



Yonathan Melaku

Yonathan Melaku was sentenced to 25 years in prison for a series of overnight shooting targeting the Pentagon, the National Museum of the Marine Corps and two military recruiting centers in the fall of 2010. He was arrested after attempting to run from law enforcement on federal property near Arlington National Cemetery in the summer of 2011, where authorities say he planned to vandalize grave markers. Police found spray paint and twenty pounds of ammonium nitrate, a common explosives component, and spent shell casings in his backpack. A former Marine reservist, Melaku, who prosecutors say self-radicalized, carried with him that night a notebook filled with references to Al Qaeda and Osama bin Laden.

Motivation

According to authorities, Melaku said that he targeted symbols of the military because of American involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. Prosecutors described him as “a self-radicalized terrorist.”

A statement in a notebook he was carrying on the night of his arrest included references to Al Qaeda and defeating the “coalition and allies and America.” Melaku recorded himself during his second shooting against the Marine Corps Memorial in Virginia repeatedly chanting “Allahu Akbar” while music glorifying mujahideen played in the background.

He had also planned further attacks “if his message was not heard,” according to a Department of Justice press release.

Online Activity

Although Melaku has no documented or recorded online activity, federal prosecutors have described him as self-radicalized; most self-radicalized individuals access extremist materials online.

Links to Extremists

Melaku appears to have been a [self-radicalized lone-wolf](#) without any known ties to other extremists or terrorist groups.

Additional Background

Melaku is a naturalized American citizen originally from Ethiopia. He formerly served as a reservist in the United States Marine Corps but was dismissed from the service after state-level larceny charges were brought against him in Virginia. He pleaded guilty to those charges in November 2011 and was sentenced to six months in prison.

After agreeing to plead guilty to charges related to the shooting spree in exchange for the 25-year sentence, Melaku’s lawyers claimed he suffers from schizophrenia and requested a formal evaluation. He was diagnosed with schizophrenia but his diagnosis did not impact the already accepted plea deal.

Authorities recovered a list in Melaku’s apartment of items required for a “timer” consistent with parts for building a detonator. Several of the items on his list had already been crossed out, leading to speculation that Melaku had begun to purchase the necessary items. Twenty pounds of chemicals frequently used in homemade bombs were also recovered from his backpack when he was arrested.