ISIS-Linked News Agency: Suspect in Stabbings at Minnesota Mall was ‘a Soldier of the Islamic State’

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Authorities are investigating the stabbing of nine people inside a Minnesota mall on Saturday night as a potential act of terrorism after a news agency linked to the Islamic State militant group claimed that the attacker was “a soldier of the Islamic State.”

The attack occurred around 8 p.m. inside the Crossroads Center mall in St. Cloud, Minn., about 70 miles northwest of Minneapolis. It ended inside a Macy’s store, where an off-duty police officer shot and killed the assailant.

The suspect was identified by community leaders as Dahir Aden, a student at St. Cloud State University and a private security guard at Electrolux, a home appliance store located near the mall. Abdul Kulane, of the Central Minnesota Community Empowerment Organization, said he was contacted by Aden’s parents, who did not know what their son’s motive was for the attack.

Aden moved to the United States from Kenya at age 2, Kulane said. He grew up in St. Cloud and graduated from Apollo High School. His parents described him as smart, quiet, and interested in soccer. Kulane said he does not believe Aden has taken any recent trips overseas, and his family and his community are in shock.

St. Cloud Mayor Dave Kleis said the attacker lunged at Jason Falconer, a part-time police officer in Avon, Minn., west of St. Cloud. Falconer then fired shots at the stabber, who fell but got up three times before he died.

Falconer “clearly prevented additional injuries and potential loss of life,” Kleis said at a news conference Sunday afternoon. “His heroic actions are exemplary.”

Falconer, who was off duty at the time, is the former police chief of Albany, Minn.

The attacker, who was wearing a private security uniform, made at least one reference to Allah during the attack and asked at least one person whether they were Muslim before attacking them, according to St. Cloud police.

In a statement Sunday, the Amaq news agency — linked to the Islamic State, also known as ISIS — said the attacker “carried out the operation in response to calls to target citizens of countries belonging to the crusader coalition.”

Richard Thornton, FBI special agent in Minneapolis, said during the Sunday news conference that the stabbings are being investigated as a “potential” act of terrorism, but that the suspect’s motive remains unknown.

There’s no indication that the suspect had direct communications with the Islamic State, or that the militant group had planned the attack or knew of it beforehand, officials in Minnesota said.

All the victims, whose ages range from 15 to 53, suffered injuries that were not life-threatening. Three remain hospitalized, authorities said.

Officials did not release any information about the attacker. They also did not comment further on the claim by Amaq.

St. Cloud Police Chief William Blair Anderson said investigators have executed search warrants at a residence in St. Cloud. Investigators also found the attacker’s vehicle in the mall parking lot.

“There’s nothing that we have gleaned that would suggest to us that this is anything other than what it appears to be now,” Anderson told reporters Sunday. “At this time, there’s nothing to suggest anything differently than what you’ve been told. There are a lot of moving parts.”

Sydney Weires was at the mall during the incident. She told the St. Cloud Times that she and her friends were walking down a hallway when they heard a loud scream.

“I saw this security guard sprinting down the hallway toward Target,” Weirs told the paper. “He was yelling, ‘Call the cops! Call the cops!'”

She said they later saw two men drenched in blood; one was bleeding from the side of his face, while the other had blood on the back of his shirt.

“He was screaming at us, ‘Get the F out!'” she said about one of the men, according to the paper.

Weires and her friends were able to leave the mall before authorities enforced a lockdown.

“We could have been one of the victims,” she told the paper. “It’s insane.”

Another witness, Harley Exsted, said he and his wife were in St. Cloud on Saturday to watch their son play in a college golf tournament, according to the St. Cloud Times.

“All of a sudden I heard pop pop pop,” Harley told the paper. “I just thought someone tipped over a shelf. All of a sudden these people started running. I just saw everybody running away.”

“But then when we heard the screaming, then we knew it was time to go,” he added.

The attacker has had encounters with police before, Anderson told reporters, but most were for minor traffic violations.

Hours after the incident, groups of shoppers huddled inside the mall’s food court. They were eventually released, said Sgt. Jason Burke, a spokesman for the police department, though the mall was closed Sunday as the investigation continued.

Many of the attacks that the Islamic State has claimed since the coordinated shootings and bombings in Paris in November have been carried out by individuals who were simply inspired by the Islamic State’s ideology and probably never came into direct contact with the group’s operatives, The Post’s Max Bearak wrote in July.

Matthew Henman, who heads the Terrorism and Insurgency Center at IHS Jane’s, a private firm specializing in military and security analysis, said in an email Monday that the militant group’s claim for the Minnesota stabbing “is the latest in a long series” of attacks that have been “seemingly conducted by lone actors who had not traveled to Iraq and Syria and did not have clear links to Islamic State.

“Nonetheless,” he continued, “there have been multiple indications that the group has been in contact with such individuals, directing and guiding their operations. Even if only indirectly linked, the Islamic State can claim to have inspired the attack in Minnesota, as it follows the kind of operations that it has called on its supporters to conduct.”

He added: “Lone actor attacks require less planning, organisation, skill and expertise, so we are likely to see more. They are far harder for security services to detect and prevent.”

The Minnesota attack occurred on the same night that an explosion went off in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan. At least 29 people suffered injuries that were not life-threatening. One person was seriously injured, authorities said.

Hours earlier, a pipe bomb exploded in a Jersey Shore garbage can shortly before a scheduled charity race benefiting Marines and Navy sailors.

On Sunday night, law enforcement combed an area around an Elizabeth, N.J., train station where a backpack with “multiple improvised explosive devices” was found. Elizabeth Mayor J. Christian Bollwage said up to five devices were discovered inside a backpack, and one of the devices exploded as it was being disarmed, shortly after 12:30 a.m. Monday.

Prior to the discovery in Elizabeth, authorities had said none of the incidents appeared to be related. But they sowed further concern about terrorism across the country.

Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton said she was briefed on the Minnesota stabbing, as well as on the explosions in New York and New Jersey, according to CBS affiliate WCCO. Donald Trump has not made a comment on the Minnesota incident.

In a statement, mall officials said they were “devastated by the events that happened at Crossroads Center. The safety and well-being of our customers and employees is our number one priority. Our thoughts and prayers are with those who were impacted by this tragic event.”

Crossroads Center plans to reopen Monday morning.