "It's becoming clearer that we are dealing with an act of terrorism," she said Thursday. "It does raise some serious questions about how we need to be protecting ourselves."

Addressing those questions will become a far more complex debate — with fewer clear-cut policy prescriptions — than the well-trod conversation over gun control.

President Barack Obama has said he worries about the difficulties of preventing a homegrown or "lone-wolf" attacker on U.S. soil — and the limits of security measures to prevent them. But proposals for tighter domestic security measures or expanded intelligence gathering powers are politically fraught. For Republicans the issue could become quick campaign fodder — although they risk politicizing a national security threat, without offering a clear alternative.

San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department via AP

This photo provided by the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department shows weapons carried by suspects at the scene of the shootout.

Obama has tried to walk a fine line in the discussion in, mindful of an ongoing investigation and shifting circumstances. The White House has deferred to law enforcement and on Friday allowed the FBI to announce the probe had become a terrorism investigation.

Briefing reporters, FBI Director James Comey said the two suspects showed signs of radicalization but were not part of a broader network.

There's still "a lot of evidence that doesn't quite make sense," he said.

In his only extended comments on the shooting, the president asked for patience, assured Americans they were safe and, notably, toned down his typically full-throated call for congressional action on gun control.

After a briefing from his national security team on Thursday, Obama asked the American people and "legislatures" to find a way to make "it a little harder" for people to get guns.

"And we're going to have to, I think, search ourselves as a society to make sure that we can take basic steps that would make it harder — not impossible, but harder — for individuals to get access to weapons," he said.

The White House's reaction was viewed by some as an attempt to downplay the possibility that a terrorist attack had occurred on the president's watch and to divert attention.

"An act of evil unfolded in California. President Obama used it not as a moment to inform or calm the American people; rather, he exploited it to push his gun control agenda," National Rifle Association executive director Chris Cox said in a statement. "The plain truth is that the president cannot keep us safe. And his policies would leave us defenseless."

Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump also suggested Obama was dodging the issue.

"Our president doesn't want to use the term," Trump said Thursday. "But it turns out it probably was related — radical Islamic terrorism."

Republicans also have had to adjust their message. In the hours after the shooting, Trump initially cast such shootings "a mental health issue, to a large extent."

The back-and-forth between the parties over gun control, gun rights and the role of the mental health in mass violence has become routine — in part because Obama, Clinton and other prominent Democrats have begun to welcome the conversation.

In October, after 9 people were killed by a gunman at Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Obama said he wasn't afraid of politicizing the debate and vowed keep up a steady drumbeat for new gun laws.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest has said that Obama was not backing off his push to drive a conversation about gun measures. White House lawyers are continuing to search for ways Obama can expand required background checks without congressional approval.

BRIEFLY

White House taking a look at women and the military draft

WASHINGTON (AP) — The government is deliberating whether to propose Selective Service changes that would make women eligible for the military draft, the White house said Friday, a day after the Pentagon said it would no longer bar women from combat jobs.

The Defense Department has prepared an analysis of how the Pentagon change could affect the U.S. Military Selective Service Act, said White House spokesman Josh Earnest.

Earnest said President Barack Obama has not expressed his views to the Pentagon.

The comments came a day after Defense Secretary Ash Carter announced he was ordering the military to open all military jobs to women, including the most dangerous commando posts.

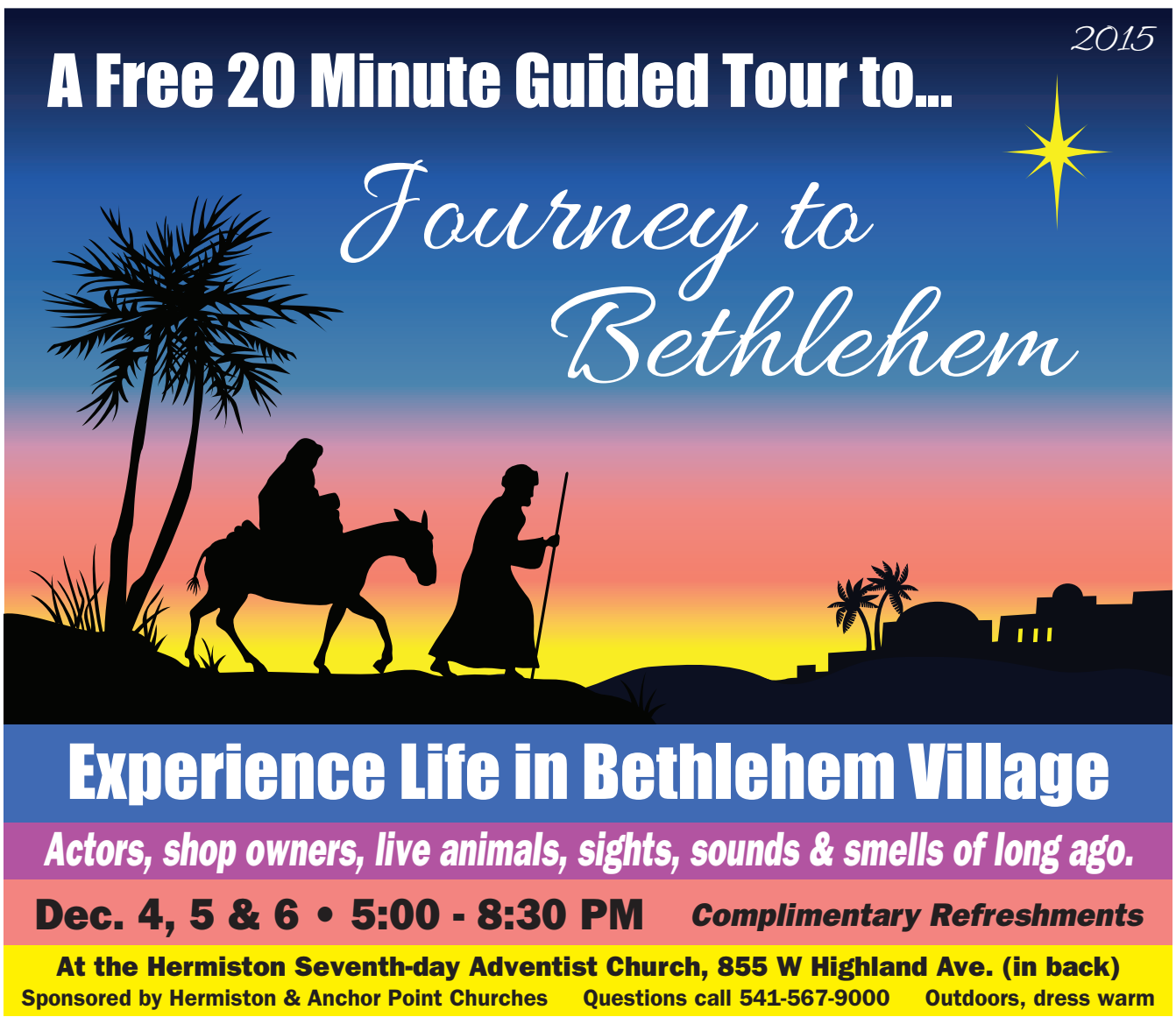
Carter's move opens up a total of about 220,000 jobs that were previously closed to women.

The Selective Service Act requires eligible men to register for the draft when they turn 18 or face fines. Registrants can be called up for compulsory service until they are 26 years old, though none have been drafted in decades.

Germany OKs military mission against Islamic State group

BERLIN (AP) — Germany stepped up its contribution to the fight against the Islamic State group on Friday, with lawmakers overwhelmingly voting in favor of sending reconnaissance jets, a tanker plane and a frigate to provide broad noncombat support to the U.S.-led coalition flying airstrikes against the militants.

The move answers a call for help from France following last month's deadly attacks in Paris. IS militants claimed responsibility for the Nov. 13 attacks that killed 130 people and wounded hundreds.

On Friday, Belgian and French authorities said they were hunting two new suspects in the Paris carnage. The men used fake identity cards and sent money to a relative of the man who orchestrated the attacks the day before the ringleader died in a shootout with French police, the Belgian prosecutor's office said.

The German Parliament voted 445 in support of the mission against IS and 146 against, with seven abstentions. The plan received wide support from the ranks of Chancellor Angela Merkel's governing coalition. German opposition lawmakers, however, questioned the effectiveness of military operations.