

The New Jersey jihadists: another strange alleged terrorist plot

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The US Justice Department has charged six immigrants in New Jersey with participating in an alleged terrorist plot to attack a heavily fortified US Army base in the state, according to federal court papers filed Tuesday. FBI officials say the accused—four ethnic Albanians from the former Yugoslavia, one Jordanian and a young man from Turkey who had all lived in the US for years—were planning to kill scores, if not hundreds, of US soldiers at Fort Dix.

The media and various political figures immediately parroted the government charges about a Muslim terrorist plot, adding that the fact the suspects had no known connections to a Middle Eastern terrorist organizations, such as Al Qaeda, made them even more dangerous because they were a “new breed” of homegrown and loosely organized terrorists who were harder to detect. “This is a stark reminder that we cannot let down our guard,” said US Rep. James Saxton, a New Jersey Republican and senior member of the House Armed Services Committee. “Today is proof positive that terrorists can be among us, even in suburban locations like Cherry Hill, N.J., and that Americans must stay vigilant.”

The six—Mohamad Ibrahim Shnewer, 22; Dritan “Anthony” or “Tony” Duka, 28; Shain Duka, 26; Eljvir “Elvis” Duka, 23; Serdar Tatar, 23; and Agron Abdullahu, 24—were ordered held without bail for a hearing Friday in a Camden, New Jersey federal court. Five were charged with conspiracy to kill U.S. military personnel; the sixth, Abdullahu, was charged with aiding and abetting illegal immigrants in obtaining weapons.

Defense attorneys for the accused have yet to present their side of the story. The only information about the alleged plot that has been provided has come from the prosecution and the FBI. From the indictment, however, it is evident that the case follows a pattern of similar highly publicized terrorist “conspiracies” pursued by the Bush administration, in which the chief instigator of the alleged plot was a paid government informant and agent provocateur who encouraged the operation, made arrangements to secure weapons and pressed ahead in the face of the caution and reluctance of the so-called jihadists.

As in a key previous case—the 1995 conviction of blind Egyptian cleric Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman—the US government used a former member of the Egyptian military to infiltrate the New Jersey group and tape record conversations with the alleged plotters and apparently play the central role in the supposed plot. While the indictment includes what are alleged to be the taped remarks of several of the six men—in which they declare their determination to kill US soldiers—it does not include what the informant might have said to provoke these responses.

A hint of the relationship, however, is included in what is presented as the transcript of

recorded remarks, in which one of the defendants, Mohamad Schnewer, is quoted as telling the informant, "I am at your services as you have more experience than me in military bases and in life."

All that is known about a supposed conspiracy before the infiltration of the FBI's man is that several of the six men had engaged in target practice at a firing range in Pennsylvania, while shouting "Allah Akbar!" Although prosecutors claim the plot had already been hatched, this did not stop one of the accused men, in January 2006, from throwing all caution to the wind and taking a videotape of their activities to a store where he asked a clerk to copy it onto a DVD. The employee, alarmed by a video showing 10 men shooting weapons and shouting Arabic slogans, contacted the FBI.

Two months after the FBI had been tipped off about the videotape the informant befriended Mohamad Shnewer, a Philadelphia cab driver, who prosecutors claim was the ringleader. Shnewer introduced the informant to three brothers—Dritan, Eljvir and Shain Duka—undocumented immigrants from the former Yugoslavia who lived in Cherry Hill and ran a roofing company out of their garage. The group often held paintball games in the woods near the Dukas's home.

The 16-month investigation, which ultimately involved two informants and dozens of recorded sessions with the accused, has all the earmarks of a sting operation, in which the federal government manufactured a plot in order to entrap the six men. Much has been made of the map of Fort Dix, which Sedar Tartar retrieved from his father's restaurant, which delivered food to the military camp. Tatar reportedly expressed his concern for his family if he were caught with the map, but the informant insisted that he get it.

Suspect went to police to report terrorist plot

Tatar apparently considered the pressure from the informant so unusual that he confronted the government agent and demanded to know if he was a "Fed," i.e., a federal law enforcement agent. In a move that hardly indicates that he was a terrorist plotting to attack a US government installation Tatar then went to the Philadelphia police department to complain that he was being pressured by someone into getting a map of Fort Dix and that he thought this had something to do with a terrorist plot.

The federal prosecutors acknowledge that this visit to the police occurred, but portray it as an attempt by Tatar to determine whether he was under FBI surveillance. Point 31 in the indictment states, "In a possible effort to determine whether CW-1 [paid informant] was a law enforcement officer, SERDAR TATAR on November 15, 2006 contacted a sergeant with the Philadelphia Police Department and stated that he had been approached by an individual who had pressured him to acquire maps of Fort Dix. TATAR also told the police officer that he did not supply the map and was fearful that the incident was terrorist-related. The sergeant telephoned the FBI in TATAR's presence."

Nevertheless the informant pressed Tatar to get the map. He ultimately vowed to obtain the map, stating, "I'm gonna do it, whether you are [FBI] or not...It doesn't matter to me, whether I get locked up, arrested, or get taken away, it doesn't matter. Or I die, doesn't matter. I'm going to do it in the name of Allah.

Another thing the prosecution has yet to explain is why Tatar continued with the alleged plot months after the FBI contacted him in December 2006 and questioned him about being part

of a terrorist operation. On March 9, three months after being interviewed by the FBI, Tatar was recorded discussing preparing for their operation in a military fashion. The next day he said he wanted to join the US Army so he could kill US soldiers from the “inside.”

After the indictment Tatar’s father, Muslim Tatar, 54, said the accusations against his son were hard to accept. “He is not a terrorist. I am not a terrorist,” he told the *Star-Ledger* of Newark. The elder Tatar told ABC News he had no indication his son harbored a deep hatred of the United States. “I came here from Turkey in 1992, and this is my country. I love this country,” Muslim Tatar told ABC.

The informant also played the key role in telling the group that he could obtain fully automatic weapons, including AK-47s and M16s, as well as RPGs and grenades, telling them he would get them from a source in Baltimore who would deliver the weapons to New Jersey. Once again he apparently reassured several of the accused men not to worry about purchasing illegal weapons.

In one tape-recorded conversation on April 6, Dritan Duka told the informant, “I just want to be safe brother.. I just need to, ‘cause I trust you brother, you understand? I got five kids so I don’t wanna go down. People catch me like they think I’m a terrorist.”

The informant also accompanied Shnewer to several other military installations, including the Dover Air Force Base, in Delaware, to discuss potential targets.

According to the indictment several members of the group watched what the FBI described as “*mujahedeen* training videos” at a nearby rented house. When one video showed a US Marine’s arm being blown off, the group burst into laughter, the criminal complaint states. In April, the informant arranged a gun buy, and Monday night, FBI agents posing as the sellers showed up at the Dukas home with an inoperable AK-47. The deal was consummated and arrests were made.

There is no doubt that the actions of the US military around the world are provoking a level of disgust and anger that could well produce misguided terrorist attacks within the US itself. Nonetheless, the various terrorist “plots” exposed by the Bush administration have virtually without exception been characterized by a similar lack of any real preparation for violence combined with the central role of a covert informant/agent provocateur.

In each of these cases, the supposed conspiracy has been heavily publicized in a transparent bid to justify the ongoing military occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and to create a climate of fear in order to suppress democratic rights in the US itself.

The exposure of the latest alleged plot has coincided with an unprecedented political crisis for the administration. With the president’s standing in the polls falling to record lows and US military casualties in Iraq increasing as the quagmire in the occupied country deepens, the political motive for unveiling another supposed terrorist threat from within is abundantly clear.

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