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THE SLATEST

People Are Molding Their Responses to Nasim Aghdam to Fit the Shape of Their Bigotry

By CHRISTINA CAUTERUCCI
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Nasim Aghdam posted several animal-rights videos on YouTube, Instagram, and her website.

Nasim Aghdam

Nasim Aghdam, the 38-year-old San Diego woman who used a gun to wound three people and kill herself at YouTube's headquarters yesterday, does not fit the profile of the average person who opens fire in a public space.

According to an FBI study of 160 "active shooter" situations that took place in the U.S. between 2000 and 2013, just six of the shooters were women, as were only three of the 42 active shooters in 2014 and 2015.

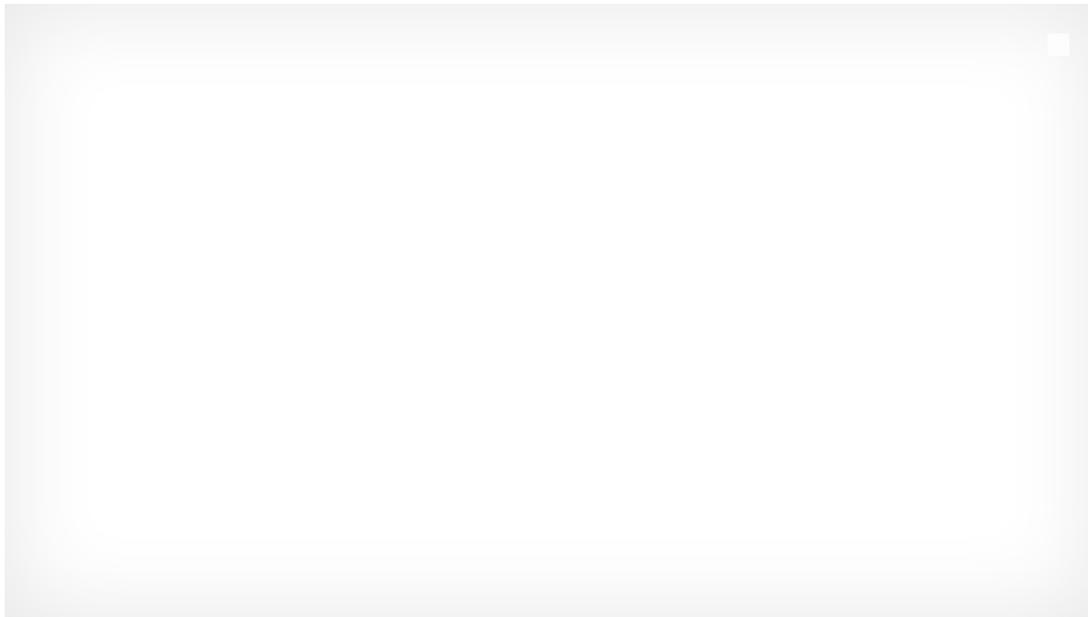
But Aghdam's gender is just the beginning of what makes her different from other Americans who've tried to kill random civilians. The FBI study found that, among active shooter situations that took place in businesses closed to pedestrian traffic (as YouTube's is), almost all of the perpetrators were current or former employees. The only one who wasn't had a relationship with an employee. Aghdam fits neither of these profiles. Aghdam also left a trail of bizarre videos on YouTube that covered veganism, exercise regimens, jewelry-making, and dance routines. She didn't make public any recognizable political platform beyond general calls for animal rights and free speech, and general criticisms of institutions she regarded as responsible for "destroying family values" and promoting "sexual degeneration," according to her website. Her anger was exclusively directed at YouTube for a personal reason: She thought the company was suppressing her videos, driving down viewership, and depriving her of income.

As observers have tried over the past 24 hours to understand Aghdam's shocking act of violence, their interpretations have held mirrors to their own fixations. With such a complex, colorful shooter to pick apart—so different from the central casting perp—people are making sense of Aghdam through their own ideas about her identities. Note which identities they center, and you'll get a glimpse of their biases.

In conservative media, the focus is on Aghdam's Iranian heritage. (She reportedly moved to the U.S. as a teenager.) A Washington Times report

fixates on the fact that Aghdam is “Middle Eastern” with names that are “typically Middle Eastern.” Right-wing Twitter is ablaze with triumphant accounts of mainstream media outlets identifying Aghdam as white, only to be caught “lying.” (The 2010 U.S. Census, for what it’s worth, included people of Middle Eastern descent in its definition of *white*.) A person who identifies himself as a Daily Wire “contributor” retweeted a tweet that confirmed Aghdam’s name and added, “Sounds Amish.” Another reporter for the outlet modified a similar tweet with a one-word statement: “Terrorism.”

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Other right-wingers are taking Aghdam’s animal-rights activism as reason to lump her in with “the left.” Donald Trump, Jr. has gone on a bit of a tear imagining how the media would have covered the YouTube shooting if the perpetrator had been an NRA member instead of “liberal Vegan PETA activists.” He retweeted a guy who listed off facts about Aghdam—“Vegan, Peta activist. Boasts of having served in the Iranian army.—and added, “So you’re saying not likely an @NRA member???” Another Trump, Jr. joint: “I look forward to the whole PETA has more mass shooters than the NRA conversations. I’m sure they will cover that... right?”

Several other people on conservative Twitter have made the NRA-PETA comparison, which is not exactly apt—one has the support of a multibillion-dollar industry, for one thing, while the other has made its name opposing

one. Almost every elected official from one political party vocally supports the NRA, while almost no members of the other give one hoot about PETA; it's far from a mainstream liberal calling card. But PETA, with its extreme positions on animal products and racy, terrible advertising campaigns, is easy shorthand for a stereotype of the kind of loudmouthed, hairy-armed, easily triggered activist cohort the right loves to hate. Nevermind the organization says Aghdam hasn't attended one of the group's demonstrations in almost a decade.

Because Aghdam is a woman, jokes about gender came easily, too: She didn't kill anyone at YouTube, so mass murder must be yet another area of superior male expertise. She must have taken the encouragement of "women can do anything men can do" too seriously. One person on Twitter called Aghdam a "bitter woman"; CNN called her a "female suspect" and speculated that a "love triangle" may have contributed to her motive. Alt-right leader Mike Cernovich posted several photos and videos of Aghdam, including one, without comment, that showed her in a studded leather jumpsuit with an open chest and corset laces, seemingly inviting comments on her looks. His followers took their cue, tweeting that she looked "hot," like a "prostitute" or Barbarella. Elsewhere, users have taken photos of her and made what looks like fan art.

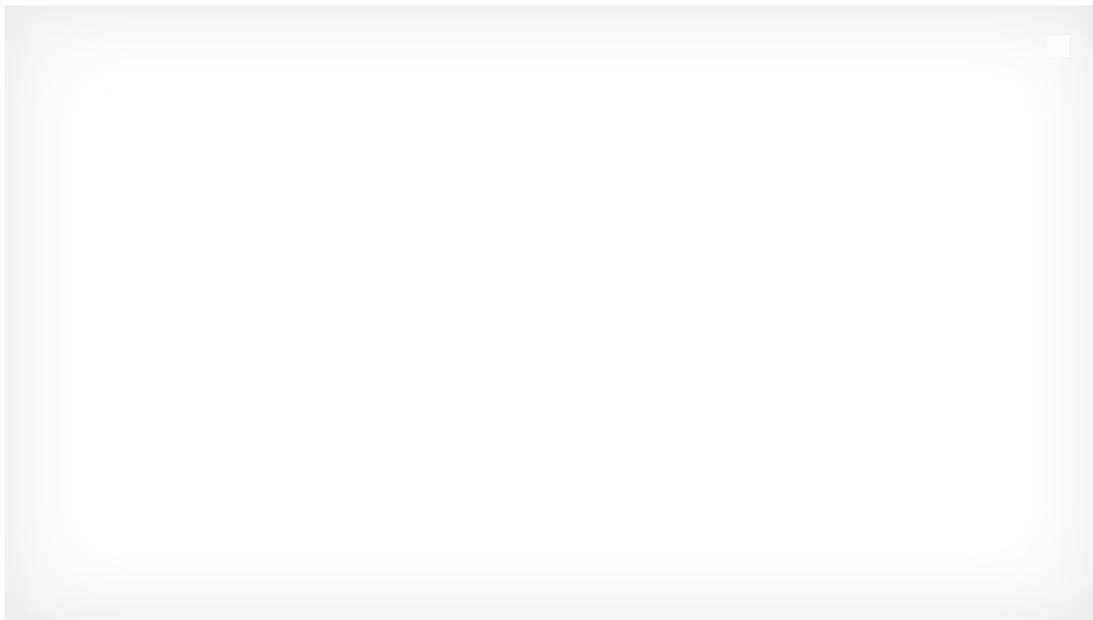
This fixation on appearance is unusual among public responses to mass shooters. Perhaps observers feel OK joking about Aghdam's looks because she didn't kill anyone, making the day after the shooting far less grave than it might have been. When photos of Adam Lanza, Elliot Rodger, Nikolas Cruz, and Dylann Roof hit the internet, the public reading has focused on symbolism: the flags they flew, insignias they wore, and poses they struck with weapons. Aghdam has an objectively more peculiar and interesting aesthetic, in large part because she made YouTube videos in garish costumes. But some conversations on right-wing Twitter have veered closer to appraisals of her sexual desirability than mere assessments of her closet. There's no particular reason why her sex appeal should be of note to these observers, other than that she is a new woman thrust into their consciousness, and sex is the lens through which new women are judged.

There's another group of people close-reading Aghdam's appearance, and they make strange companions for the conservatives doing the same. Feminist-identified women with anti-transgender politics are convinced that Aghdam is trans, and they fear she'll unduly besmirch the female tradition of not shooting at people in public places. "Is anyone surprised that the 'woman' who shot up the YouTube hq is obviously a man?" one such Twitter user asked.

Another beseeded the media to "Please report #YouTubeShooter's sex, not identity," because "the public deserve to know objective facts." "Nobody actually knows the SEX of criminals, because the media and documentation now report identity instead," she continued.

"The #YouTubeShooter was not a woman, he was a transwoman," a user with the handle @WomenHaveWombs tweeted. "Please do not add this person to the women's crime statistics. There are so few women shooters that just adding one trans male to the women's stats will skew them enormously."

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Twitter users have presented Aghdam's eyebrows, neck, muscular frame (she was a bodybuilder), and "masculine features" as evidence that she is transgender. There are, as one might have guessed, multiple and extensive 4chan threads dedicated to the topic. Though there's nothing particularly

gender-transgressive about Aghdam's physical appearance or presentation, her singularity—a vegan YouTuber who shot up a business, as a woman!—makes her difficult to understand. Among inscrutable people, gender is often the first quality to fall under suspicion.

The most prominent person questioning Aghdam's gender is Laura Loomer, formerly of the right-wing outfit Project Veritas, which tries to trick mainstream publications into publishing false information. Loomer published a piece that calls the YouTube shooting a “#LoveaMuslimDay Terror Attack,” referencing a popular hashtag from Tuesday that “coincidentally” fell on the same day Aghdam walked into YouTube headquarters in a “headscarf.” Loomer later tweeted to her 138,000 followers that Aghdam had “very muscular thighs and buff arms” and “oversized breasts” that “look distorted w/ photoshop.” “I don't think we are getting the full story,” she tweeted. “And for the record, Nasim is not traditionally a woman's name. It's a boy's name.” Twitter users disputed that characterization of the name in the replies.

NRA supporters who aren't blinded by Islamophobia are currently holding up Aghdam as evidence that gun violence is random—unlike most mass shooters, she was a woman with a small handgun, therefore neither the corrosive effects of hegemonic masculinity nor frictionless access to assault rifles have anything to do with who tries to kill people and how. The popular response to the person of Aghdam, which is unlike the reaction to any other active shooter situation in the U.S., tells a different story. With all her idiosyncrasies, Aghdam was the exception that proved the rule: a woman who opened fire in a public place, only to be met with accusations that she was not a woman at all.

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