

How police foiled Melbourne's deadliest terror plot

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Ibrahim Abbas stood smug and proud in the dock, laughing as he described how he and three accomplices tried to avoid detection while they stood at Federation Square on December 20, 2016, planning how to kill people with bombs and knives on Christmas Day.

CCTV shows dozens of people including a number of children standing nearby, oblivious, as the group tried to be secretive while discussing their plans on the steps of central Melbourne's unofficial meeting place.

During his two-week long testimony to the Supreme Court, Ibrahim — the group's ringleader — revealed his sickening plot in detail. “Cause it’d be pretty stupid for someone to hear us talkin’ about our plans,” Abbas laughed as he described the group's visit. “I’m just thinking how I’m gunna use my knife as efficiently as possible.”

Just weeks earlier he had pleaded guilty in Victoria's Supreme Court to his part in the Christmas Day terror plot.

Ibrahim had turned prosecution witness against the three other members of his terror cell — his younger brother Hamza, his cousin Abdullah Charani, and a friend, Ahmed Mohamed.

The ringleader

Ibrahim hadn't always thought this way. Born in East Melbourne, he was raised in the northern suburbs as a peaceful Muslim. He and Hamza attended Darul Ulum College of Victoria in Fawkner. Their parents had migrated to Australia from Lebanon before the brothers were born. Their father worked as a taxi driver until, when Ibrahim was aged 10, he left the family unit and remarried.

During his teenage years, like many young Australians, Ibrahim identified as an atheist. It was amid the slow, agonising death of his uncle in 2012 that he says he questioned his beliefs. He was catapulted “straight into the deep end” of Islamic radicalisation, aged 19, when a cousin introduced him to Islamic State and al-Qaeda material.

When Ibrahim started practising Islam again, it was immediately as a jihadi ideology.

By the time of his arrest by heavily-armed police inside his Campbellfield home on December 22, 2016, Ibrahim was an Islamic State fanatic in the grip of blinding extremism.

The inspiration

The newly married then 22-year-old was downloading extreme Islamic propaganda from al-Qaeda and Islamic State's most influential recruiters. He had developed a thirst for preachings from some of the world's most feared terror figures and made a decision that it was time to recruit a team of radicalised disciples. That led to the development of a plot to target Melbourne's most populated places, including Federation Square and Flinders Street Station, with bombs and knives on or around Christmas Day.

When Ibrahim talks about the scholars he sought out, he doesn't mean the great minds of Islamic theology, but instead some of the most feared and hunted figures of 21st century terror — Osama Bin Laden and Anwar Al-Awlaki. "At the beginning, I didn't confine myself to one set of scholars, I just - in the beginning I learned religion in a very general sense," Ibrahim later told the Supreme Court. Eventually I began to incline towards other scholars. "At the time I knew he [Osama Bin Laden] was the leader of al-Qaeda."

His number one influence, Ibrahim says, was Anwar Al-Awlaki, a charming and confident English-speaking man who was born in America before becoming an imam in the UK and Yemen. Al-Awlaki was known to have preached to and met the 9/11 hijackers and had been linked to failed plots in 2009 and 2010 to blow up cargo planes. The popular recruiter was eventually killed in a US-sanctioned drone strike in 2011. From the grave, Al-Awlaki continues to radicalise Australian men.

Planning jihad

By 2014, Ibrahim was in the grip of full-blown radicalisation as he studied civil engineering at Swinburne University where he was said to be a keen student who found the work "too easy". He lived in Flemington, then Hawthorn before later moving out to Campbellfield with his wife in 2016.

He also regularly attended the Hume Islamic Youth Centre (HIYC), a sprawling mosque complex in Coolaroo known to be one of the state's largest places of gathering for young Muslim men. It was there, he says, he spoke to others

about his views on Islamic State and what he believed needed to be done — jihad.

“You could ram people with a car, you can use a knife attack, you can shoot people,” he’d later tell police.

“The whole point of jihad is martyrdom. Martyrdom is attaining death through acts of Jihad. Your sins are erased and you are granted paradise. “For the general Muslim population who are not martyrs, they don't enter paradise until the world is over.” Ibrahim wanted to carry out his killing spree in a crowded place where the tally of casualties would be high.

Federation Square on Christmas Eve, 2016, after the terror plot was foiled. Credit: Josh Robenstone

He described the aim as: “the bigger, the more terror is achieved, and that's the point”. He later told federal investigators that he’d been open to the idea of a terrorist attack since 2013, and that for a year and a half before his arrest, he considered every person he had seen — woman, child, disabled, or ill included — as a potential target.

The caliph's call In 2014 , a caliphate — a religious state governed by Sharia or Islamic law — was announced by Islamic State. In June 29, of that year Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the head of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, came, declared himself the caliph, a person considered to be a successor to the prophet Muhammad.

The caliph insisted people pledge their allegiance, and encouraged them to commit attacks — jihad — in the land of the "infidels" who they believe are hostile towards the Muslim faith.

This, Ibrahim said, included Australia. “It was their, their cause to establish a caliphate which, um, appealed to me the most. “I wrote on my description on Facebook that I pledge allegiance to the Islamic State ... on day one of the establishment.”

More than 150 Australians subsequently flew to Iraq and Syria to join Islamic State’s foreign fighters before ASIO began revoking passports.

The co-accused

Ibrahim's cousin Charani and friend Mohamed had come to the attention of the police at least a year before they were arrested over the terror plot. On

May 27, 2015, Mohamed arrived at Melbourne Airport with a return ticket to Malaysia in hand and Iraq his target destination. Carrying just an iPhone and a large duffle bag he attempted to board the flight before Border Force officers seized his passport.

On July 9, Charani attempted to fly the same route with the aim of making it to Iraq, too, to fight with Islamic State forces.

Abdullah Charani arriving at the Supreme Court in early October. Credit:Paul Jeffers

Again, Border Force personnel refused his departure. The two men would later learn that a cousin of the Abbas brothers — Nabil Abbas — successfully left Australia on June 16 of the same year. He never came home and died on the Islamic State battlefield, a picture of his body later circulating among friends and family.

Charani was a ladies man and the only one in the group who had more than a couple of friends outside the close-knit group of wannabe terrorists. His father had emigrated from Lebanon in the 1970s and had driven taxis. However, his parents separated in around 2012, and for the next three years there were bitter and protracted family law proceedings.

Charani was educated at the same Islamic school as his cousin Ibrahim but, unlike him, he went on to complete his studies at Fawkner High School. He worked as an electrician then a painter, and in mid-2016 married and moved into a small bungalow in Dallas. Very little of friend Mohamed's back story has been revealed other than his challenging relationship with his young bride during their time living in Meadow Heights.

The youngest in the group, Hamza Abbas, was described as a "fish brain" who struggled to retain information. He was referred to in court as a tag-along loner who did not want a wife, instead choosing to live with his mother. Hamza's only passion appeared to be online gaming, with his family revealing he'd spend hours playing the wilderness survival video game Rust.

During his lengthy court appearance he sat quietly, wearing a navy jumper, seeming almost unaware of what was happening around him.

The plot and preparation

Before their arrest, the four men seemed to be living two distinctly separate lives — one as family men, the other as would-be jihadis. They had begun to follow an extreme brand of Sunni Islam which had as one of its central aims the waging of violent jihad against its perceived enemies around the world. The group would watch bomb-making videos and recorded beheadings together.

By October 2016, they were being watched.

They would regularly meet, at places including at Hume Islamic Youth Centre, and had begun to follow the same amateur bomb-making manual used in the 2013 Boston Marathon terror attack of 2013. (Two bombs went off near the finish line, killing three people and wounding more than 260.)

But Ibrahim was beginning to get nervous.

He feared his "fish brain" brother couldn't be trusted with the plot and instead of briefing him on the finer details, he planned to strap a suicide vest to his sibling and drive him into Melbourne's CBD at the very last minute.

The Federal Police operation dubbed Kastelholm was now learning that the group had bought galvanised pipes and nail gun cartridges - a rudimentary shopping list for bomb building - at Bunnings in November 2016. In December the men bought two machetes from a BCF store in Coburg, and travelled to Chemist Warehouse in Campbellfield to buy hydrogen peroxide (as suggested in the online video on how to make a bomb "in your mum's kitchen"). "We were going to extract the gunpowder from the cartridges and use that material to, um, use it as a, as an explosive substance to create a bomb," Ibrahim later told police.

Ahmed Mohamed at the Supreme Court in September. Credit:Darrian Traynor

Days later, Mohamed would encourage Chaarani to fill out an application form for a Victorian firearms licence. On December 8, Chaarani rang the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. He told DELWP staff he wanted to hunt pests and they accepted his application fee.

A fortnight later, on December 20, the four men travelled to Federation Square under the guise of buying ice cream. Instead, police say they were there to scope out potential locations for a terrorist attack.

By then, ASIO and the AFP were secretly listening into the four men's chilling conversations as they travelled around the northern suburbs. It was then that police would learn that Mohamed was also planning to use his wife as a suicide bomber, as Ibrahim had planned to do with his younger brother Hamza.

"She's happy to, she wants that, she even told me that since ages ago, I told her [to]," Mohamed is recorded saying. "Strap her and just drop her ... drop her off and go. "I know once it's done I'm not going to care about her. I'm not gonna, you know, but from now to then, what a battle to have, man. "I'm not doubting, I'm not doubting, and I'm not backing down. No way."

As the plan came closer to fruition, Mohamed visited the Bunnings store at Broadmeadows shortly after midday on December 22. He bought 700 nail gun cartridges packed with gunpowder — they were kept behind a locked counter. Staff became so suspicious that one of them trailed him out into the carpark on Pearcedale Parade to take down his car's registration and raise the alarm.

The arrests

It was close to 6pm when balaclava-clad officers from Victoria Police's Special Operations Group first drew their guns. Mohamed, Charani and a third man were travelling at speed through one of suburban Melbourne's largest intersections, the corner of Dandenong and Springvale roads, when police intercepted their red sedan.

"Get out of the f---ing car or you'll be shot," an officer yells. An ultimatum had been issued.

"These guys are fucking serious, bro. Can I put it in park?", Charani said. The trio were ordered to crawl from the car on hands and knees across the roadway.

As Charani was being cuffed with plastic ties, senior police say he yelled: "Go ahead martyr me. I welcome death. You will have your day soon. Praise Allah, you can't stop us all". The 700 nail gun cartridges were inside the boot of their car. Police would soon hear for the first time the reasoning behind the terror plot.

The trial

Mohamed, Chaarani and Hamza sat shoulder to shoulder at the back of the court with stone-cold faces for most of their trial, which ran from August to October.

The only time the trio's demeanour changed was when Mohamed's toddler son, born while he was behind bars, was swiftly ferried into the room before the judge arrived.

The burly Mohamed would then tousle his long curly brown hair back into a bun as he waited for the jury. In the dock to his left was the slim-built Chaarani, who sported an unkempt long beard. Chaarani spent much of the terror trial comforting his cousin Hamza on the far side of the dock. Despite Chaarani's attempts to engage him, Hamza sat disconnected from the room, his hazel eyes staring into space for much of the 10 weeks.

The court heard the three men from Melbourne's northern suburbs had been recruited in 2016 by Ibrahim. At the end of the trial, Mohamed, Chaarani and Hamza smirked as they exchanged glances in the minutes after their guilty verdict was read aloud to a packed, emotional Supreme Court room just a few weeks ago, on November 2. (They will be sentenced at a later date.)

Despite the realisation they were now likely to spend life behind bars, the convicted terror plotters acted like immature teenage boys, refusing to stand as the jury returned its verdict. Their ringleader, Ibrahim, had already pleaded guilty and jailed for 24 years.

During his time on the stand as a prosecution witness, Ibrahim revealed with pride the reasons behind his plot to kill indiscriminately. "My goals, okay, were to cause as much chaos, destruction, fear, bloodshed — that was my goal and I believe that to achieve this goal I needed the group," he said. "If sharia [law] was applied in Australia ... all the people would fall under a contract.

"Whoever does not sign that contract either leaves the country or is executed."