

Inside the Terror Factory

Award-winning journalist Trevor Aaronson digs deep into the FBI's massive efforts to create fake terrorist plots.

—By [Trevor Aaronson](#) | Fri Jan. 11, 2013 3:01 AM PST



Illustration: Jeffrey Smith

Editor's note: This story is adapted from [The Terror Factory](#), Trevor Aaronson's new book documenting how the Federal Bureau of Investigation has built a vast network of informants to infiltrate Muslim communities and, in some cases, cultivate phony terrorist plots. The book grew from Aaronson's [award-winning](#) Mother Jones cover story "[The Informants](#)" and his research in the Investigative Reporting Program at the University of California-Berkeley.

Quazi Mohammad Nafis was a 21-year-old student living in Queens, New York, when the US government helped turn him into a terrorist.

His transformation began on July 5, when Nafis, a Bangladeshi citizen who'd come to the United States on a student visa that January, shared aspirations with a man he believed he could trust. Nafis told this man in a phone call that he wanted to wage jihad in the United States, that he enjoyed reading Al Qaeda propaganda, and that he admired "Sheikh O," or Osama bin Laden. Who this confidant was and how Nafis came to meet him remain unclear; what we know from public documents is that the man told Nafis he could introduce him to an Al Qaeda operative.

It was a hot, sunny day in Central Park on July 24 when Nafis met with Kareem, who said he was with Al Qaeda. Nafis, who had a slight build, mop of black hair, and a feebly grown beard, told Kareem that he was "ready for action."

"What I really mean is that I don't want something that's, like, small," Nafis said. "I just want something big. Something very big. Very, very, very, very big, that will shake the whole country."

Nafis said he wanted to bomb the New York Stock Exchange, and with help from his new Al Qaeda contact, he surveilled the iconic building at 11 Wall Street. "We are going to need a lot of TNT or dynamite," Nafis told Kareem. But Nafis didn't have any explosives, and, as court records indicate, he didn't know anyone who could sell him explosives, let alone have the money to purchase such materials. His father, a banker in Bangladesh, had spent his entire life savings to send Nafis to the United States after his son, who was described to journalists as dim by people who knew him in his native country, had flunked out of North South University in Bangladesh.

Kareem suggested they rent a storage facility to stash the material they'd need for a car bomb. He said he'd put up the money for it, and get the materials. Nafis dutifully agreed, and suggested a new target: the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Nafis later met Kareem at a storage facility, where Nafis poured the materials Kareem had brought into trash bins, believing he was creating a 1,000-pound car bomb that could level a city block.

In truth, the stuff was inert. And Kareem was an undercover FBI agent, tipped off by the man who Nafis had believed was a confidant—an FBI informant. The FBI had secretly provided everything Nafis needed for his attack: not only the storage facility and supposed explosives, but also the detonator and the van that Nafis believed would deliver the bomb.

On the morning of October 17, Nafis and Kareem drove the van to Lower Manhattan and parked it in front of the Federal Reserve Bank on Liberty Street. Then they walked to a nearby hotel room, where Nafis dialed on his cellphone the number he believed would trigger the bomb, but nothing happened. He dialed again, and again. The only result was Nafis' apprehension by federal agents.

"The defendant thought he was striking a blow to the American economy," US Attorney Loretta E. Lynch said in a statement after the arrest. "At every turn, he was wrong, and his extensive efforts to strike at the heart of the nation's financial system were foiled by effective law enforcement. We will use all of the tools at our disposal to stop any such attack before it can occur."

How many of these would-be terrorists would have acted were it not for an FBI agent provocateur helping them? Is it possible that the FBI is creating the very enemy we fear?

Federal officials say they are protecting Americans with these operations—but from whom? Real terrorists, or dupes like Nafis, who appear unlikely to have the capacity for terrorism were it not for FBI agents providing the opportunity and means?

Nafis is one of more than 150 men since 9/11 who have been caught in FBI terrorism stings, some of whom have received 25 years or more in prison. In these cases, the FBI uses one of its more than 15,000 registered informants—many of them criminals, others trying to stay in the country following immigration violations—to identify potential terrorists. It then provides the means necessary for these would-be terrorists to move forward with a plot—in some cases even planting specific ideas for attacks. The FBI now spends \$3 billion on counterterrorism annually, the largest portion of its budget. Our nation's top law enforcement agency, traditionally focused on investigating crimes after they occur, now operates more as an intelligence organization that tries to preempt crimes *before* they occur. But how many of these would-be terrorists would have acted were it not for an FBI agent provocateur helping them? Is it possible that the FBI is creating the very enemy we fear?

Those are the questions I set out to explore beginning in 2010. With the help of a research assistant, [I built a database of more than 500 terrorism prosecutions since 9/11](#), looking closely and critically at every terrorism case brought into federal courts during the past decade. We pored through thousands of pages of court records, and found that nearly half of all terrorism cases since 9/11 involved informants, many of them paid as much as \$100,000 per assignment by the FBI. At the time of the story's publication in *Mother Jones* in August 2011, 49 defendants had participated in plots led by an FBI agent provocateur, and that number has continued to rise since.

Historically, media coverage of these operations—begun under George W. Bush and continuing apace under Barack Obama—was mostly uncritical. With their aggressive tactics essentially unknown to the public, the FBI and Justice Department controlled the narrative: another dangerous terrorist apprehended by vigilant federal agents!

But in late 2011, the conversation began to shift. A couple of months after my story in *Mother Jones* and following the announcement of a far-fetched sting in which a Massachusetts man believed he'd been poised to destroy the US Capitol building using grenade-laden, remote-controlled airplanes, *TPM Muckraker* published a story headlined: "[The Five Most Bizarre Terror Plots Hatched Under the FBI's Watch](#)." Author David K. Shipler, in [an April 2012 New York Times editorial](#), questioned the legitimacy of terrorism stings involving people who appeared to have no wherewithal to commit acts of terror: "Some threats are real, others less so. In terrorism, it's not easy to tell the difference." Stories in other major news outlets followed suit, and by October 2012, a post in *Foreign Policy* was asking: "[How many idiot jihadis can the FBI fool?](#)"

Which brings us back to Nafis. "The case appears to be the latest to fit a model in which, in the process of flushing out people they believe present a risk of terrorism, federal law enforcement officials have played the role of enabler," reported the *New York Times*, after the Justice Department announced Nafis' arrest. "Though these operations have almost always held up in court, they have come under increasing criticism from those who believe that many of the subjects, even some who openly espoused violence, would have been unable to execute such plots without substantial assistance from the government."

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.

Anwar al-Awlaki, a US-born, high-ranking Al Qaeda official became something of the terrorist group's Dear Abby. Have a question about Islam? Ask Anwar!

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," and "Why Did I Choose Al-Qaeda?"

Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born, high-ranking Al Qaeda official who was killed in a US drone strike in Yemen on September 30, 2011, became something of the terrorist group's Dear Abby. Have a question about Islam? Ask Anwar! Muslim men in nations throughout the Western world would email him questions, and Awlaki would reply dutifully, and in English, encouraging many of his electronic pen pals to violent action. 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. US Army Major Nadal Hassan, for example, corresponded with Awlaki before he killed 13 people and wounded 29 others in the Fort Hood shootings in 2009. Antonio Martinez, a Baltimore man and recent convert to Islam who was sentenced to 25 years in prison for trying to bomb a military recruiting office, sent Awlaki messages and watched Al Qaeda propaganda videos online before getting wrapped up in an FBI sting operation.

The FBI has a term for Nafis, Martinez, and other alleged terrorists like them: 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 10 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's and the Ku Klux Klan. Modern FBI informants aren't burrowing into political groups, however; they are focused on identifying today the terrorist of tomorrow. US 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 American Muslim communities.

The FBI's vast army of spies, located today in every community in the United States with enough Muslims to support a mosque, has one primary function: identify the next lone wolf, likely to be a single male age 16 to 35, according to the Bureau. Informants and their FBI handlers are on the lookout for young Muslims who espouse radical beliefs, are vocal about their disapproval of American 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 operation.

The terrorism sting operations are an evolution of an FBI tactic that has long captured the imaginations of Hollywood filmmakers: undercover drug busts.

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, DC, to talk about how the FBI runs its sting operations. Ahearn was in 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 funded 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 US 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 37-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 forced 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.

At its most cliché, the Hollywood version of this 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. Hidden on the other side of the room is a grainy black-and-white camera recording the entire scene. The apartment's door swings open and two men saunter in, the camera recording their every move and word. The two men hand over bundles of cash, and the

scruffy man then hands over the briefcase. But instead of finding pounds of cocaine inside it, the two guests are shocked to find the briefcase is empty—and then 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's 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 counterterrorism is the bureau's top priority, the investigation of major drug crimes has largely fallen back to the DEA). While the assumptions behind both types of stings are similar, there is a fundamental flaw as applied to terrorism stings. 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 they 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.

In terrorism stings, however, federal law enforcement officials assume that any would-be terrorists caught 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 in fact what data is available often suggests the opposite.

Few of the more than 150 defendants indicted and convicted this way since 9/11 had any connection to terrorists, evidence showed, and those that did have connections, however tangential, lacked the capacity to launch attacks on their own. Of the more than 150 defendants, an FBI informant not only led one of every three terrorist plots, but also provided all the necessary weapons, money, and transportation.

The informant goaded them on the whole time, encouraging the pair with lines like: "We will teach these bastards a good lesson." For his work on the case, he received \$100,000 from the FBI.

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 the terrorism sting operations since 9/11, the would-be terrorists are usually uneducated, unsophisticated, and economically desperate—not the attributes for someone likely to plan and launch a sophisticated, violent attack without significant help.

This isn't to say there have not been deadly and potentially deadly terrorist attacks and threats in the United States since 9/11. Hesham Mohamed Hadayet, an Egyptian, opened fire on the El-Al ticket counter at Los Angeles International Airport on July 4, 2002, killing two and wounding four. Afghan American Najibullah Zazi, who trained with Al Qaeda in Pakistan in 2008, came close to attacking the New York City subway system in September 2009, with a plan to place backpack bombs on crowded trains coming to and from Grand Central and Times Square stations. Faisal Shahzad, who trained with terrorists in the tribal regions of Pakistan, attempted but failed to detonate a crude car bomb in Times Square on May 1, 2010. While all three were dangerous lone wolves, none fit the profile of would-be terrorists targeted today in FBI terrorism sting operations. Unlike those caught in FBI stings, these three terrorists had international connections and the ability to carry out attacks on their own, however unsuccessful those attacks might have been for Zazi and Shahzad.

By contrast, consider another New York City terrorism conspiracy—the so-called Herald Square bomb plot. Shahawar Matin Siraj, a 22-year-old Pakistani American, struck up a friendship with a seemingly elderly and knowledgeable Islamic scholar named Dawadi at his uncle's Islamic Books and Tapes shop in Brooklyn. Dawadi was an FBI informant, Osama Eldawood, who was put on the government payroll in September 2003 to stoke Siraj's extremist inclinations. Siraj asked if Eldawood could help him build a nuclear weapon and volunteered that he and a friend, James Elshafay, wanted to detonate a car bomb on one of New York's bridges. "He's a terrorist. He wants to harm the country and the people of the country. That's what I thought immediately," Eldawood said in court testimony.

Siraj introduced Dawadi to Elshafay, who had drawn schematics of police stations and bridges on napkins with the hopes of plotting a terrorist attack. Elshafay's crude drawings prompted Siraj to hatch a new plan that involved the three men, Dawadi's supposed international connections, and an attack on New York's Herald Square subway station. The two young men discussed how they'd grown to hate the United States for invading Iraq and torturing prisoners. In Eldawood's car, the three of them talked about carrying 20- to 30-pound backpack bombs into the Herald Square subway station and leaving them on the train platform. Their conversations were recorded from a secret camera in the car's dashboard. From April to August 2004, the men considered targets, surveilled the subway, checked security, and drew diagrams of the station. The informant goaded them on the whole time, encouraging the pair with lines like: "We will teach these bastards a good lesson." For his work on the case, Eldawood received \$100,000 from the FBI.

The evidence from the sting was enough to win convictions, and Siraj was sentenced to 30 years in prison and Elshafay 5 years. But it was also clear from the trial that Siraj was a dimwitted social recluse—a mother's boy with little capacity to steal a car on his own, let alone bomb a subway station as part of a spectacular terrorist attack. In fact, Siraj was recorded during the sting operation as saying: "Everyone thinks I'm stupid."

During Obama's first term in office, the Justice Department prosecuted more than 75 targets of terrorism stings.

The question underlying the Herald Square case can be asked in dozens of other similar sting operations: Could the defendants have become terrorists had they never met the FBI informant? The answer haunts Martin Stolar, the lawyer who represented Siraj at trial and fully expected to win an acquittal through an entrapment defense. "The problem with the cases we're talking about is that defendants would not have done anything if not kicked in the ass by government agents," Stolar said. "They're creating crimes to solve crimes so they can claim a victory in the war on terror."

The practice is only growing. Though developed under the Bush administration, terrorism stings have become even more common under President Obama. While the Bush administration used terrorism stings to its greatest degree in 2006 and 2007—60 defendants were prosecuted and convicted from terrorism stings during those two years—the Justice Department began to shy away from the practice toward the end of Bush's second term in office. In 2008, Bush's last year as president, the US didn't prosecute anyone from a terrorism sting. But when Obama became president in January 2009, the use of sting operations resumed and increased in frequency. During Obama's first term in office, the Justice Department prosecuted more than 75 targets of terrorism stings.

Obama has been an aggressive president when it comes to national security, successfully disarming the long-standing perception that Democrats are weak on that front. He launched the daring raid that took out Osama bin Laden, has conducted secret wars in Yemen and Somalia, and stepped up extrajudicial killings of terrorist suspects overseas using military drones, for which he has come under sharp criticism from some on the political left. Public opinion polls during his fourth year as president showed that most Americans gave him high marks on national security.

That may help explain why the Obama administration has been so determined to pursue terrorism stings as well. Addressing a gathering of Muslim leaders near San Francisco in December 2010, Attorney General Eric Holder described how the administration believes the ends justify the means. "These types of operations have proven to be an essential law enforcement tool in uncovering and preventing potential terror attacks...And in those terrorism cases where undercover sting operations have been used, there is a lengthy record of convictions," the [attorney general said](#), adding that "our nation's law enforcement professionals have consistently demonstrated not just their effectiveness, but also their commitment to the highest standards of professional conduct, integrity, and fairness."

Today, federal prosecutors announce arrests from terrorism stings at a rate of about one every 60 days, suggesting either that there are a lot of ineffective terrorists in the United States, or that the FBI has become effective at creating the very enemy it is hunting.

Further Reading



- [Our Yearlong Investigation Into the Program to Spy on America's Muslim Communities](#)
- [How the Bureau Enlists Foreign Regimes to Detain and Interrogate US Citizens](#)
- [When Did Lefty Darling Brandon Darby Turn Government Informant?](#)
- [Charts from Our Terror Trial Database](#)
- [Watch an FBI Surveillance Video](#)
- [Documents: FBI Spies and Suspects, in Their Own Words](#)