

FBI investigating San Bernardino attack as an act of terrorism

Suspects attempted to destroy 'digital fingerprints' but Tashfeen Malik allegedly made pledge of allegiance to Isis in a Facebook post on day of the attack

Rory Carroll in San Bernardino and Joanna Walters in New York

Saturday 5 December 2015 09.34 EST

The San Bernardino shooting that killed 14 people is being investigated as an act of terrorism, the FBI has confirmed, as it emerged that the couple who carried out the attack appear to have had links to Islamic State.

"As of today, based on the information and the facts that we know ... we are now investigating these horrific acts as an act of terrorism," FBI assistant director David Bowdich told a press conference.

The move comes after reports that the **woman who helped slaughter 14 people in a gun massacre in California pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (Isis).**

Tashfeen Malik, 27, swore allegiance to the terror group in a Facebook post on Wednesday, the same day she and her husband, Syed Rizwan Farook, committed the rampage, US officials said on Friday, according to numerous media reports.

A Facebook executive said Malik's online post was made as the attacks began, the Associated Press reported. Law enforcement officials said it could be a "game changer" in the investigation. It is likely to shift political debate over the massacre - the worst mass shooting in the US in three years - from gun control to terrorism, immigration and radical Islam.

Speaking later in Washington DC, FBI director James Comey said the investigation had been taken on by his agency amid indications of radicalisation by the killers, and because they had been potentially inspired by foreign terrorist organisations.

However, he said there was "no indication that the killers are part of an organised larger group or form part of a cell. There is no indication that they are part of a network".

It has since emerged that Islamic State acknowledged the attacks in a regular radio broadcast, saying they had been carried out by "followers" of the group. "Two followers of Islamic State attacked several days ago a centre in San Bernadino in California, opening fire inside the centre, leading to the deaths of 14 people and wounding more than 20 others" the group's daily broadcast al-Bayan said, giving information already widely reported. The statement stopped short of a full claim of responsibility.

The assistant FBI director said that several pieces of evidence "essentially pushed us off the cliff

to say we are now investigating this as an act of terrorism". Bowdich confirmed that the two attackers had attempted to destroy their "digital fingerprints" and that two cellphones had been found, crushed, in a bin near the scene of the shooting.

He confirmed that evidence was being retrieved from the phones, however, adding there has been "some telephonic connections between at least one of these individuals and other subjects of our investigation". Bowdich said he knew of contacts made within the US, not overseas, but that the bureau was working with foreign partners to clarify that.

He also confirmed that he was aware of the Facebook post that had been cited in earlier reports. He said there were no other suspects under arrest, adding that an "acquaintance" who bought two guns on behalf of Farook was so far not under arrest. He said he did not know whether Malik radicalised her husband. "Being a husband myself we're all influenced to some extent, but I don't know the answer."

The assistant director also expressed concern that the suspects were not on law enforcement radar before the attack. "Of course I'm concerned. We didn't know. There's nothing that we've seen yet that would've triggered us to know."

But he added: "Is it possible there may be future arrests? We don't know. Are there others and are they based in the US, are they outside the US - we don't know the answer."

Malik, who was Pakistani, and Farook, 28, an Illinois-born US citizen and the son of Pakistani immigrants, died in a shootout with police hours after killing 14 people and wounding 21 in the Inland Regional Center social services agency in San Bernardino, about 60 miles (100km) east of Los Angeles. Most of the victims were Farook's colleagues.

Citing law enforcement officials and government sources, Reuters, the Associated Press, CNN and the New York Times reported that Malik pledged allegiance to the Isis leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, on Facebook. CNN's sources said she made the posts while the attack was happening. Other accounts said she used an alias and deleted the messages before the attack.

The officials said investigators were still looking into additional motives, including possible workplace tensions over religion.

Farook, described by relatives and colleagues as a quiet, reserved and devout Muslim, was a county environmental health inspector. He had been attending a day-long training session, with a holiday-themed luncheon, before leaving mid-morning and returning with Malik. Both wore masks and combat-style black clothing and wielded assault rifles, according to witnesses.

One of the dead was Nicholas Thalasinis, a Jewish colleague with outspoken views, and blog postings, about Islam and jihadis. He reportedly had a heated argument with Farook about two weeks before the massacre. There are unconfirmed reports that Farook may have been involved in another argument shortly before leaving the gathering.

The couple appeared to have prepared for a dramatic, bloody confrontation: they stockpiled pipe bombs and thousands of rounds of ammunition at home and several days before the attack deleted their electronic information, according to the officials who briefed the media.

Several days earlier they also rented a black SUV, used in their dramatic final gun battle with

police. Before heading to the Inland Regional Center they left their six-month-old daughter with Farook's mother, saying they had a medical appointment.

'I think he married a terrorist'

Malik's alleged oath to Isis intensified scrutiny on her role and background.

She was born in Pakistan and travelled on a Pakistani passport, and recently lived in Saudi Arabia. She apparently met Farook online - he posted profiles on Muslim dating websites - and met in person when he travelled to Saudi Arabia last year.

They came to the US together in July 2014, Bowdich told a news conference. Malik traveled with K-1 visa, which lets people enter the US to marry an American citizen.

Christian Nwadike, who worked with Farook for five years, told CBS that his co-worker had been different since he returned from Saudi Arabia. "I think he married a terrorist," Nwadike said.

Syed Nisar Hussain Shah, one of Malik's professors in the pharmacy department at Bahauddin Zakariya University, said she was a diligent student and one of the small minority of women who wore a veil. "She remained always in a veil and she was not mixing with other students. She was shy," he said.

During her studies she lived with other students in the women's hostel at the university. After completing her five-year course in 2012 she moved to Saudi Arabia to be with her parents, Dr Shah said.

Comey said hundreds of officers were working on the case around the world and a large volume of electronic data was being exploited even though the killers had tried to conceal their movements. Without going into detail, he said there were elements of the evidence that "did not make sense" to investigators.

The alleged Isis connection will tilt political debate over the massacre from gun control to immigration, radical Islam and national security, potentially boosting Donald Trump, Ben Carson and other Republican presidential contenders who have focused on those issues.

Obama said the attack may have been motivated by a mix of reasons, including extremist ideology.

Publicly, the FBI continued to reserve judgment. "We don't know the motive," Bowdich said on Thursday. "We cannot rule anything out at this point. We don't know if this was the intended target or there was something that triggered him to do this immediately."

On Friday, David Chelsey, a lawyer for Farook and Malik's family, said many details "do not add up".

"There are a lot of disconnects and there are a lot of unknowns and there are a lot of things that quite frankly don't add up, or seem implausible," he told CNN.

Later at a news conference in Los Angeles, the lawyers played down any terrorist link and suggested loneliness and teasing at work may have contributed to the attack. "Someone made

fun of his beard. He was a very isolated, introverted individual with really no friends that we could identify,” Chesley said.

They said the alleged link to terrorism was tenuous. “All there is thus far is some nebulous thing that someone looked at something on Facebook,” said Chesley. Visiting a page did not signify endorsement, he added.

The lawyers disputed the characterisation of Malik as a terrorist who radicalised her husband, saying she was a soft-spoken housewife who cared for the couple’s infant daughter.

Farhan Khan, who is married to one of Farook’s sisters, told NBC News he had begun legal proceedings to adopt the couple’s daughter. He lashed out at his late brother-in-law. “You left your six-month-old daughter,” Khan said. “In this life some people cannot have kids. God gave you a gift of a daughter. And you left that kid behind ... What did you achieve?”

Candlelit vigils drew thousands of people, including Muslim, Christian and other faith leaders, across San Bernardino on Thursday night.

On Friday, some streets that had been sealed off were reopened, restoring a semblance of normality to a city still coming to terms with its loss. The dead victims, five women and nine men, ranged in age from 26 to 60. They included a father of six, a coffee shop owner, a physical education teacher, a health inspector who followed his love to California, a mother who fled Iran to start a new life, and the cousin of a New York Giants player.

The loss of life was the country’s worst since the December 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut.

Thirteen of the dead worked for the county health department, said a spokeswoman, Felisa Cardona. “It’s an unspeakable tragedy of this magnitude. It’s just devastating to fellow employees and it’s devastating to the community.”

After police vacated Malik and Farook’s home it briefly became a media circus when journalists entered and rifled through it, inspecting ID documents, baby books, a crib and other items before being ushered out by the landlord. He then boarded up the property.

Additional reporting by Jon Boone.

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