



Ben Boychuk

The Too-Friendly City

Syed Farook's politically correct San Bernardino neighbors sensed something was up but said nothing.

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San Bernardino used to be called “The Friendly City.” That was a long time ago, well before [the municipal bankruptcy](#) and the recession and the housing market collapse and the blight. The city still had Norton Air Force Base and the economic prosperity that came with it. The nickname—which was really more of a Chamber of Commerce gimmick, much like neighboring Bloomington’s short-lived effort to brand itself “Southern California’s Undiscovered Shangri-La” (not even close)—fit, despite the racial segregation and the sizable presence of Hells Angels. San Bernardino was a working class town that aspired to middle-class respectability, and until 20 years ago, the city managed to pull it off. It had distinctive neighborhoods. People knew their neighbors.

Since then, it’s been calamity after calamity for the city of 213,000 people. The mass shooting at the Inland Regional Center on Wednesday, which left 14 people dead and 21 injured, is one more distinction the dysfunctional city could do without. Former mayor Pat Morris lamented that Wednesday’s massacre would “unfairly tarnish” San Bernardino, which has struggled mightily since 2012 to work its way out of insolvency. “It deeply, deeply troubles me that this happened in our city—in any city,” Morris [told the Los Angeles Times](#). “But it’s a real double-whammy for this to happen during our recovery.”

Morris’s parochialism is understandable. But the truth is, Wednesday’s attacks were another example of how disjointed and unserious the state, local, and federal officials’ efforts have been at preempting domestic terrorism—not for lack of resources, but for lack of a clear understanding of the enemies we face. It’s a credit to San Bernardino’s police force, which has seen which drastic reductions in personnel as a result of the city’s insolvency, that the crisis was brought to an end so quickly with the help of the FBI and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. Authorities had Syed Farook’s name and description shortly after noon on Wednesday. A witness from the holiday party that was the target of the attack said one of the shooters had a similar height and build as Farook, who had left the event abruptly several minutes before the shooting began. Police tracked a black SUV seen fleeing the Center’s parking lot to a townhouse in nearby Redlands, which initial reports said was owned by Farook’s family. It wasn’t until after police chased down the vehicle and shot its two occupants that they learned the other shooter was Farook’s wife, Tashfeen Malik, and that the couple had amassed enough ammunition and explosives in the Redlands residence to carry off several more attacks had they so chosen.

As the news of the murderers’ identities spread, reporters began talking with the neighbors and tracking down relatives. A former neighbor in Riverside, where Farook graduated from La Sierra High School in 2003, described him as “quiet but always polite.” “Maybe two years ago he became more religious,” Maria Gutierrez [told the New York Daily News](#). “He grew a beard and started to wear religious clothing. The long shirt that’s like a dress and the cap on his head.” Farook’s father, also named Syed, told the *Daily News* that his son was “very religious. He would go to work, come back, go to pray, come back. He’s Muslim.” Farook’s co-workers said he was respected and well-liked.

He had traveled to Saudi Arabia and returned with a new wife he met through an online religious dating site. On his profile page, Farook described himself as an “Allah fearing, calm thought full (sic) and simple man.” Patrick Baccari, who shared a cubicle with Farook, said the couple recently had a baby and appeared to be “living the American dream.”

At this point, after dozens of attacks or foiled plots by quiet, polite guys who suddenly become religious and later start shooting people, we should know that appearances can be deceiving. What might look a little odd at the time takes on a sinister cast in retrospect. But nearly 15 years after 9/11, people seemed to have received mixed messages. The Homeland Security mantra of “if you see something, say something” conflicts with admonitions from elected officials and other doyens of the political class that “not all Muslims are terrorists” (obviously) and “religious and racial profiling is wrong” (not so obvious).

Faced with the choice of either “saying something” to the authorities about suspicious behavior that may or may not be a bona fide threat and remaining mum for fear of being tarred as a bigot people increasingly opt for the latter. Nobody wants that kind of hassle, and very few people think saying nothing will have the sort of deadly consequences that we saw on Wednesday. Yet that’s exactly what happened. CBS News [reported](#) that a man who worked down the street from the Redlands residence said he noticed “a half-dozen Middle Eastern men” coming and going from the place, but “decided not to report anything since he did not wish to racially profile those people.” Yet the man—whom the story did not identify, no doubt out of concern for his wellbeing—had enough common sense to recognize that something wasn’t right. “We sat around lunch thinking, ‘What were they doing around the neighborhood?’” he said. “We’d see them leave where they’re raiding the apartment.”

Three days after the massacre, law enforcement still has plenty of questions to answer as to why exactly Farook and Malik carried out the deadliest mass shooting since Sandy Hook. Clearly, it wasn’t just another case of “workplace violence.” But one conclusion couldn’t be clearer: a misplaced sense of political correctness very likely prevented law enforcement from learning of the threat before it could be realized. In a friendlier city, perhaps, a watchful neighbor would have said something.

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