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A slow, isolated descent to jihad

 How Phoenix man came to embrace radical Islam

SEAN HOLSTEGE AND MATTHEW CASEY

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 Elton Simpson sought meaning from his life and the acceptance of others, and he found it in a north Phoenix mosque and in the social-media plaudits from violent extremists. Courtney Lonergan, who met Simpson at that mosque about 10 years ago, said the north Phoenix resident was willing to die to defend his faith. It fits a pattern seen in social-media posts by violent jihadists and in research by experts who track them. A string of Twitter posts before and after Simpson and fellow Phoenix resident Nadir Soofi were shot dead May 3 as they clutched automatic rifles in

See JIHAD, Page 12A

SCANDAL AT THE VA

Lawsuit says VA caused vet's suicide

 Claim: Misdiagnosis led Phoenix man to kill self

DENNIS WAGNER

 THE REPUBLIC • AZCENTRAL.COM

 The lawsuit says U.S. Army veteran Gene Spencer was at the Phoenix VA Medical Center on Oct. 5, 2012, when a physician told him cancer had metastasized in his lungs and he should go home to prepare for the end. Three days passed, according to the complaint, before the 67-year-old husband, writer, audiologist, building contractor and dog lover used a gun to take his own life. One day after that, Spencer's wife, Shirley Fobke, says, she received a phone call from the hospital notifying her of good news: There was an error in

See SUICIDE, Page 19A

More online: Visit veterans.azcentral.com for extensive coverage of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

“I don’t think there is anything inconsistent about getting health-care coverage from one’s employer and eliminating a government subsidy for an entitlement program.”

 STATE REP. JUSTIN OLSON, R-MESA

WHO CHOSE COVERAGE THROUGH A STATE-FUNDED HEALTH-INSURANCE PLAN INSTEAD OF VIA HIS PRIVATE EMPLOYER, APOLLO EDUCATION GROUP, WHICH OWNS THE UNIVERSITY OF PHOENIX



Lawmakers get prime health-care benefits

 State-sponsored plans more robust, cheaper

KEN ALLTUCKER

 THE REPUBLIC • AZCENTRAL.COM

 The Arizona Legislature takes a hard line when it comes to spending taxpayer money on health care. During its recent session, it passed measures seeking to limit lifetime Medicaid eligibility and to prohibit Arizona from establishing a state-based marketplace where residents could buy health insurance subsidized by the federal government. Some lawmakers have signed onto a lawsuit seeking to overturn Arizona's Medicaid expansion. But those cost-conscious measures don't apply to the lawmakers' own government-subsidized health care. Arizona lawmakers serve the public in a part-time role, but the vast majority of these elected officials take year-round health-insurance plans that are among the most generous state-funded benefits in the nation.

See BENEFITS, Page 10A

Legislators' benefits

 Most members of the Arizona Legislature take state-subsidized health insurance, with **25 of 30** senators and **45 of 60** representatives enrolled in a state-sponsored health-insurance plan. The total number of legislators, staff members and family members covered:

2013: 657 **2014:** 621 **2015:** 662

 Total medical claims paid on behalf of legislators, staffers and family:

2013: \$3 million **2014:** \$2.8 million **2015:** \$2.3 million (fiscal year to date)

SOURCE: ARIZONA DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATION, ARIZONA REPUBLIC RESEARCH

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY RICK KONOPKA/GANNETT

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JASON GETZ/USA TODAY SPORTS

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ALSO

Justice delayed: Three years after Arizona DPS Officer Robert Martin was gunned down during a 1995 traffic stop on the Beeline Highway, his killer was sentenced to die. But five years ago, Ernesto Martinez was extradited to California to face another charge from that 1995 crime spree. Things have not gone as expected. Besides being accused of attacking his cellmate, Martinez has engaged in a series of delay tactics that have stymied prosecutors, leading some to question the wisdom and expense of trying a man already sentenced to die. **25A**

INSIDE



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From the Front Page

Jihad

Continued from Page 1A

Garland, Texas, link Simpson to Islamic State, or ISIS, militants halfway around the world. The messages encouraged him and praised him for attacking a group that lampooned the Prophet Mohammed in cartoons.

“There are other Elton Simpsons out there,” FBI Director James Comey told reporters in a press briefing Thursday.

“Few will move to violent action. How many are ideological sympathizers? Many,” said Clark McCauley, a Bryn Mawr College psychology professor, who has researched extremists and written a book called “Friction: How Radicalization Happens to Them and Us.”

But how many, and the scope of any connection such people may have with ISIS, remains murky. Less murky, but open to interpretation, is how much stock to place in ISIS’ claims of responsibility for the attack and in reports of homegrown U.S. recruits.

About 10 percent of U.S. Muslims told pollsters that suicide bombings can be justified in defense of Islam, said McCauley, whose research has been supported in part by the Department of Homeland Security. Half, he said, believe America’s war on terror is an assault on their religion.

What is clear is that ISIS runs an effective propaganda operation online, and its sophisticated use of social-media accounts connects in significant ways with supporters in the West, counterterrorism experts widely agree.

The influence of social media in ISIS inspiring attacks marks a departure from the methods of al-Qaida and traditional terrorist groups. Historically, such groups would recruit, train and indoctrinate their supporters, then support their operations.

In contrast, ISIS is less structured, and that, say experts, makes it harder to track and stop.

Unlike the hierarchy of al-Qaida, which relies on recognized leaders for tactical and strategic direction, ISIS provides the spiritual backdrop. Traditional Islam teaches that believers must take concrete actions in their lives, said William Braniff, executive director of the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism institute, or START, a consortium of international counterterrorism researchers based out of the University of Maryland.

“In ISIS, they believe that every foot soldier in Iraq and Syria should be venerated. There are 20,000 propagandists, recruiters and cell leaders all on Twitter and other social-media sites,” he said. “It’s much more intimate when you’re following somebody’s exploits on the battlefield.”

“Elton Simpson is a symptom of a social movement,” he said.

Before the attack

Leading up to the incident in Garland, Simpson used a Twitter account called “Sharia is Light,” authorities say.

He used Twitter to echo ISIS’ calls for violence, including threats against the Garland contest organizer, Pamela Geller, the *New York Times* has reported.

Ten days before the event in Garland, Mohammed Abdullahi Hassan, who left Minneapolis for Somalia as a teenager, tweeted a link to the event and called for jihadists to follow the example set by the Charlie Hebdo shootings, according to Minnesota Public Radio.

“The brothers from the Charlie hebdo attack did their part. It’s time for brothers in the #US to do their part,” Hassan tweeted.

Simpson tweeted a response to Hassan, who

MPR reported had been indicted on terrorism charges in 2009, that if there were jihadists like that in the U.S., people would not draw Mohammed.

Their interaction continued days later when Simpson tweeted at Hassan to send him a direct message, NBC News said.

While not all devout Muslims consider images of the prophet to be an affront, Simpson fit the pattern of those who would. Loneragan, a 40-year-old

convert to Islam who has attended the Islamic Community Center of Phoenix where Simpson worshipped, remembers him by his conversion name, Ibrahim. She’s known him for a decade and shares close friends, she said.

She recalled a man for whom the mosque was everything. A star high-school basketball player, he would shine in his role playing pickup games with kids who admired him, she said.

“He was one of those

guys who would sleep at the mosque,” Loneragan said. “The fact that he felt personally insulted by somebody drawing a picture had to come from the ideological rhetoric coming out of the mosque.”

Mosque leaders have said repeatedly that they don’t preach radical views and they have kicked out extremists who use their building to recruit followers.

But Simpson’s closeness to the mosque increasingly cut him off

from those outside, including some friends, Loneragan said.

“He was in a pattern of feeling isolated, a pattern of feeling marginalized by society,” she said.

So when he sought a Muslim wife, Simpson turned to the men in the mosque to find a suitable woman, and his way of earning their respect was to show his devotion to Islam by quoting teachings verbatim.

His life fits the patterns that researchers

and counterterrorism experts see in extremists.

“Like all true believers, they may be attracted by a simple black-and-white, us-versus-them belief system,” wrote Brian Jenkins, a senior adviser at the RAND Corporation, who advised former President Bill Clinton on terrorism issues.

“Poverty and oppression may explain why people in some countries embrace violent extremism,

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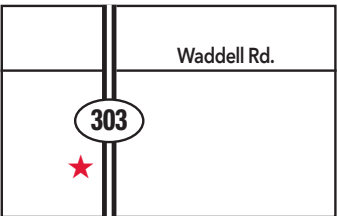
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From the Front Page

Jihad

Continued from Page 12A

but it does not account for the flow of Western volunteers or the dreamy allure of fighting for a faraway cause,” Jenkins wrote in March.

He cited “alienation, personal crises and dissatisfaction with empty spiritual lives” as factors that turn sympathizers into killers.

Researchers at START keep a database of 1,500 extremists. Polling showed that 45 percent had experienced childhood physical abuse, while nearly three-quarters reported drug or alcohol problems.

Two-thirds experimented with one or the other before age 16, and more than half had problems with grades and attendance in high school.

Simpson’s classmates at Glendale’s Washington High School described him as a friendly guy with a great sense of humor. He was remembered as a good friend, not a troubled youth.

But Islam isolated him, Lonergan said.

“Ibrahim was desperate to find a wife. For Muslims, their hearts are in their homes, but he didn’t have his heart in his home. He was struggling for something else,” she said.

He started listening to “us-vs.-them” sermons at the Islamic center along Interstate 17, the language of victimization, blaming Muslims’ plight on America and Israel, and it took root, she said.

“They tell you your neighbors are against you,” she said, likening Simpson’s mind-set to what she had seen as an inner-city community worker. “You sit there and stew and feel there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Lonergan said: “He went backwards in time.”

Day of attack

Moments before the attack, Simpson used Twitter and the hashtag #texasattack to ask Allah to accept him and Soofi as guerrilla warriors in the struggle against non-Muslims, CNN reported.

“May Allah accept us as mujahideen,” Simpson tweeted.

But it was a tweet Simpson sent a couple of hours earlier that showed his longing for approval from ISIS. He tweeted to his roughly 1,000 followers to follow an account that CNN reported was linked to ISIS fighter Junaid Hussain, also known as Abu Hussain al-Britani.

“That’s what set Ibrahim apart,” Lonergan said. “He thought everybody should be Muslim.”

Experts such as START director Braniff say the pull to act is

strong, but Americans shouldn’t exaggerate the direct influence of ISIS.

“It would be a mistake to assume that ISIS is in some monolithic command-and-control center looking through their Rolodex and saying, ‘Who can we trust to do this?’” he said.

“I do not believe (Simpson) was planning to go to a soccer game and got a secret encrypted message on his secret phone saying it was go-time,” Braniff said. “This is not ‘The Manchurian Candidate.’”

Instead, he suggested, ISIS maintains intimate and ongoing relationships with supporters. Many of them have a personal and collective sense of injustice in their lives and those of millions of other Muslims. The incoming tweets are more than peer pressure and often enough to compel action.

“You’re sitting there with a meaningless life and every three minutes you’re getting a photo from the front lines. You see other people leading meaningless lives and they are now leading heroic lives. It’s heroic. It’s epic. It’s massive. It’s a minute-by-minute presence in your life,” he explained.

The aftermath

Around the time when Simpson and Soofi opened fire, the Twitter account that CNN linked to Hussain used Simpson’s hashtag, #texasattack, to announce the incident to his followers.

In a series of tweets, Hussain called Simpson and Soofi brothers and soldiers of the Islamic State and claimed their actions were against unchecked freedom of speech.

“If there is no check on the freedom of your speech, then let your hearts be open to the freedom of our actions,” CNN reported that Hussain tweeted.

“I would be willing to bet that nobody in ISIS in Syria heard of Elton Simpson before his attack,” said McCauley, the Bryn Mawr researcher.

He thinks that in 98 percent of its attacks, ISIS offers inspiration only. The group leaves it to others to wage violent jihad as they see fit.


Lonergan remembers Simpson would never waver from the teachings he picked up in the mosque and elsewhere. While she and mutual friends would reject sermons at the mosque that she described as anti-American and political, Simpson would repeat scripture and the writings of Islamic scholars, never offering his own opinion.

“Ibrahim would die for an ideology and to protect a faith,” Lonergan said.

He did. Acceptance came at the price of his life.

“You see other people leading meaningless lives and they are now leading heroic lives.”

TERRORISM EXPERT WILLIAM BRANIFF



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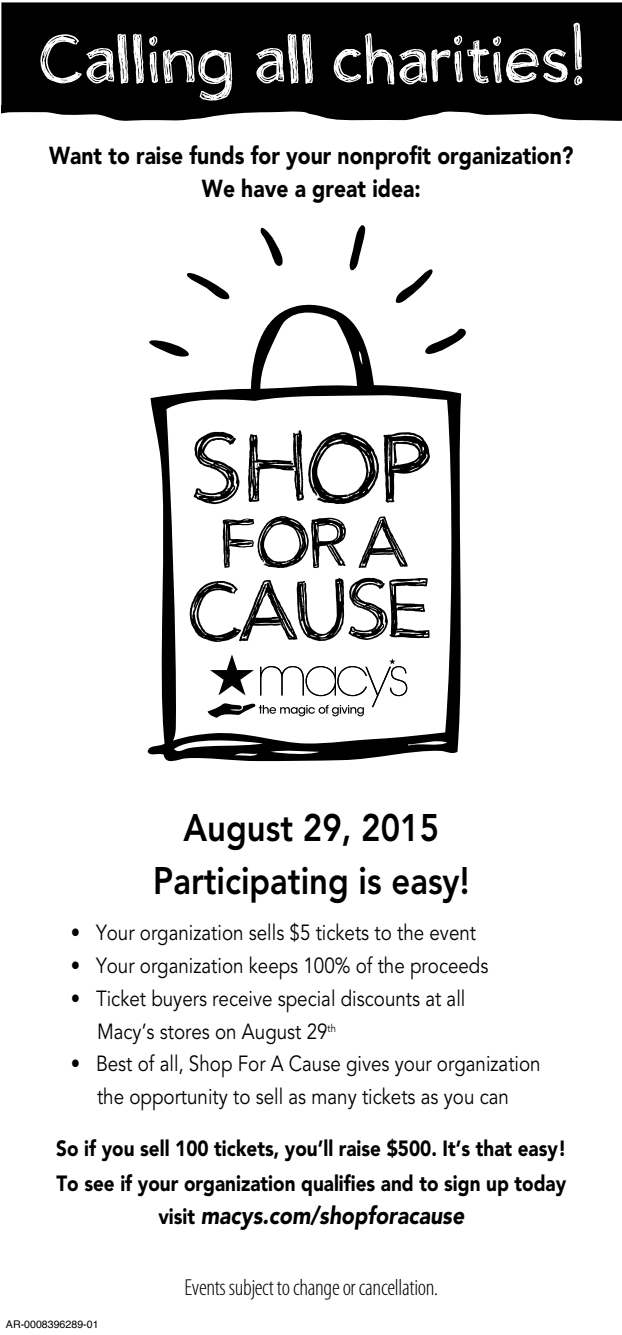
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