

Jihad Jane: A Vow Is Confirmed, a Jihad Grows

Colleen LaRose, the middle-aged American woman who called herself Jihad Jane, hurried to the computer in her duplex near Philadelphia—the place where she had spent months entertaining murder.

Minutes earlier, an FBI agent had left a card on her door, requesting a call, and LaRose had known precisely what to do. She emailed her al-Qaida handler for advice.

It was July 17, 2009, and almost four months had passed since LaRose had agreed to kill in the name of Allah. Now, the FBI left a calling card on her doorstep. How had they found her? And what did they know?

Her al-Qaida handler, Eagle Eye, lived in Pakistan. He was wise. He was pious. He would guide her.

LaRose, now 46, had never seen his face, but during online chats, he had seen hers. Her blonde hair, fair skin and green eyes made her a prized recruit, especially for the undertaking Eagle Eye had ordered. She would blend in nicely, avoiding suspicion. Eagle Eye's plot called for her to travel to Sweden and murder Lars Vilks, the artist who had blasphemed the Prophet Mohammad.

When LaRose reached Eagle Eye, he told her to call the agent back. Find out how much the FBI knows, he said.

Obediently, LaRose dialed the number. The agent picked up.

Have you ever visited extremist Islamic forums? he asked.

No, never, she lied.

Have you ever solicited money for terrorists?

No. Another lie.

Do you know anyone who goes by the online name Jihad Jane?

No, LaRose said.

The call didn't last long, and the FBI agent didn't reveal much. She couldn't tell if the FBI had seen her YouTube posts supporting al-Qaida and violent jihad.

For more than a year, LaRose had clashed online with YouTube Smackdown, a group that flagged and reported hate speech and jihadist activity. Maybe they had contacted the FBI. But so what? Her YouTube rants couldn't be considered a crime.

Then again, what if the FBI knew more? What if agents had read messages LaRose exchanged with Eagle Eye in Pakistan or his associate Black Flag in Ireland? The men were al-Qaida—that's what they said, anyway.

What about her jihadi friends inside the United States—the woman in Colorado and the teenager in Maryland? Did the FBI know about them? Or about her pledge to kill the Swedish artist?

Despite the concerns, LaRose plunged forward. Without disguising herself, she began contacting fellow jihadists online. She warned them of the FBI's visit and asked them to delete anything that might prove incriminating.

Then LaRose took the next step on her path to martyrdom – an act she later described as one of the proudest moments in the conspiracy to kill the artist in Europe.

She found a bargain flight to Amsterdam for \$400.

"I went straight to the airline," she says today. "I didn't use no middle person. I also made it two weeks ahead of time."

The plot, loose as it was, was advancing. Jihad Jane booked the flight for August 23.

The Honor Student

Shortly after the FBI agent left her duplex, LaRose emailed a high school student who lived near Baltimore, about 150 miles away.

Please contact jihadi forum administrators, LaRose begged the teen. "Ask him to PLEASE remove ALL my posts ... because I told the FBI guy I don't know that site."

The teenager, who went by Hassan online, did as asked. "She is being threatened by the FBI," he explained in a message to the forum administrators.

Hassan wasn't a creative pseudonym like Jihad Jane. It was simply the middle name of Mohammed H. Khalid, a gangly Pakistani immigrant who lived with his parents, older brother and two younger sisters in Ellicott City, Md.

Khalid, 15, had met Jihad Jane on YouTube months earlier and their online friendship had grown quickly. By now, they were talking to some of the same people overseas: an al-Qaida operative named Eagle Eye and a Muslim man in Ireland who called himself Black Flag.

Like LaRose, Khalid had become radicalized watching videos of Muslim children maimed or killed in attacks by Israeli or American forces. Khalid was not a convert. He had been born a Muslim in Dubai and raised in Pakistan from age 11 to 14.

His family, classic American immigrants seeking a better life for their children, had arrived in Maryland in 2007. Khalid's father delivered pizzas. His mother kept the home.

The family of six squeezed into a modern-day tenement, a tiny two-bedroom apartment selected for its location inside the best school district his parents could afford. In one bedroom, Khalid and his brother shared a mattress. In the other, his sisters lived beside stacked boxes of perfume the family peddled at a weekend flea market. Their parents slept on a mattress in the dining room.

Khalid excelled during his first two years at Mt. Hebron High School. He earned A's in English, Algebra, Science and U.S. History. He joined the chess club and later became an administrator for the school web site.

Although his parents were thrilled with Khalid's grades, they began to notice subtle changes. He seemed withdrawn and spent so much time alone in his bedroom on his laptop. They worried he might be downloading porn.

If only.

Eager to learn more about his Muslim heritage, the 15 year old had stumbled onto violent jihadi videos and become addicted. The anti-American rhetoric proved intoxicating to an immigrant boy struggling to find an identity in a place that embraced neither his race nor his religion.

Khalid began translating from Urdu to English sermons and violent jihadi videos – snuff-style images of U.S. soldiers in the throes of death, and beheadings of Americans Nick Berg and Daniel Pearl. Khalid posted the videos and began to solicit money online for al-Qaida. He never aspired to kill anyone personally. He later described himself as a “keyboard warrior.”

“I will be a great facilitator,” he wrote to a friend.

To shield his identity, Khalid studied basic terrorist tradecraft – how to use programs such as Pidgin to encrypt chats and Tor to cloak his location. He learned to use code words – for example, “HK” in place of “jihad.” The letters were chosen because J falls between H and K on the keyboard.

Now, in mid-July 2009 – around the time Jihad Jane warned him about the FBI–Khalid launched a new online endeavor. It was brimming with teenage bravado. He called the blog Path to Martyrdom/Resisting the War Against al-Islaam. From the blog, Khalid linked to hundreds of videos of al-Qaida sermons and violent attacks.

He intended Path to Martyrdom to be anonymous. His keystrokes betrayed him.

Pivoting between maintaining the school's website and his new jihadist blog, he inadvertently linked the "About Me" section of Martyrdom to the wrong web page—the page for his high school track team.

Jamie Joins

On Aug. 1, 2009—around the time LaRose found her bargain ticket to Europe—a 31-year-old woman sat before a laptop at her mother's kitchen table in the remote town of Leadville, Colo.

Jamie Paulin Ramirez felt stifled. Her young son, Christian, bounded past every now and then, and her nosy mother kept making excuses to stroll by.

As discreetly as she could, Ramirez tried to shield the screen. She and her mom had clashed about her conversion to Islam. It wasn't that her mother objected to the religion; she had married a Muslim herself. She just thought her daughter was overzealous.

Ramirez feared her mom would launch into a tirade if she caught her chatting with her new Muslim friends, just as her mother criticized her for wearing a head scarf, or hijab.

"When I would pray she would scream at me," Ramirez recalled in a document reviewed by Reuters. "When I would wear my hijab to work and to the store, she would say it was embarrassing."

One of Ramirez's new online friends was another recent convert to Islam, a woman from Pennsylvania who sometimes called herself Jihad Jane. They seemed a lot alike—they were both white, blonde, Americans. And each had gravitated toward Muslim men in Europe, including one man in Ireland. He had been trying to persuade Ramirez to bring her son and join him there.

On this day, Jihad Jane wrote with big news: "Soon, I will be leaving for Europe to be with other brothers & sisters. When I get to Europe, I will send for you to come be there with me... This place will be like a training camp as well as a home."

"I would love to go over there," Ramirez replied.

Their chat turned to politics. And, years later, the brief exchange that followed would become part of the government's case against both of them.

Jihad Jane: "When our brothers defend our faith their homes, they are terrorist. Fine, then I am a terrorist and proud to be this."

Ramirez: "That's right ... If that's how they call it, then so be it. I am what I am."

Ramirez was raised a Methodist, but she had become embittered toward God and abandoned religion years earlier following her sister's death from cancer.

Thrice divorced, Ramirez had moved in with her mother to save money. But they quarreled often, especially about her young son – what he should read, how he should pray, what he should eat for dinner, whether he should wear his hair short or long.

Ramirez had been looking for a reason to leave.

Her turn toward Islam had begun the year before, while researching a paper for a college class. Intrigued by what she learned about the religion, she continued reading. After a few months, she slipped down to a Denver-area mosque and converted.

Now, her new, nonjudgmental friends on Islamic forums were enticing her to join them. The man in Ireland – the one Jihad Jane knew as Black Flag – pressed Ramirez hardest.

Ramirez knew the man only by his real name, Ali Damache, and in his latest message to her, he persisted: Bring your son.

Marry me. I will teach you Arabic and the mystical beauty of the Koran.

Ramirez hesitated. Men had burned her so many times. She liked what she knew of Damache. He was nice – he complimented her on the color schemes of her hijabs. Even so...

Damache urged her to ask Allah for guidance. Pray for a week, each night before bedtime, he said, then consider the colors of the dreams: If the dreams come in white or green, it is a sign that she should to fly to Ireland with her son; if the dreams come in red or black, she and her son should stay in Colorado.

Ramirez struggled to recall her dreams, but it wouldn't matter. Damache told her he had prayed, too, and his dreams were glowing green – the color of Islam, and of Ireland.

OK, Ramirez agreed, that must be a sign from Allah. She began shopping for two plane tickets to Ireland.

The Passports

In the weeks leading up to her own flight to Europe, LaRose grew excited about what lay ahead.

Finally, she would meet some true Muslims—men more righteous than she was, people wholly committed to the cause. They would teach her to pray and the ways of Allah. More important, they would accept her as one of their own.

It would be an honor to fly to Amsterdam for training, then travel on to Sweden to carry out the killing.

Her instructions: to shoot the artist Vilks six times in the chest. "That way," LaRose recalls today, "they know it was not an accident. It was intended."

A short while before her flight, LaRose stole her boyfriend's passport and birth certificate, presumably to provide false identification for the terrorists. LaRose located two of the boyfriend's passports, one current and one expired, as well as

several birth certificates.

Following her handler's instructions, LaRose mailed everything to young Khalid near Baltimore.

Then, days before the flight to Amsterdam and the start of her new life, the realities of her old one intervened: Her boyfriend's father suffered a heart attack. Soon after, he died.

LaRose wasn't deterred. She let her al-Qaida associates know she was still coming. "I will be away from here in a couple days," she wrote. "Then ... I will get to work on important matters."

Within hours, LaRose heard a knock on the door of her home near Philadelphia.

The FBI had returned. This time, LaRose answered.

HOW THE SERIES WAS REPORTED:

JANE'S JIHAD is based on six months of reporting in Pennsylvania, Texas, Maryland, Colorado, Washington, D.C., and Ireland. The accounts, including the thoughts and actions of characters in the stories, are based on court records and other documents, many of them confidential, as well as interviews with people involved in the case. Reporter John Shiffman gained exclusive access to those documents and individuals. Many spoke only on condition of anonymity. In Ireland, the law forbids the government and defense lawyers from commenting until court proceedings are completed. In the United States, prosecutors do not typically comment before sentencing. The Reuters interview with Colleen LaRose, the woman who called herself Jihad Jane, is the only one she has granted. This is Part 2; [click here](#) for Part 1 of the series.

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