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Deadly FBI raid in Dearborn prompts concern over informants

Muslims, civil rights advocates decry tactic

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He called himself Jabril. Two years ago, a white man who claimed he was an ex-con and convert to Islam started attending a predominantly African-American mosque on a run-down street in Detroit.

He touted his Islamic ways while offering poor members of the mosque cash for odd jobs at an auto shop on the city's west side. He told tales of sick family members and brought a young boy to the mosque who he said was his son.

Jabril soon became a brother in faith and a confidante of the mosque's fiery leader, Luqman Ameen Abdullah, who was killed in a shootout during an Oct. 28 raid by FBI agents to arrest men suspected of dealing in stolen goods.

Members now believe Jabril was an FBI informant who infiltrated their mosque.

"He built up trust in the community," said Omar Regan, 34, one of Abdullah's sons.

The case -- one of several in the past year involving informants in Muslim-American communities -- has prompted growing concern among Muslims and civil rights advocates about undercover surveillance in religious institutions.

Federal officials say they don't send informants into congregations without reason. But last week, U.S. Rep. John Conyers, a Detroit Democrat, called upon the U.S. Justice Department to review its policies on using informants in houses of worship.

Meanwhile, federal prosecutors are seeking a protective order to shield the identities of three informants used in the case.

With tattoos on his neck and a full beard, the newcomer arrived at the Detroit mosque in 2007 with stories of turning to Islam while in prison.

"He had this hard-life story," recalled Regan, a son of the mosque's imam, Luqman Ameen Abdullah.

For two years, the man known as Jabril to many at Masjid Al-Haqq ingratiated himself with members of the mosque, according to Abdullah's followers. They accepted him as a brother in Islam.

On Oct. 28, Regan said Jabril asked mosque members to help him move some goods in a Dearborn warehouse. Authorities said the men were there to deal in stolen items.

Once inside the warehouse, Jabril reportedly told the mosque members: "I'm going to go get some

water, a drink of water," Regan said in an interview with the Free Press.

Jabril then disappeared.

Moments later, federal agents stormed inside. Abdullah, 53, was shot dead by FBI agents after an exchange of fire during the raid.

Jabril was never seen again by members of the mosque.

The story of Jabril's alleged infiltration offers a rare look into the use of FBI informants in Muslim-American communities in the aftermath of Sept. 11, 2001. Members of the Detroit mosque say they believe Jabril was a key undercover informant in helping the FBI build a case against Abdullah and his followers.

Muslim advocates say there's a growing problem of improper use of informants, particularly in houses of worship. Some accuse the informant of luring Abdullah to his death in the fatal shooting, which has raised questions about excessive force.

FBI agents' actions defended

But the FBI and federal prosecutors have said that agents acted appropriately in trying to apprehend members of a criminal operation led by Abdullah. They said the group preached violence and hatred against law enforcement and non-Muslims.

Abdullah and his followers were not charged with any acts of terrorism. The charges against the 11 men arrested include dealing in stolen goods such as laptops and fur coats, firearms violations and tampering with vehicle identification numbers. The criminal complaint, however, highlights the radical views of the group. "America must fall," Abdullah once said, according to the complaint.

While some Muslim leaders have expressed concern about civil rights, federal officials say informants are vitally needed, especially with the recent surge in domestic terrorism.

The FBI would not comment on whether Jabril was one of the three informants in the case. But the recollections of Jabril by mosque members interviewed by the Free Press match parts of the 43-page criminal complaint filed against Abdullah and 10 others. Mosque members say, for example, that the complaint's descriptions of car trips to Virginia and Chicago with an informant named S-3 jibe with their memories of rides they and Abdullah took with Jabril.

Mosque members said they believe S-3 is Jabril, though the criminal complaint only identifies S-3 as "an FBI confidential source who has proven to be reliable and credible in the past."

Last week, federal prosecutors filed a motion in which they expressed concern about the safety of the informants used by federal agents in the investigation. Prosecutors appeared particularly worried about S-3, saying the defendants have discovered his identity.

They are seeking a protective order barring the defense from releasing undercover audio and video because they are worried about S-3's safety. Prosecutors note that the criminal complaint includes references to threats by Abdullah -- reported by S-3 -- that he would kill any informants. According to the complaint, Abdullah told S-3 in June 2009 that he suspected there was an informant in his mosque, saying "that if somebody is trying to gather information on him, he would kill them himself or have them killed."

Muslims, and some civil rights advocates, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, have raised concern that using informants in mosques infringes on the constitutional right to free assembly and worship.

Other cases involving informants in Muslim communities in California, Ohio and New York have surfaced over the past year, alarming some who say mosques are supposed to be safe places where people can be free to speak their minds.

Andrew Arena, special agent in charge of the Detroit FBI office, said his agency doesn't target anyone based on religion.

"Without predication, without reason, we cannot send informants into a religious institution just to see what is going on," Arena said. "That is illegal. On the flip side, if there are individuals involved in criminal activity, and they are trying to hide behind a religious institution, that's not going to fly."

He said informants are used in a wide range of investigations including "mortgage fraud, gangs and public corruption -- and counterterrorism is no different."

Human intelligence

In recent years, the FBI has increasingly used human intelligence in the United States. After Sept. 11, 2001, the FBI told all of its field offices across the U.S. to increase its use of informants as it made terrorism its No. 1 priority. Keeping an eye on Islamic extremism became a priority and remains so -- as highlighted by the Dec. 25 failed bombing attempt suspected to have been carried out by a Muslim man on a Detroit-bound airplane.

The increase in reported cases of informants comes after the Justice Department gave the FBI more leeway a year ago on when the agency could use undercover sources in terrorism cases. The new rules allow the FBI for the first time to use informants and undercover agents in preliminary investigations and to spy on suspects without clear evidence of wrongdoing.

In July, the ACLU said in a report that the use of informants has had a "chilling effect on congregants' rights to association, speech and religion."

And last week, U.S. Rep. John Conyers, a Detroit Democrat and chairman of the U.S. House Judiciary Committee, sent a letter to U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder asking that he review the policy of using informants inside mosques, saying that "our traditions, and our constitution, simply do not permit undercover fishing expeditions in our nation's houses of worship."

But some terrorism and legal experts disagree.

"Radicalization and recruitment to terrorism does take place here," and so using informants can be helpful and legitimate, said Brian Jenkins, a senior adviser at the Rand Corp. who studies terrorism. But he said it needs to remain under tight controls.

Ultimately, an open court system must be used to let a judge and jury decide whether any informants were used legitimately in particular cases, he said.

Some legal experts say the use of informants in mosques doesn't violate the Constitution.

"There is nothing in the ... First Amendment that would preclude the FBI from using informants at a mosque," said Robert Sedler, distinguished professor of law at Wayne State University who teaches constitutional issues. "A true informant is not going to have any chilling effect, so there is no constitutional objection to the FBI using informants within a religious organization because it doesn't interfere with the religious practices of the people. The service at the mosque goes on even when you have the FBI" informant listening.

"It doesn't affect what the imam is saying."

Informant prodded violence

Tensions over the use of informants in Muslim communities came to a head last year after reports that the FBI had used an informant in Orange County, Calif., who had acted as an agent provocateur by trying to get Muslims to wage violent attacks against Western targets. In Michigan, Muslim leaders said in April that agents were pushing some local Muslims to act as spies inside their mosques.

"It's brought paranoia in the community," said Dawud Walid, head of the Michigan branch of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. "Some are now wary of coming to the mosque."

The controversy over Abdullah's death has been heightened because his autopsy results have not been released by Wayne County, which says that Dearborn police have requested a delay pending their investigation. Authorities maintain that Abdullah opened fire on federal agents, and he was killed when they returned fire. The family contends he was shot 18 times.

A close friend of Abdullah, Akil Fahd, 40, said he remembers the imam as peaceful and focused "on calling people to Allah."

'Stuck out like a sore thumb'

When Jabril showed up in 2007, Masjid Al-Haqq sat on a rough stretch of Joy Road in Detroit. It has since relocated to Clairmount.

Most of its members are African American, some of them former convicts looking to improve their lives through Islam. Because of their felony records, some had problems finding steady employment.

So, Jabril's job offers made him popular despite the fact that he "he stuck out like a sore thumb, a white guy among all these black people," said Abdullah's son, Mujahid Carswell, 30. Carswell is among the 11 indicted in the case.

"When he started offering the brothers jobs, that's when he got close to my dad," Regan said.

But the federal complaint suggests that it was S-3's offer of cash through criminal activities that drew him close to Abdullah. The criminal complaint, for example, shows Abdullah and S-3 talking multiple times about how to deal with a stolen Dodge truck.

In the nearly three months since the imam's death, talk about Jabril has swirled throughout parts of the African-American Muslim community. Those who met him say they never suspected Jabril.

One of them, Mikail Stewart, 34, of Detroit remembers Jabril as a cordial man who always shook his hands and said "As-salamu Alaykum," the traditional Muslim greeting that means "Peace be upon you."

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Related content

Excerpts from FBI criminal complaint

Parts of the FBI criminal complaint against Muslim leader Luqman Ameen Abdullah and his followers talk about an undercover source named only as S-3. Two of his sons say the references match their recollections of the man who called himself Jabril.

- Criminal complaint says: "On March 21, 2008, S-3, Luqman Abdullah, Mohammad Abdul Bassir, and Mujahid Carswell (aka Mujahid Abdullah, who is Luqman Abdullah's biological son) drove to Herndon, Va. Bassir and Carswell were there to provide security for Luqman Abdullah."

Carswell, 30, said the man who called himself Jabril took that trip to Virginia with his father.

- Criminal complaint talks about Carswell's work with children. It says that "S-3 has observed Mujahid Carswell training children as young as 7 years old in martial arts."

Carswell said S-3 did observe him when he was teaching children, but it was basketball, not martial arts.

- Criminal complaint talks about a trip that S-3 took with Abdullah to Chicago and later to Flint.

"On February 12, 2009, S-3 and Luqman Abdullah drove to Chicago, Ill., together," it reads.

Omar Regan, 34, another of Abdullah's sons, recalls speaking to his father about taking a trip together to Chicago; Regan said he was unable to make the trip.

He said Jabril then offered to drive to Chicago with Abdullah.

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