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Syrian Refugee Terror Plot or Latest in Pattern of FBI-Manufactured Terrorism Cases?



Photograph Source: An FBI Evidence Response Team – Public Domain

On the surface, the story of 21-year-old Syrian refugee and Pittsburgh resident Mustafa Mousab Alowemer has the elements to strike fear in many Americans and give ammunition to the Trump administration for its war on immigrants and refugees, especially those who would dare to flee violence in countries like Syria.

With much fanfare but no apparent imminent danger, the FBI announced on Wednesday last week that it had foiled a purported plot by Alowemer, an accused ISIS supporter, to bomb a local church in Northview Heights on the north side of Pittsburgh. To increase

the spectacle of Alowemer's arrest, police shut down the entire block on which he lived and even knocked on neighborhood doors to alert residents to stay inside.

The results of the months-long FBI investigation was the indictment of Alowemer, who was charged with one count of attempting to provide material support to ISIS and two counts of distributing information about making explosives.

Although Alowemer's alleged plot to bomb the Legacy International Worship Center was set for July, the arrest was carried out on June 19, the eve of Global Refugee Day. This year's theme encouraged people to stand in solidarity with refugees.

Alowemer came to the US in 2016 as a refugee escaping his war-ravaged country, a war the US has supported and fought in militarily. The young Syrian had just graduated high school earlier this year.

Alowemer lived with his family in a neighborhood of other immigrant families and longtime residents who were shocked by the news, according to the Post-Gazette, and described Alowemer as quiet but friendly.

Pattern of FBI-manufactured terror plots used to yield political objectives

For the most part, the mainstream media has unquestioningly repeated spectacular claims of little substance made by the Justice Department. But, if you peel away the congratulatory rhetoric and superficial evidence proffered thus far, you can see glimpses of the FBI's pattern of manufactured terror plots used to yield political objectives.

The FBI has a long history of encouraging individuals and groups to plan actions they would otherwise not have undertaken but for prompting by FBI agents and paid informants. Whether targeting Muslim communities or political activists, the FBI has gained a reputation of goading and entrapping its targets using manipulation and the questionable motivations of paid informants.

The FBI has been known to seduce targets with the prospect of money, employment, housing, and even drugs in order to carry out plans either concocted or supported by the law enforcement actors involved. Paid FBI informants often have pending criminal charges or prior records and agree to take part in entrapment schemes to reduce their own criminal penalties and/or to make money. According to research conducted in 2011 by Mother Jones, nearly half of the 500 people the government had prosecuted on terrorism charges since 9/11 were taken to court based on the evidence and testimony of informants.

Of course, none of this will appear in a criminal complaint, much less a law enforcement affidavit which states up front that it “does not set forth each and every fact learned...during the course of this investigation.”

Imminent threat or PR opportunity? – More questions than answers

With federal law enforcement in total control of the circumstances and despite no apparent risk, the Justice Department sealed its criminal complaint, keeping the contents from public scrutiny and relying instead on a department press release and the affidavit of FBI Special Agent Nicholas Edquist to inform the public. But, we don’t really know the role of Edquist or his relationship to the “online covert [FBI] employee,” the undercover FBI agent or the FBI informant. We also don’t know anything about the methods or motivations of the FBI informant, the weak link in many of these so-called “terrorism” cases.

So, we are left to read between the lines.

Alowemer allegedly provided a number of items to his FBI contact, including a video recording of him pledging loyalty to ISIS, Googlemaps data about the church, and two bomb-making instruction manuals—“Beginners Course for Young Mujahedeen” and “The Extraction of Potassium Nitrate from Goat Manure and Other Methods.” According to the affidavit, Alowemer is also accused of buying common household items, such as “acetone (in the form of nail polish remover), 9-volt batteries, ice packs, and nails,” all of which he allegedly believed were necessary in the construction of an explosive device.

But, the affidavit has no details or context with which to ascertain whether Alowemer was instructed by his FBI contacts to produce those items or if he did so of his own free will. It’s also questionable whether his actions, as defined by the Justice Department, amounted to material support for terrorism.

Alowemer admitted knowing nothing about making bombs and the affidavit indicates that the undercover FBI agent told Alowemer he had “expertise in constructing destructive devices and explosives.” So why would Alowemer’s FBI contact have benefited from bomb-making instruction manuals, especially at a beginners level? Was Alowemer asked to produce the manuals simply to round out the FBI’s “terrorism plot” and enable the government to charge him with multiple counts of distributing information relating to explosives?

Furthermore, was Alowemer coached by the FBI, and how much of the so-called “plot” was developed independently by Alowemer versus the FBI agents and informant(s)?

Another contradiction in the FBI’s story is the claim that Alowemer provided the bureau with a self-authored poem addressed to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, entitled “The Longing for Martyrdom,” without any corresponding indication that Alowemer intended to carry out a suicide bombing. Instead, the alleged plan factors in Alowemer’s escape and evasion from authorities.

Islamophobic and anti-immigrant sentiments

Sadly, this case can be expected to stoke Islamophobic sentiment and increase fear of immigrants and refugees just struggling to survive in the US.

The Alowemer family and other immigrant families in their neighborhood likely already felt marginalized and excluded, if not unwelcome. Marcus Reed, president of the local tenant council, told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette he had joked with longtime residents that Alowemer and his family were members of ISIS because they “isolated themselves,” and only associated with other immigrant families. Reed also complained that immigrants were outnumbering the longtime residents in his neighborhood.

To complement this street-level sentiment toward immigrants, the right-wing news media is using this case to stir up general hysteria around immigration. On Thursday, Fox News Contributor Sara Carter referenced “broken and failed immigration laws,” as well as the misperception that “we just don’t know who’s coming in [to the US].”

Prepared for these kinds of extrapolated responses, terrorism experts have been trying to deescalate the rhetoric with facts. “The threat posed by refugees is overall very low despite some of the rhetoric you may hear,” Patrick James, a researcher with the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), told the Tribune-Review. “The refugee vetting system is effective.”

James underscored the fact that Alowemer is the only Syrian refugee accused of being involved in a US-based terror plot. “The vast majority of cases are US-born individuals,” he said. START identified nearly 500 cases where people were involved in activity supporting al-Qaida and ISIS in the US, but only twelve involved refugees. Experts also pointed to the multilayered process of admitting refugees into the US, a process that is governed by the State Department and includes extensive background checks.

Fallout for Alomeyer and his family

Nevertheless, in some cases fear will prevail. For the Alowemer family, the results of that fear are all-too real. Although the Justice Department made no overt connection between the actions of Mustafa Alowemer and his family, a 15-day eviction notice was posted Thursday on the family's home by the Pittsburgh Housing Authority, which has the discretion to evict any residents who become involved with "crime-related activity."

Alowemer appeared in court Friday for a preliminary hearing in an orange jumpsuit and shackles. Defense lawyer Sam Saylor used a translator to communicate with his client. Special Agent Gary Morgan of the Pittsburgh FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force was the only witness to testify. Notably, Morgan does not appear in the Justice Department's press release or in Edquist's affidavit as involved in the investigation, but nevertheless he testified to the claims made in the affidavit.

Alomeyer's lawyer Sam Saylor argued that the Justice Department's evidence did not constitute a plan to build and use explosives and, therefore, prosecutors did not have probable cause to charge his client. US Magistrate Judge Cynthia Eddy disagreed and ruled that Alowemer, who is facing decades in prison, could be tried on all three charges. According to the Tribune-Review, Alowemer waived his detention hearing and was taken back into custody after the 90-minute hearing.

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