

The Soufan Group

TSG IntelBrief: Investigating the Orlando Attack
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Investigating the Orlando Attack

Bottom Line Up Front:

- During the June 12 standoff at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, Omar Mateen called 9-1-1 and claimed to be acting on behalf of the Islamic State
- In previous interactions with the FBI and in his call with the police during the attack, Mateen expressed contradictory terrorist allegiances and sympathies
- As investigators work to determine the link between Mateen and the Islamic State, it remains possible that the only connection was one of inspiration
- The notoriety that accompanies an attack associated—however nebulously—with the Islamic State will continue to be a powerful draw for violent people.

Among the few established facts concerning the June 12 [terrorist attack](#) at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida is that the shooter, Omar Mateen, called the police during the attack and declared that he was acting in the name of the so-called [Islamic State](#). That claim, however tenuous, will have enormous consequences. Investigators are working quickly to determine if the attack was directed by the Islamic State or [inspired by the group's repeated calls](#) for attacks in the West. The official working assumption is that the attack will fall in the inspired category, though all possibilities are being examined.

Given the enormous consequences that stem from the claim of an Islamic State 'inspired' attack, the notion of inspired attacks must be examined more closely. What does it mean if an attack is inspired by the Islamic State? Would the attack have happened without [the appeal for violence](#) by the Islamic State? Was the claim of inspiration made at the last minute for purposes of notoriety? Or was the attack set into motion by the group's propaganda, tipping a disturbed, angry person into a murderous terrorist? Was inspiration the driving factor of the attack, or was it an extension of an existing pathos? It is of paramount importance to determine connections and lines of communication between attackers and their professed affiliations. However, the uncomfortable reality is that attacks such as the one in Orlando become 'Islamic State attacks' simply because the attackers declare them as such. The validity of their assertions matters less than the consequences of their actions.

Initial reports suggest that Mateen was all over the map when it came to identifying with specific terrorist groups or individuals. FBI Director James Comey announced that Mateen had told investigators in 2013 that he had connections to [al-Qaeda](#) as well as [Hizballah](#)—nonsensical claims that perhaps played a role in the investigators' determination that Mateen was not a threat at that time. The inquiry also included extensive surveillance and further investigation, all of which failed to turn up any evidence of terrorist connections. During his calls with police, Mateen said he pledged allegiance to [Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi](#), the leader of the Islamic State; he expressed solidarity with Moner Mohamad Abusalha, a suicide bomber in Syria for [Jabhat al-Nusra](#), an al-Qaeda affiliate and one of the Islamic State's rivals; Mateen also declared his support for the Boston Marathon bombers.

Had Mateen not called police to make a statement pledging his allegiance to the Islamic State, investigators would still be working to uncover all the clues and motivations in what is the worst mass shooting in American history. However, by claiming Islamic State inspiration, Mateen may have sought to catapult his reputation from that of a homophobic mass-murderer to a '[soldier of the caliphate](#),' merely by parroting the group's name. His claim has significant weight regardless of its actual merit. Even if the investigation ultimately reveals that Mateen had limited, if any, real connection to the Islamic State, the tragedy demonstrates the gravity and repercussions of the group's [eternal call to terror](#). In compelling its supporters to commit violence, the Islamic State can claim victories with which it has very little—if anything—to do with.

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