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James B. Comey

Statement on Orlando Mass Shooting

delivered 13 June 2016, FBI Headquarters, Washington, D.C.



AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio

I want to echo what the Deputy Attorney General said just now. Our hearts are broken and ache for the people who were lost in Orlando, those wounded, and their families. We are so sorry for your loss and your suffering.

I also want to say a word of thanks and express admiration for the work of local law enforcement in Orlando. They showed professionalism and extraordinary bravery that saved lives. We are very lucky that such good people choose lives of service in law enforcement.

And last, I want say a word of thanks to the people who rendered care that saved lives at the scene. The docs, the EMTs, the nurses, the victim specialists, and the ordinary citizens who stopped to help family and friends. You showed us the best part of humanity in the midst of terrible loss.



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As you know, this is a federal terrorism investigation led by the FBI, with the assistance, as we always do, of our state, local, and federal partners. The reason for that is there are strong indications of radicalization by this killer, and a potential inspiration by foreign terrorist organizations.

We are spending a tremendous amount of time, as you would imagine, trying to understand every moment of this killer's path to that terrible night in Orlando -- to understand his motives, and to understand the details of his life. You will notice that I am not using the killer's name, and I will try not to do that. Part of what motivates sick people to do this kind of thing is some twisted notion of fame or glory, and I don't want to be part of that for the sake of the victims and their families; and so that other twisted minds don't think that this is a path to fame and recognition.

So what I [want] to do is give you a sense of what we know so far, and then tell you as much as I can about our past contact with the killer. We are going through the killer's life, as I said, especially his electronics, to understand as much as we can about his path and whether there was anyone else involved, either in directing him or in assisting him. So far, we see no indication that this was a plot directed from outside the United States, and we see no indication that he was part of any kind of network.

It is also not entirely clear at this point just what terrorist group he aspired to support -- although he made clear his affinity at the time of the attack for ISIL, and generally, leading up to the attack, for radical Islamist groups. He made 911 calls from the club during the attack at about 2:30 in the morning, Sunday morning. And there were three different calls. He called and he hung up. He called again and spoke briefly with the dispatcher, and then he hung up. And then the dispatcher called him back again and they spoke briefly. So there were three total calls.

During the calls he said he was doing this for the leader of ISIL, who he named and pledged loyalty to, but he also appeared to claim solidarity with the perpetrators of the Boston Marathon bombing, and solidarity with a Florida man who died as a suicide bomber in Syria for al Nusra Front, a group in conflict with the so-called Islamic State. The bombers at the Boston Marathon and the suicide bomber from Florida were not inspired by ISIL, which adds a little bit to the confusion about his motives.



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And of course we're working to understand what role anti-gay bigotry may have played in motivating this attack, an attack that occurred during the very month when we recognize and celebrate our LGBT brothers and sisters.

Again, it's early. We're working hard to understand the killer, and his motives, and his sources of inspiration, but we are highly confident that this killer was radicalized, and at least, in some part, through the Internet.

So that's what we've been doing. Now let me tell you what I can about the FBI's prior contact with the killer. We first became aware of him in May of 2013. He was working as a contract security guard at a local court house. And he made some statements that were inflammatory and contradictory that concerned his coworkers about terrorism. First, he claimed family connections to al Qaeda. He also said that he was a member of Hezbollah, which is a Shia terrorist organization that is a bitter enemy of the so called Islamic State, ISIL. He said he hoped that law enforcement would raid his apartment and assault his wife and child so that he could martyr himself.

When this was reported to us, the FBI's Miami office opened a preliminary investigation, and over the next 10 months we attempted to determine whether he was possibly a terrorist -- something we do in hundreds and hundreds of cases all across the country.

Our investigation involved introducing confidential sources to him, recording conversations with him, following him, reviewing transactional records from his communications, and searching all government holdings for any possible connections, any possible derogatory information. We then interviewed him twice. He admitted making the statements that his co-workers reported, but explained that he did it in anger because he thought his co-workers were discriminating against him and teasing him because he was Muslim.

After 10 months of investigation, we closed the preliminary investigation. Two months later in July of 2014, the killer's name surfaced again in an indirect way. Our Miami office was investigating the Florida man who had blown himself up for the Nusra Front in Syria -- again, the Nusra Front being an al Qaeda group in conflict with ISIL. And we learned from the investigation that the killer knew him casually from attending the same mosque in that area of Florida. But our investigation turned up no ties of any consequence between the two of them.



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In the course of that investigation, one witness told us, when asked, "Do you know anybody else who might be radicalizing," that he had once been concerned about the killer because the killer had mentioned al-Awlaki videos. But the -- the witness had concluded that he later got married, and had a child, and got a job as a security guard, and so he was no longer concerned about him.

Our investigation again turned and interviewed the killer to find out whether he had any significant contacts with the suicide bomber from Nusra, determined that he did not, and then the inquiry continued focusing on the suicide bomber with no further focus on the Orlando killer.

We will continue to look forward in this investigation, and backward. We will leave no stone unturned, and we will work all day and all night to understand the path to that terrible night. We're also going to look hard at our own work to see whether there is something we should have done differently. So far, the honest answer is: I don't think so. I don't see anything in reviewing our work that our agents should have done differently, but we'll look at in an open and honest way, and be transparent about it. Our work is very challenging. We are looking for needles in a nationwide haystack, but we're also called up to figure out which pieces of hay might someday become needles. That is hard work. If we can find a way to do that better, we will.

We will also do our best to be transparent about what we find going forward, consistent with our need to do an investigation in a good way, but we will tell you as much as we possibly can.

And let me close by saying something I have said before: We know that this killing is upsetting to all Americans. We hope that our fellow Americans will not let fear become disabling because that is what these savages want. We hope that instead, you will channel this sense of anxiety into something more positive, which is an awareness of your surroundings, and the seeking of opportunities to help your fellow Americans, as we saw with the tremendous lines of people giving blood in Orlando.

If you channel that anxiety into awareness, you can live your life and allow those of us who are paid to investigate and to stop terrorists to do that work while you live the full life that this great country offers you.



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If you see something, tell us so we can look at it. In every single one of our cases, as we look back, somebody always sees something that they should of told us and they didn't.

So our request to you is please don't let them make you work into a state of anxiety that is disabling. Find ways to channel that into a healthy awareness of your surroundings, and live your lives.

And we will keep you posted on what we learn from doing our work.

Thank you very much.