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How FBI Informants Do Their Dirty Work

by BARBARA NIMRI AZIZ

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Finally we have a visual testimony of how FBI informants do their dirty work. Americans who experienced COINTELPRO understand the treachery involved. During the 1960s African Americans were targeted and Black organizations infiltrated, intimidated and disrupted. Today's main targets of US intelligence plots, Muslims, were completely naïve about COINTEL strategies; and much of the US media today act as if they'd never heard of it.

In the climate of fear that began to grip the US in the mid 1990s, it was a rare lawyer or journalist who would question government announcements of uncovered 'terror' threats. Exaggerated claims of danger and demonic portrayals of Muslims threatening 'the American way of life' went unchallenged by media for more than a decade. The 1993 World Trade Center bombing and the Patriot Act drawn up in its wake was followed by an expansion of surveillance post 9/11, allowing the FBI and police to act with near impunity. They swept through Muslim communities detaining individuals on suspicion of aiding terrorism. Authorities deported thousands, most without a trail, and at the same time planted suspicion and fear within Muslim communities, citizens and immigrants alike.

The process continues today. After Sept. 2001, 13,000 mainly Muslim men were put into detention proceedings; we don't know the precise number of resulting deportations. We also don't know how many people were recruited as 'informers' to identify or entrap suspect Muslims, although it may be as high as 15,000.

During the first ‘Muslim terror’ phase (1993-2001) a few civil rights attorneys dared to take on the defense of suspects. After 9/11 everything changed. Distrust spread, animosity towards Muslims heightened, mosques and workplaces were infiltrated by planted informers, Muslim charities were investigated while many were closed and their leaders arrested. With notable exceptions –e.g. Lynne Stewart who paid heavily for her principles—civil rights advocates retreated from taking on ‘terror suspect’ cases. Journalists too backed away from investigating civil rights violations of Muslims. The 9/11 attacks had a chilling effect on everyone —the press, legal institutions, citizens, and especially Muslim immigrants—that persists to this day.

FBI entrapment programs were greatly facilitated by the tenuous status of many Muslims living in the US, especially non-citizen residents many of whom were married to Americans and had American-born children. Some had citizen applications in progress while others skirted the law by quietly overstaying their visa. These practices were not abnormal, and normally they were not serious.

Suddenly this population became vulnerable, like African Americans with minor infractions forty years earlier under COINTELPRO. A traffic citation, unpaid child support, or a visa overstay now became a device whereby FBI recruited individuals to pursue people it identified as possible ‘threats to America’. This new class of FBI informants, nefariously referred to as ‘mosque crawlers’, began frequenting Muslim institutions and neighborhoods across the country. After ensnaring victims in ‘sting operations’, these informants would furnish evidence in court, helping to send hundreds of these entrapped individuals to prison.

One such ‘mosque crawler’ is Saeed Torres, a longtime FBI contract employee. Thanks to a remarkable new film “(T)ERROR” offering Torres’ on-camera testimonials, no one can pretend that such work has anything to do with justice. Torres is a disagreeable character but he was ready to show and tell.

Disenchantment with his work and his disrespect for both his FBI handlers and his potential victims (POIs: persons-of-interest in FBI parlance) led Torres to confess his activities to Lyric R Cabral, a fearless –fearless because she would herself come under scrutiny by the FBI– photojournalist and filmmaker. Torres decided to allow her to film him at work–scouting out a ‘terror’ target.

“(T)ERROR”, a newly released film, is the result of painstaking work over a 10 year period by Cabral. It’s a joint effort by her and fellow filmmaker David F. Sutcliffe whose 2011 film “Adama” documented how, beginning in 2005, FBI harassment of a 16-year old New York student and her family almost destroyed their lives.

Sutcliffe and Cabral’s success in “(T)ERROR” lies not only in securing Torres’ candid testimony, but also in identifying and filming his intended Philadelphia target, (POI) Khalifah. The filmmakers’ extraordinary access to these men during the ongoing process of entrapment shows us both sides—that of the hunter, Torres, and hunted, Khalifah, in this unsettling drama.

We get a first hand view of the clandestine nature of an FBI ‘sting’. We witness an underworld of unsavory characters, incompetent and living a marginal existence. Even the ‘innocent’

Khalifah evokes no sympathy in this drama. (He was able to contact legal advisors for help, thwart entrapment and avoid imprisonment as a terrorist, but eventually was tried and convicted on a weapons charge.)

This film takes our understanding of this disagreeable process of entrapment to a new level, adding credibility to earlier reports of questionable FBI practices. In the highly publicized 2009 case of the Newburgh Four the blinds came off. Journalists and civil rights lawyers stepped in to take a closer look at government tactics and investigate their devastating effects on the Muslim community. “Mohamed’s Ghosts” by Philadelphia Inquirer reporter Stephen Salisbury started a conversation about the US government ‘stage-managing’ its war on terror. In a 2011 exposé by “Mother Jones” <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/08/fbi-terrorist-informants> , author Trevor Aaronson asks: “... is the FBI busting terrorist plots—or leading them?”

Most recently we have an exhaustive report from Projectsalam.org and civilliberties.org answering Aaronson’s question. This and “(T)ERROR should leave no one in doubt that things have to change.

Next time, how long will it take to expose government lies?