

NEWS DESK

WAS THE WIFE OF THE PULSE SHOOTER A VICTIM OR AN ACCOMPLICE?

By Rachel Louise Snyder

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Noor Salman, the wife of Omar Mateen, was indicted on counts of obstruction of justice and providing material support to a terrorist organization. Photograph by Jim Wilson / NYT / Redux

Omar Mateen spent the final two years of his life growing ever angrier at what he saw as the slaughter of Muslims overseas. In 2013, the twenty-nine-year-old security guard had been investigated by the F.B.I. for making statements in support of both Hezbollah and Al Qaeda to his co-workers at G4S, one of the largest private-security firms in the world. After his co-workers contacted the F.B.I., agents questioned Mateen several times and placed him under surveillance. During his second interview, Mateen admitted that he had made such statements, but the agency ultimately concluded that he was not a threat.

On June 12, 2016, Mateen drove to the Pulse night club, in Orlando, and killed forty-nine people before being shot by police. It was the second-largest mass shooting in the nation's history. Several months later, Noor Salman, Mateen's wife, with whom he had a young son, was arrested in northern California, where she had been living with her family since the massacre. She was indicted on two counts: obstruction of justice, and providing material support to a terrorist organization—in this case, ISIS.

Earlier this month, I went to Orlando to cover jury selection in her trial, which begins in federal court this week. I visited the Pulse night club, which sits empty, with a chain-link fence around its perimeter. A sign in front said that the building will reopen as a memorial in April. Mourners wrote messages of love and remembrance on banners affixed to the fence. Forty-nine dried white roses had been braided into it.

Salman's trial is expected to raise questions about what level of responsibility family members have to report suspicious behavior. It is also expected to draw more attention to the relationship between domestic violence and mass shootings. The link is well known among researchers, and increasingly part of the public conversation, but the domestic-violence laws that do exist—such as banning convicted abusers from owning guns, or a strangulation statute that could have put Mateen behind bars—are not always enforced. In recent years, domestic-violence incidents have foreshadowed shootings in Sutherland Springs, Texas; Fort Lauderdale, Florida; Northern California; and Harvey County, Kansas.

Salman's relatives say that she did not know Mateen planned to carry out the attack. Her lawyers will likely argue that if the F.B.I. failed to detect Mateen's radicalization, his wife would not have been able to do so either. Defense lawyers may also describe what they say is Mateen's history of abusing and deceiving Salman.

The couple met online in 2011, on a dating Web site named Arab Lounge, and then in person in September of that year, when he and his relatives visited Salman and her family in California. On that trip, they got engaged. Within six months of their marriage, Mateen began beating her, according to relatives. Mateen had a history of violence. His first wife, Sitora Yusufiy, had called the police on him for strangling her in 2009, and although nonfatal strangulation is a felony in Florida, no charges were filed. He once punched Salman in the shoulder while she was pregnant, her family says. Another time, Mateen shoved Salman into a wall and strangled her, allegedly telling her to "stay out of [his] business." She was "always alone, always isolated" with her son, one family member, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, told me. She felt so isolated that she would sometimes call this person three times a day.

If convicted, Salman, who is thirty-one, faces life in prison. The prosecution will likely base its case on a three-part confession that Salman signed on the day of the shooting, which was written by an F.B.I. agent. In it, Salman claims that she and Mateen "cased" both the Pulse night club and a nearby amusement park in the weeks before the shooting, and quotes Mateen asking her, "How bad would it be if a club got attacked?" She goes on to say, "I often worry that he was going to commit an act of violence or terrorism." Prosecutors are also expected to point out that Salman knew that Mateen frequently watched ISIS and Al Qaeda videos.

Salman was interviewed for more than fifteen hours by the F.B.I., but none of her interviews were recorded and no lawyer was present, because she was not yet technically being accused of a crime. The defense team argues that her confession was coerced and that F.B.I. agents allegedly warned her that she would never see her son again—and that he would be raised by Christians—if she refused to sign it. In unsealed court documents, G.P.S. and cell-phone data collected by the police also suggest that Salman and Mateen were never anywhere near the Pulse night club until the night of the shooting, when Mateen went there alone.

Family members believe that the fact that the F.B.I. cleared Mateen in 2013 undermines the prosecution's case. According to a relative who asked not to be named, Salman understood that her husband had been thoroughly investigated and absolved. "He was able to fool the F.B.I. with all their technology and surveillance, but he's not able to fool his wife? What do they expect? She trusts the F.B.I. and they said they cleared him," the relative told me.

Jacquelyn Campbell, a professor at the Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing who created a system that assesses the level of danger that an abused woman faces, conducted an analysis of Salman and Mateen's history for the defense team. According to Campbell, Salman was strangled, threatened with death, and raped. Mateen allegedly also wouldn't allow her to work and even monitored the food she ate. Based on her results, Campbell said it would be surprising to her if Mateen had disclosed his plan to Salman, given the lesser secrets he'd kept: he cheated on her with other women, he opened bank accounts and credit cards in his name only, and days before the shooting he bought an arsenal of weapons and ammunition from the St. Lucie Shooting Center, where security-camera footage shows that he made the purchases alone. "It's a very paralyzing place where women understand that they are only living to survive," Campbell said.

When Salman was arrested and charged with aiding her husband in the attack, she was put on suicide watch. Now she spends twenty-three hours a day in solitary confinement. A spokeswoman for Salman's family, Susan Clary, said that Salman has not seen her son, who is now five, in more than a year. Her family says that when police come on the television, the boy runs and hides behind the couch.

During jury selection, Salman spent most of her time in court writing notes. Leaning over as she wrote, her forehead was pressed nearly against the notebook on the table in front of her. Salman swivelled occasionally in her chair and wore a thin black blazer. Her attorney, Linda Moreno, placed her hand on Salman's back as she introduced the defendant to each potential juror—many of whom bore some connection to the shooting. One was dismissed after he said that he had been working as a physician's assistant when victims began to pour into the local hospital on the night of Mateen's rampage.

The judge in the case, Paul G. Byron, asked each potential juror whether he or she could be unbiased given the recent mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, three hours south of Orlando. Like Mateen, the perpetrator in that shooting, Nikolas Cruz, had been reported to authorities but eluded arrest.

Salman's family told me that the fraught atmosphere has increased their fears that Salman will not get a fair trial. They are terrified of guilt by association, and worried that the fact that Salman is Muslim will cause her to be convicted and land them in trouble, as well. Outside the courthouse, public hostility toward Salman was clear. On the first morning of jury selection, a man stood with a sign that said, "Fry her till she has no Pulse."

Rachel Louise Snyder is the author of the books "No Visible Bruises," "What We've Lost Is Nothing" and "Fugitive Denim." She first contributed to the magazine in 2013.

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