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Most Terrorist Plots in the US Aren't Invented by Al Qaeda -- They're Manufactured by the FBI

February 15, 2013

*The following is an excerpt from **The Terror Factory: Inside the FBI's Manufactured War on Terrorism [3]** by Trevor Aaronson (Ig Publishing, 2012).*

Antonio Martinez was a punk. The twenty-two-year-old from Baltimore was chunky, with a wide nose and jet-black hair pulled back close to his scalp and tied into long braids that hung past his shoulders. He preferred to be called Muhammad Hussain, the name he gave himself following his conversion to Islam. But his mother still called him Tony, and she couldn't understand her son's burning desire to be the Maryland Mujahideen.

As a young man, Martinez had been angry and lost. He'd dropped out of Laurel High School, in Prince George's County, Maryland, and spent his teens as a small-time thief in the Washington, D.C., suburbs. By the age of sixteen, he'd been charged with armed robbery. In February 2008, at the age of eighteen, he tried to steal a car. Catholic University doctoral student Daniel Tobin was looking out of the window of his apartment one day when he saw a man driving off in his car. Tobin gave chase, running between apartment buildings and finally catching up to the stolen vehicle. He opened the passenger-side door and got in. Martinez, in the driver's seat, dashed out and ran away on foot. Jumping behind the wheel, Tobin followed the would-be car thief. "You may as well give up running," he yelled at Martinez. Martinez was apprehended and charged with grand theft of a motor vehicle—he had stolen the vehicle using an extra set of car keys which had gone missing when someone had broken into Tobin's apartment earlier. However, prosecutors dropped the charges against Martinez after Tobin failed to appear in court.

Despite the close call, Martinez's petty crimes continued. One month after the car theft, he and a friend approached a cashier at a Safeway grocery store, acting as if they wanted to buy potato chips. When the cashier opened the register, Martinez and his friend grabbed as much money as they could and ran out of the store. The cashier and store manager chased after them, and later identified the pair to police. Martinez pleaded guilty to theft of one hundred dollars and received a ninety-day suspended sentence, plus six months of probation.

Searching for greater meaning in his life, Martinez was baptized and became a Christian when he was twenty-one years old, but he didn't stick with the religion. "He said he tried the Christian thing. He just really didn't understand it," said Alisha Legrand, a former girlfriend. Martinez chose Islam instead. On his Facebook page, Martinez wrote that he was "just a yung brotha from the wrong side of the tracks who embraced Islam." But for reasons that have never been clear to his family and friends, Martinez drifted toward a violent, extremist brand of Islam. When the FBI discovered him, Martinez was an angry extremist mouthing off on Facebook about violence, with misspelled posts such as, "The sword is cummin the reign of oppression is about 2 cease inshallah." Based on the Facebook postings alone, an FBI agent gave an informant the "green light" to get to know Martinez and determine if he had a propensity for violence. In other words, to see if he was dangerous.

The government was setting the trap.

On the evening of December 2, 2010, Martinez was in another Muslim's car as they drove through Baltimore. A hidden device recorded their conversation. His mother had called, and Martinez had just finished talking to her on his cell phone. He was aggravated. "She wants me to be like everybody else, being in school, working," he told his friend. "For me, it's different. I have this zeal for deen and she doesn't understand that." Martinez's mother didn't know that her son had just left a meeting with a purported Afghan-born terrorist who had agreed to provide him with a car bomb. But she wasn't the only one in the dark that night. Martinez himself didn't know his new terrorist friend was an undercover agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation and that the man driving the car—a man he'd met only a few weeks earlier—was a paid informant for federal law enforcement.

Five days later, Martinez met again with the man he believed to be a terrorist. The informant was there, too. They were all, Martinez believed, brothers in arms and in Islam. In a parking lot near the Armed Forces Career Center on Baltimore National Pike, Martinez, the informant, and the undercover FBI agent piled into an SUV, where the undercover agent showed Martinez the device that would detonate the car bomb and how to use it. He then unveiled to the twenty-two-year-old the bomb in the back of the SUV and demonstrated what he'd need to do to activate it. "I'm ready, man," Martinez said. "It ain't like you seein' it on the news. You gonna be there. You gonna hear the bomb go off. You gonna be, uh, shooting, gettin' shot at. It's gonna be real. ... I'm excited, man."

That night, Martinez, who had little experience behind the wheel of a car, needed to practice driving the SUV around the empty parking lot. Once he felt comfortable doing what most teenagers can do easily, Martinez and his associates devised a plan: Martinez would park the bomb-on-wheels in the parking lot outside the military recruiting center. One of his associates

would then pick him up, and they'd drive together to a vantage point where Martinez could detonate the bomb and delight in the resulting chaos and carnage.

The next morning, the three men put their plan into action. Martinez hopped into the SUV and activated the bomb, as he'd been instructed, and then drove to the military recruiting station. He parked right in front. The informant, trailing in another car, picked up Martinez and drove him to the vantage point, just as planned. Everything was falling into place, and Martinez was about to launch his first attack in what he hoped would be for him a lifetime of jihad against the only nation he had ever known.

Looking out at the military recruiting station, Martinez lifted the detonation device and triggered the bomb. Smiling, he watched expectantly. Nothing happened. Suddenly, FBI agents rushed in and arrested the man they'd later identify in court records as "Antonio Martinez a/k/a Muhammad Hussain." Federal prosecutors in Maryland charged Martinez with attempted murder of federal officers and attempted use of a weapon of mass destruction. He faced at least thirty-five years in prison if convicted at trial.

"This is not Tony," a woman identifying herself as Martinez's mother told a reporter after the arrest. "I think he was brainwashed with that Islam crap." Joseph Balter, a federal public defender, told the court during a detention hearing that FBI agents had entrapped Martinez, whom he referred to by his chosen name. The terrorist plot was, Balter said, "the creation of the government—a creation which was implanted into Mr. Hussain's mind." He added: "There was nothing provided which showed that Mr. Hussain had any ability whatsoever to carry out any kind of plan."

Despite Balter's claims, a little more than a year after his indictment, Martinez chose not to challenge the government's charges in court. On January 26, 2012, Martinez dropped his entrapment defense and pleaded guilty to attempted use of a weapon of mass destruction under a deal that will require him to serve twenty-five years in prison—more years than he's been alive. Neither Martinez nor Balter would comment on the reasons they chose a plea agreement, though in a sentencing hearing, Balter told the judge he believed the entire case could have been avoided had the FBI counseled, rather than encouraged, Martinez.

The U.S. Department of Justice touted the conviction as another example of the government keeping citizens safe from terrorists. "We are catching dangerous suspects before they strike, and we are investigating them in a way that maximizes the liberty and security of law-abiding citizens," U.S. attorney for the District of Maryland Rod J. Rosenstein said in a statement announcing Martinez's plea agreement. "That is what the American people expect of the Justice Department, and that is what we aim to deliver."

Indeed, that is exactly what the Justice Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation have been delivering throughout the decade since the attacks of September 11, 2001. But whether it's what the American people expect is questionable, because most Americans today have no idea that since 9/11, one single organization has been responsible for hatching and financing more terrorist plots in the United States than any other. That organization isn't Al Qaeda, the terrorist network founded by Osama bin Laden and responsible for the spectacular 2001 attacks on New

York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. And it isn't Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammed, Al-Shabaab, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, or any of the other more than forty U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organizations. No, the organization responsible for more terrorist plots over the last decade than any other is the FBI. Through elaborate and expensive sting operations involving informants and undercover agents posing as terrorists, the FBI has arrested and the Justice Department has prosecuted dozens of men government officials say posed direct—but by no means immediate or credible—threats to the United States.

Just as in the Martinez case, in terrorism sting after terrorism sting, FBI and DOJ officials have hosted high-profile press conferences to announce yet another foiled terrorist plot. But what isn't publicized during these press conferences is the fact that government-described terrorists such as Antonio Martinez were able to carry forward with their potentially lethal plots only because FBI informants and agents provided them with all of the means—in most cases delivering weapons and equipment, in some cases even paying for rent and doling out a little spending money to keep targets on the hook. In cities around the country where terrorism sting operations have occurred—among them New York City, Albany, Chicago, Miami, Baltimore, Portland, Tampa, Houston, and Dallas—a central question exists: Is the FBI catching terrorists or creating them?

In the years since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the federal law enforcement profile of a terrorist has changed dramatically. The men responsible for downing the World Trade Center were disciplined and patient; they were also living and training in the United States with money from an Al Qaeda cell led by Kuwaiti-born Khalid Sheikh Mohammad. In the days and weeks following 9/11, federal officials anxiously awaited a second wave of attacks, which would be launched, they believed at the time, by several sleeper cells around the country. But the feared second wave never crashed ashore. Instead, the United States and allied nations invaded Afghanistan, Al Qaeda's home base, and forced Osama bin Laden and his deputies into hiding. Bruised and hunted, Al Qaeda no longer had the capability to train terrorists and send them to the United States.

In response, Al Qaeda's leaders moved to what FBI officials describe as a "franchise model." If you can't run Al Qaeda as a hierarchal, centrally organized outfit, the theory went, run it as a franchise. In other words, export ideas—not terrorists. Al Qaeda and its affiliated organizations went online, setting up websites and forums dedicated to instilling their beliefs in disenfranchised Muslims already living in Western nations. A slickly designed magazine, appropriately titled Inspire, quickly followed. Article headlines included "I Am Proud to Be a Traitor to America,"⁹ and "Why Did I Choose Al-Qaeda?" Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born, high-ranking Al Qaeda official who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Yemen on September 30, 2011, became something of the terrorist organization's Dear Abby. Have a question about Islam? Ask Anwar! Muslim men in nations throughout the Western world would email him questions, and al-Awlaki would reply dutifully, and in English, encouraging many of his electronic pen pals to violent action. Al-Awlaki also kept a blog and a Facebook page, and regularly posted recruitment videos to YouTube. He said in one video:

I specifically invite the youth to either fight in the West or join their brothers in the fronts of jihad: Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia.

I invite them to join us in our new front, Yemen, the base from which the great jihad of the Arabian Peninsula will begin, the base from which the greatest army of Islam will march forth.

Al Qaeda's move to a franchise model met with some success. U.S. army major Nadal Hassan, for example, corresponded with al-Awlaki before he killed thirteen people and wounded twenty-nine others in the Fort Hood, Texas, shootings in 2009. Antonio Martinez and other American-born men, many of them recent converts to Islam, also sent al-Awlaki messages or watched Al Qaeda propaganda videos online before moving forward in alleged terrorist plots.

The FBI has a term for Martinez and other alleged terrorists like him: lone wolf. Officials at the Bureau now believe that the next terrorist attack will likely come from a lone wolf, and this belief is at the core of a federal law enforcement policy known variously as preemption, prevention, and disruption. FBI counterterrorism agents want to catch terrorists before they act, and to accomplish this, federal law enforcement officials have in the decade since 9/11 created the largest domestic spying network ever to exist in the United States. In fact, the FBI today has ten times as many informants as it did in the 1960s, when former FBI director J. Edgar Hoover made the Bureau infamous for inserting spies into organizations as varied as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s and the Ku Klux Klan. Modern FBI informants aren't burrowing into political groups, however; they are focused on terrorism, on identifying today the terrorist of tomorrow, and U.S. government officials acknowledge that while terrorist threats do exist from domestic organizations, such as white supremacist groups and the sovereign citizen movement, they believe the greatest threat comes from within U.S. Muslim communities due, in large part, to the aftereffects of the shock and awe Al Qaeda delivered on September 11, 2001.

The FBI's vast army of spies, located in every community in the United States with enough Muslims to support a mosque, has one primary function: to identify the next lone wolf. According to the Bureau, a lone wolf is likely to be a single male age sixteen to thirty-five. Therefore, informants and their FBI handlers are on the lookout for young Muslims who espouse radical beliefs, are vocal about their disapproval of U.S. foreign policy, or have expressed sympathy for international terrorist groups. If they find anyone who meets the criteria, they move him to the next stage: the sting, in which an FBI informant, posing as a terrorist, offers to help facilitate a terrorist attack for the target.

On a cold February morning in 2011, I met with Peter Ahearn, a retired FBI special agent who directed the Western New York Joint Terrorism Task Force, in a coffee shop outside Washington, D.C., to talk about how the FBI runs its operations. Ahearn was among the Bureau's vanguard as it transformed into a counterterrorism organization in the wake of 9/11. An average-built man with a small dimple on his chin and close-cropped brown hair receding in the front, Ahearn oversaw one of the earliest post-9/11 terrorism investigations, involving the so-called Lackawanna Six—a group of six Yemeni-American men living outside Buffalo, New York, who attended a training camp in Afghanistan and were convicted of providing material support to Al Qaeda. “If you're doing a sting right, you're offering the target multiple chances to back out,” Ahearn told me. “Real people don't say, ‘Yeah, let's go bomb that place.’ Real people call the cops.”

Indeed, while terrorism sting operations are a new practice for the Bureau, they are an evolution of an FBI tactic that has for decades captured the imaginations of Hollywood filmmakers. In 1982, as the illegal drug trade overwhelmed local police resources nationwide and contributed to an increase in violent crime, President Ronald Reagan's first attorney general, William French Smith, gave the FBI jurisdiction over federal drug crimes, which previously had been the exclusive domain of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. Eager to show up their DEA rivals, FBI agents began aggressively sending undercover agents into America's cities. This was relatively new territory for the FBI, which, during Hoover's thirty-seven-year stewardship, had mandated that agents wear a suit and tie at all times, federal law enforcement badge easily accessible from the coat pocket. But an increasingly powerful Mafia and the bloody drug war compelled the FBI to begin enforcing federal laws from the street level. In searching for drug crimes, FBI agents hunted sellers as well as buyers, and soon learned one of the best strategies was to become part of the action.

Most people have no doubt seen drug sting operations as portrayed in countless movies and television shows. At its most cliché, the scene is set in a Miami high-rise apartment, its floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the cresting waves of the Atlantic Ocean. There's a man seated at the dining table; he's longhaired, with a scruffy face, and he has a briefcase next to him. But that's not all. Hidden on the other side of the room is a camera making a grainy black-and-white recording of the entire scene. The apartment's door swings open and two men saunter in, the camera recording their every move and word. Everyone sits down at the table. The two men hand over bundles of cash. The scruffy man then hands over the briefcase. The two guests of course expect to find cocaine inside. Instead, the briefcase is empty, and as soon as they open it to find the drugs missing, FBI agents rush in, guns drawn for the takedown. Federal law enforcement officials call this type of sting operation a "no-dope bust," and it has been an effective tool for decades. It's also the direct predecessor to today's terrorism sting. Instead of empty briefcases, the FBI today uses inert bombs and disabled assault rifles, and now that counter-terrorism is the Bureau's top priority, the investigation of major drug crimes has largely fallen back to the DEA. Just as no-dope busts resulted in the arrest and prosecution of those in the drug trade in the twentieth century, terrorism sting operations are resulting in the arrest and prosecution of would-be terrorists in this century.

While the assumptions behind drug stings and terrorism stings are similar, there is a fundamental flaw in the assumption underpinning the latter. In drug stings, federal law enforcement officials assume that any buyer caught in a sting would have been able to buy or sell drugs elsewhere had that buyer not fallen into the FBI trap. The numbers support this assumption. In 2010, the most recent year for which data is available, the DEA seized 29,179 kilograms, or 64,328 pounds, of cocaine in the United States. Likewise, in terrorism stings, federal law enforcement officials assume that any would-be terrorists caught in a sting would have been able to acquire the means elsewhere to carry out their violent plans had they not been ensnared by the FBI. The problem with this assumption is that no data exists to support it, and what data is available suggests would-be Islamic terrorists caught in FBI terrorism stings never could have obtained the capability to carry out their planned violent acts were it not for the FBI's assistance.

In the ten years following 9/11, the FBI and the Justice Department indicted and convicted more than 150 people following sting operations involving alleged connections to international

terrorism. Few of these defendants had any connection to terrorists, evidence showed, and those who did have connections, however tangential, never had the capacity to launch attacks on their own. In fact, of the more than 150 terrorism sting operation defendants, an FBI informant not only led one of every three terrorist plots, but also provided all the necessary weapons, money, and transportation.

The FBI's logic to support the use of terrorism stings goes something like this: By catching a lone wolf before he strikes, federal law enforcement can take him off the streets before he meets a real terrorist who can provide him with weapons and munitions. However, to this day, no example exists of a lone wolf, by himself unable to launch an attack, becoming operational through meeting an actual terrorist in the United States. In addition, in the dozens of terrorism sting operations since 9/11, the would-be terrorists are usually uneducated, unsophisticated, and economically desperate—not the attributes of someone likely to plan and launch a sophisticated, violent attack without significant help.