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MANUFACTURING TERRORISTS

by Matthew Harwood

January 6, 2014

Predators stalk Muslim-American communities across the nation today. They talk of brotherhood and of sacrifice. They talk of jihad and the duty of fellow Muslims to come to the defense of the faithful. Often they prey on the most vulnerable within these communities: immature young men; new converts to Islam; ex-cons trying to turn their lives around; and the mentally unhinged. The thing is, these men who talk of martial valor and of waging war on the United States, both at home and abroad, aren't members of al-Qaeda or one of its affiliates; they are the undercover agents and confidential informants of the FBI. And their talent is a peculiar form of alchemy: they turn wayward, incompetent men, often with only a superficial understanding of Islam, into bloodthirsty jihadis intent on making the American dream a nightmare. In reality, the victims of this scam bear no more resemblance to monsters than Boris Karloff did.

“The organization responsible for more terrorist plots over the last decade than any other is the FBI,” investigative journalist Trevor Aaronson provocatively declares at the outset of his deeply unsettling book, *The Terror Factory*. With sinewy prose and surgical investigative techniques, Aaronson crafts a devastating indictment against the FBI, showing that many of these successful

counterterrorism investigations heralded by the bureau — the Lackawanna Six, the Liberty City Seven, the Fort Dix Five, the Newburgh Four — did not avert mass slaughter. Rather the plots were manufactured by the FBI, often using a network of 15,000 domestic spies to entrap jihadi wannabees and completely innocent men into terrorist conspiracies, which invariably ended with the mark theatrically pushing a button that was supposed to make a big boom.

Aaronson's approach isn't anecdotal. He's done the hard, often unheralded work of building a database of 508 defendants charged with terrorism offenses by the Department of Justice since 9/11. When broken down, the analytical results are startling.

Of the 508 defendants, 243 had been targeted through an FBI informant, 158 had been caught in an FBI terrorism sting, and 49 had encountered an agent provocateur. Most of the people who didn't face off against an informant weren't directly involved with terrorism at all, but were instead Category II offenders, small-time criminals with distant links to terrorists overseas. Seventy-two of these Category II offenders had been charged with making false statements, while 121 had been prosecuted for immigration violations. Of the 508 cases, I could count on one hand the number of actual terrorists ... who posed a direct and immediate threat to the United States.

Swarms of informants

The genesis of this corrupt domestic counterterrorism apparatus began in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Since core al-Qaeda slaughtered approximately 3,000 people on that beautiful September morning, the FBI has been empowered to identify and disrupt jihadist terrorists believed to have either insinuated themselves into American society or become radicalized at home. Rather than concentrating on investigating crimes that have already occurred, the FBI now has license from the White House to engage in intelligence-led preventative policing. Think of it as the domestic corollary to the Bush's administration's argument for preventative war. The result: swarms of informants. "In the decade since 9-11," writes Aaronson, "the FBI has built the largest network of spies ever to exist in the United States — with ten times as many informants on the streets today as there were during the infamous COINTELPRO operations under FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover — with the majority of these spies focused on ferreting out terrorism in Muslim communities." These "confidential informants," or CIs in bureau parlance, are not selfless volunteers. They are often unprincipled profiteers, many of whom have lengthy criminal records.

The “G” in G-men no longer stands for “government.” It stands for “grifter.”

Maybe the most representative, absurd, and vile example of the FBI’s manufacturing process is the case of the Newburgh Four, particularly its “ring leader,” 45-year-old James Cromitie. A former crack dealer and drug addict, Cromitie, a prison convert to Islam, stocked shelves at a Walmart and once told “a psychiatrist that he heard and saw things that weren’t there.” He was by all accounts a middle-aged loser until he met FBI superinformant Shahed Hussain, a con man and accused murderer. Only Hussein, known as Maqsood, could turn a beaten-down dog like Cromitie into a jihadi werewolf.

Hussain told Cromitie he was a rich importer from Pakistan, and he exploited Cromitie’s anti-Semitism to draw him into a plot that would eventually coalesce into targeting two synagogues in the Bronx and military planes flying from Stewart Air National Guard Base. But it was clear that Cromitie, and the three incompetent Muslim converts he recruited, had no ideological motivation to carry out the attacks. Rather, it was money. Hussain offered Cromitie \$250,000 to carry out the attack, paid his rent many times during the sting operation, and promised to buy him a barbershop. On May 20, 2009, Cromitie, his three accomplices and Hussain waiting in the getaway car, placed three bombs in three cars rented by the FBI outside two synagogues. FBI-led law enforcement swooped in, and eventually all four were found guilty of various terrorism-related crimes.

At the four’s sentencing hearing the judge admitted what was plainly obvious, particularly about Cromitie. “I suspect that real terrorists would not have bothered themselves with a person who was so utterly inept,” said U.S. District Judge Colleen McMahon. “Only the government could have made a terrorist out of Mr. Cromitie, whose buffoonery is positively Shakespearean in scope.” Drawing on the cliché “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter,” Aaronson has a new formulation for these post-9/11 stings: “One man’s terrorist is another man’s fool.” Hussain profited off of all this. His work creating the Newburgh Four netted him \$96,000 from the FBI. His “performance incentive,” or bonus, for the four’s successful prosecution has never been revealed. Some people earn bonuses selling toxic mortgages; others earn it by sending dupes through the prison gates.

To demonstrate to skeptical readers that these practices are the rule rather than the exception, Aaronson lays out example after example of CIs, like Hussain, aggressively trying to coax Muslim Americans into carrying out terrorism plots. His message: Something has gone radically wrong inside the FBI. “Since 9/11, Shahed Hussain and informants like him have become one of

the Bureau's most valuable commodities in the war on terrorism — aggressive men indentured to the FBI who are willing to do anything to take down their targets and who also have the ability to 'play the part' of terrorists in front of hidden cameras and microphones," Aaronson writes. "This ability to betray others for personal gain, however, reveals a dark aspect to the FBI's use of informants; namely, that the best informants are also those who tend toward criminal behavior themselves." Other CIs, Aaronson documents, have been convicted of armed robbery and dealing drugs. One allegedly continued selling drugs while on the FBI payroll. Inside the bureau, Aaronson reports, agents and officials believe only criminals can catch other criminals. The FBI justifies the program's moral compromises with a serious-sounding saying: "To catch the devil, you have to go to hell." The Obama administration is along for the ride: the FBI's use of CIs has increased since the professor of constitutional law took up residence at the White House, Aaronson notes.

Myth of the lone wolf

One area, however, where Aaronson's book is deeply flawed is in his discussion of lone-wolf terrorism. Despite his skepticism of FBI sting tactics, Aaronson accepts uncritically that certain people are lone wolves, even when that conceptually makes no sense. For instance, he describes failed Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad as a lone wolf even though he traveled to Pakistan, received training from Tehrik-i-Taliban, and then returned home to carry out his atrocity. Aaronson does the same, absurdly, with Najibullah Zazi, who also traveled to an al-Qaeda camp in Pakistan for explosives training and conspired domestically with two high-school friends to carry out suicide bombings inside the New York City subway system in September 2009. Describing lone-wolf terrorism isn't an academic matter; it has serious real-world consequences for counterterrorism policing.

As Aaronson points out, the FBI argues CIs are a critical tool for drawing out into the open these lone wolves that hide in the hard-to-penetrate forests of Muslim-American communities. The bureau and other federal law-enforcement and intelligence agencies also hype the threat of lone wolves to argue for new widespread powers to monitor electronic communications and thus supposedly identify radicalized individuals and stop them before they strike. Simply put, if a lone wolf is disrupted through an FBI sting using undercover agents and CIs, then that person is no longer a lone-wolf terrorist. The whole rationale behind lone-wolf terrorism is to carry out an attack without having to worry that your accomplices are in law enforcement. By failing to understand that, Aaronson seems to concede that lone-wolf terrorism is a terrible threat. It's not: it's a drop of blood in the lake of violent crime Americans bathe in each year. By not recognizing

that, Aaronson inadvertently makes the FBI's CI tactics, and the more dangerous push for increasingly robust electronic-surveillance and data-mining powers, appear legitimate, because "how else will law enforcement protect us from these monstrous individuals?"

Aaronson also fails to analyze the impact the FBI's counterterrorism tactics — like CIs and widespread surveillance — have had on law enforcement's relationship with Muslim-American communities nationwide. This relationship should be critical to anyone genuinely concerned about stopping homegrown jihadist terrorism. Despite former House Homeland Security Chairman Rep. Peter King's McCarthyesque questioning of Muslim-American loyalty, tips from the Muslim-American community have disrupted about 40 percent of jihadi plots interdicted by law enforcement. In my own reporting I've discovered that Muslim Americans and people who work in these communities no longer trust that they can communicate concern about an individual they know to law enforcement. The fear, as Aaronson so expertly validates, is that law enforcement won't try to divert that individual away from terrorism, but rather will encourage him to sprint down that dark path into the abyss. If Muslim Americans believe that entrapment is law enforcement's preferred method of dealing with potential radicals who have broken no laws within their communities, American law enforcement will be as feared as the foreign secret-police forces that many Muslim-American families fled from. An exploration of the broader impact of the FBI's unethical tactics would have been a welcome addition to a book that at times feels redundant, with Aaronson describing sting after sting.

These minor flaws aside, Aaronson's work shows how the FBI's obsession with jihadi terrorism has led American taxpayers to lavishly fund a counterterrorism program that incinerates the Bill of Rights. The FBI spends about \$3 billion annually to protect the country from terrorism. That's big money, which naturally comes with expectations from Capitol Hill. Those expectations create a perverse incentive with authoritarian consequences, Aaronson concludes.

Congress allocates billions to the FBI to find terrorists and prevent the next attack. The FBI in turn focuses thousands of agents and informants on Muslim communities in sting operations that pull easily influenced fringe members of these communities into terrorist plots conceived and financed by the FBI. The Justice Department then labels these targets, who have no capacity on their own to commit terrorist acts and no connections to actual terrorists, as terrorists and includes them in data intended, not only to justify how previous dollars were spent, but also to justify the need for future counterterrorism funding. In the end, the tail wags the dog in a continual cycle.

Hollywood isn't the only American institution that can transform men into monsters to keep the green rolling in.