

Hate cleric Anwar al-Awlaki link to Melbourne terror plot



Samed Eriklioglu is led from the AFP's Melbourne headquarters yesterday.
Picture: Jay Town
exclusive

Chip Le Grand, Victorian Chief Reporter, Mark Schliebs, Reporter, Tessa Akerman, Reporter, 12:00AM November 21, 2018

An al-Qa'ida propagandist may have inspired Australia's latest alleged terror plot from beyond the grave, with evidence that members of a suspected extremist cell in Melbourne's north were communicating by encrypted messaging less than 12 hours before a pre-dawn police raid.

The Australian can reveal that 26-year-old Samed Eriklioglu, one of three men yesterday charged with planning a terror attack, posted on social media a quote attributed to Anwar al-Awlaki, a Yemeni-American cleric who was killed in a drone attack and whose hate sermons inspired two of America's worst terror attacks: the Pulse Nightclub massacre in Orlando, Florida, and the San Bernardino shooting.

It can also be revealed that Armagan Eriklioglu, the father of two brothers in the alleged terror cell, posted a link to a Turkish-language Islamic State Facebook account. Armagan Eriklioglu was not arrested yesterday and is not suspected of being part of his sons' alleged plans.

Samed Eriklioglu, his 30-year-old brother Ertunc and Hanifi Halis, 21, were arrested at separate addresses in Melbourne's north about 3.20am yesterday, following an eight-month investigation and surveillance operation by Victoria Police, the Australian Federal Police and ASIO.

They appeared in court, each charged with one count of preparing or planning for a terrorist act and were not asked to enter a plea.

Victoria Police Chief Commissioner Graham Ashton said the trio was planning a mass-casualty attack in a public place and had become "more energised" since this month's Bourke Street attack and the conviction of the Christmas Day terrorists. The group had taken steps in recent days to obtain a 22-calibre semi-automatic rifle. All three had their passports cancelled this year.

AFP Assistant Commissioner Ian McCartney said that, although the alleged terror cell had not locked in a specific target, the Joint Counter Terrorism Team command believed it needed to step in and disrupt their alleged plans. "If we had not acted early in preventing this attack, we will allege the consequences would have been chilling, with potential significant loss of human life."

The full picture of what the accused terrorists were allegedly planning is likely to emerge in coming months, as investigators trawl through approximately 17,000 phone calls, 10,500 text messages from phones, tablets and USB sticks seized by police, and 7800 hours of secretly recorded conversations. It is understood the group was overheard discussing the Bourke Street attack on November 9. Police believe Hassan Khalif Shire Ali's frenzied knife attack — in which restaurateur Sisto Malaspina was killed and two other people stabbed before Shire Ali was shot dead by police — may have hastened the plans of the latest alleged terror cell. Malaspina was yesterday farewelled at a state funeral at St Patrick's Cathedral.

The Australian has established that Samed Eriklioglu was communicating as late as 4.21pm on Monday on WhatsApp, an encrypted messaging service. He also holds an account with Telegram, the messaging app favoured by Islamic State fighters, propagandists and their followers. His WhatsApp account carries a three-point warning: "Allah is watching you! Angels are recording your deeds! And death is closer than you think."

Unbeknown to the alleged terrorists, their deeds were also being recorded by counter-terrorism investigators after a tip-off late last year led to the creation

in March of Operation Donabate. Mr McCartney said one of the difficulties for police was their inability to intercept encrypted communications. “It is not a case that we are going dark,” Mr McCartney said. “We have gone dark and this case is another example of that.”

Victoria Police assistant commissioner for counter-terrorism Ross Guenther said the trio might have previously attended the Hume Islamic Youth Centre but not in recent years. Police do not believe that the alleged terror cell was radicalised at a mosque or youth centre. Rather, they suspect they are “garage jihadists” who formed their own prayer group and withdrew from mainstream teaching of Islam. John Esho, a 25-year-old student who lives next to Halis’s family home in Greenvale, said he had observed significant changes in his neighbour over the past six months.

“He grew a beard, changed his clothes,” he said. “He even sold his car. I used to see him driving a BMW, but it’s gone.”

Samed Eriklioglu used to like Rihanna and magic tricks. Since 2016, he began listening to the lectures of firebrand cleric Ahmad Musa Jibril, a Palestinian--American Salafist preacher, and discussing questions of prayer with Dar al Quran wa Sunnah, a Sydney charity previously investigated over its links to Islamic State. Ertunc Eriklioglu recently deregistered his painting business and, according to a neighbour, had stopped work due to a back injury. His Skype account features a picture of the Shahada flag.

Deakin University professor Greg Barton, an expert in Islamic radicalisation, said it was “pretty significant” that Samed Eriklioglu had posted a quote from Awlaki. Although the quote cited by Eriklioglu is not damning, Awlaki at the time of his death was strongly associated with al-Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula, a proscribed terrorist group.

Professor Barton questioned why Armagan Eriklioglu, who yesterday declared his sons had no sympathy for Islamic State, would post a link to a Facebook page for Deviet Islamiyye, which means Islamic State in Turkish. The page calls for the creation of a caliphate. “There is no mistaking what the Turkish means,” Professor Barton said. “The fact that the father would have this on his page is, to say the least, very disturbing.”

A source close to the investigation said Armagan Eriklioglu and his wife both appeared to be “moderate” Muslims.

Additional reporting: Samantha Hutchinson, Paul Maley