

THE CASE OF THE DALLAS TERRORIST

A lone terrorist plotting to unleash a weapon of mass destruction was freely walking the streets, unaware that his every move was being monitored 24/7 by the FBI.

Supervisory Special Agent Tom Petrowski and his team were enduring many sleepless nights during this top secret undercover operation. They understood that if they botched the case or if the terrorist discovered they were onto him, the consequences would be disastrous: the senseless slaughter of hundreds of innocent people.

Petrowski, an agent with the Bureau since 1995, was managing the operation out of the FBI's field office in Dallas, Texas, where he supervised the Counterterrorism-2 squad (CT-2). Like all FBI agents, Petrowski and his team found it disturbing that there are so many websites promoting

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bloodthirsty jihad — acts of terrorism in the name of Islam. Radicals, many using fake names, spew their loathing for the United States in online chat groups, endorsing and celebrating acts of terrorism against American citizens, soldiers, and allies. Rather than muster holy armies of warriors, terrorist groups are resorting to a different weapon of choice — the angry loner who is emotionally connected with the jihadist philosophy. He's so easily influenced by hate-filled propaganda on the Internet that he's willing to carry out acts of death and devastation on his own free will.

One such violence-prone lone wolf was the focus of CT-2's undercover operation: 19-year-old Hosam "Sam" Smadi.

In January 2009, an Arab-speaking undercover FBI agent posing as an extremist on an online forum of Islamic radicals noticed that someone named Abu al Ayyubi seemed different from the others. While many praised violence, al Ayyubi stood out because he said he yearned to be a soldier for Osama bin Laden, who was, at the time, the leader of al-Qaeda, the terrorist organization responsible for the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Pledging his allegiance to al-Qaeda, al Ayyubi said he was already in the U.S. and hoped to carry out terrorism here, but needed help. "I can strike at their interests in their midst," he wrote in the online forum. "The targets are easy."

The FBI discovered that al Ayyubi was really Hosam Smadi. A background check showed he was born in the

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Middle Eastern country of Jordan and came to the U.S. on March 14, 2007, at the age of 16 on a temporary visa, which expired on October 30 of that year. He was living about an hour's drive south of Dallas, where he worked in a restaurant off Interstate 35.

After several email exchanges with Smadi, the undercover extremist introduced him online to Rafiq, a second Arab-speaking undercover agent, in early 2009. Acting as a senior al-Qaeda leader who assessed new recruits, Rafiq cultivated a relationship with Smadi over the next several months. The two engaged in two dozen online conversations about Smadi's desire to commit a major terrorist attack.

In one such message to Rafiq on March 19, Smadi wrote, "I truly say it, that my dream is to be among God's soldiers, first for the support of Islam and my beloved Sheik Osama, may God give him long life. I don't know what is in me, but I love him as I love my father. . . . In the name of God, the Gracious and Merciful, this is my vow to you, my brother, that I am ready . . . for the Jihadi life. What you will see of me will please you and your Commander."

Ten days later, Smadi emailed Rafiq again, "We shall attack them in their very homes. Brother, by God, we shall attack them in a manner that hurts, an attack that shakes the world. Oh Brother, let the backsliders know that the time of their destruction has come."

No matter how many times Rafiq suggested non-violent forms of jihad, Smadi remained steadfast in wanting

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to strike against America. In an email on April 7, he declared, “I have chosen to be a *Mujahidin* [an Islamic guerilla fighter] with my self, blood, soul, and body. [That is] more precious to me than this world and its money, women, and amusements.”

Petrowski and his team still harbored doubts that Smadi really intended to carry out a terrorist act. After all, talk is cheap. To get a better understanding of him, the FBI arranged, through Rafiq, for Smadi to meet a third Arabic-speaking undercover agent in person. The agent posed as Brother Hussein, a member of an al-Qaeda sleeper cell (a secret group of terrorists in the United States). Even though there was no actual sleeper cell, Hussein acted as one of its low-level operational soldiers who was there to assist Smadi. As part of his cover, Hussein said he had been in the U.S. for several years and was a businessman in the Southeast.

The first time the two met face-to-face, Smadi told Hussein, “When I came to this country, I came for the purpose which is jihad.”

After the meeting, the undercover agent told the CT-2 team, “I have an overwhelming feeling this guy is for real. My initial assessment is that he’s serious about committing a terrorist attack.”

Petrowski brought in experts from the FBI’s Behavioral Analysis Unit (BAU) to help determine how great a threat Smadi posed. Every communication that undercover agents

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had with Smadi had been electronically recorded. In face-to-face meetings with Smadi, Hussein wore a hidden microphone while other agents who were out of sight took photos and video. After reviewing and analyzing the transcripts of those conversations, senior agents and BAU experts trained in conducting psychological profiles of criminals came to the same conclusion: Smadi was a lone extremist obsessed with bin Laden and had an unwavering desire to commit a major act of terrorism in the Dallas area.

Smadi was now considered a legitimate threat.

FBI intelligence analyst Sheeren Zaidi studied Smadi's communications to peel back his inner personality and find the deep-seated reasons that powered his motivation. She concluded that for the first time in his life, Smadi felt important because he believed he was working for al-Qaeda.

Investigations conducted by senior agents and task-force officers, including Detective Mitch Bird of the Dallas Police Department, helped the team chart Smadi's transformation from a likeable Jordanian kid into a seething radical. Smadi grew up in northern Jordan with a brother and sister. He had many Christian friends, and even attended chapel at a nearby Baptist school, where he was a student. His strict father, who was a government employee, and his loving mother were both strong supporters of Jordan's pro-American royal family. Smadi's life flipped upside down after his parents divorced and then his mother died of cancer in 2005 when he was 15. Angry at the world, he began embracing jihad.

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Smadi developed a smoldering hatred for America because of what he perceived to be anti-Muslim foreign policies of the United States, Jordan, and neighboring Egypt.

Around this time, he and his brother dropped out of school, so their father obtained visas and sent them to live with relatives in San Jose, California, in 2007. After his visa expired seven months later, Smadi, who spoke English, remained in the U.S. on his own. He moved to Italy, Texas, where a friend got him a job at the Texas Best Smokehouse as a cashier, stock boy, and clerk. Known as Sam to his new pals, Smadi lived in a housing complex of individual domed structures. He wore earrings, liked techno music, partied, smoked, and drank alcohol — behavior frowned upon by observant Muslims. He rarely prayed and never fasted during the holy month of Ramadan, which are religious requirements of adult Muslims. He seldom spent time with his relatives in the Dallas area, nor did he talk much to his friends about politics, terrorism, or the Middle East. The short, slightly built young man dressed and acted like a typical Texas teenager and was often seen wearing a belt buckle decorated with rhinestones in the shape of a gun. What none of his American friends knew was that he spent hours alone on the Internet preparing for jihad against their country.

The FBI could have deported Smadi because he was living in the U.S. illegally. But the Bureau believed that if he were returned to the Middle East, he would join a terrorist group as a prized recruit. With a false identity, he likely

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would try to sneak back into the country to launch a terrorist attack.

Thinking it was safer to keep him under the watchful eye of agents, the highest levels of the FBI in Washington, D.C., ordered a complex sting operation run by Petrowski and his core team of CT-2 investigators — Agents David Marshall, Michael Howell, Michael Decker, Robert Benton, and Kevin Gentry — and Detective Bird. In a strictly controlled manner, the team would continue to work closely with undercover Agents Rafiq and Hussein. For the sting to succeed legally, all the ideas and research for Smadi’s terrorist scheme had to come directly from him. The job of the undercover agents was to help, or pretend to help, him toward his sinister goal — up to a point. Then, when the time was right, the FBI would arrest and prosecute Smadi.

The strategy meant that Smadi could continue to walk freely while he plotted his big day of murder and mayhem. It also meant that the CT-2 squad had to make certain that he would never, ever get the opportunity to actually carry it out.

Analysts told Petrowski that because of Smadi’s anti-American feelings and his belief that he was now a member of an al-Qaeda sleeper cell, it was unlikely he would act spontaneously or recklessly. But that was only if the FBI kept the investigation secret from him.

“What would happen if Smadi found out his sleeper cell is a sting operation?” Petrowski asked a BAU profiler.

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The profiler replied, “If he finds out that your guys are FBI, he likely will do something very violent, very quickly.”

And that’s why everyone on the CT-2 squad was having sleepless nights. There could be no mistakes, no miscalculations, no misunderstandings.

The Bureau’s Counterterrorism Division in Washington began tracking the team’s efforts daily and provided briefings to FBI Director Robert Mueller and even, at times, to the president of the United States.

Agents put Smadi under constant surveillance, but it wasn’t easy. Because he lived in a rural area, there were times when they couldn’t just tail him in a car or mill around the restaurant without being obvious. So, with the help of its tech agents, the FBI tracked his cell phone and his car and continued to monitor his emails and phone calls. As a precaution, his name was put on a terrorist watch list, which would prevent him from trying to leave the country.

Over the next few months, the physical surveillance unit noticed he was changing his appearance. As he grew to consider himself a soldier of al-Qaeda, he dressed a little flashier and sported more facial hair.

On several occasions, Smadi told Rafiq and Hussein he wasn’t a practicing Muslim and didn’t go to mosque. He said his relatives in the Dallas area and the local Islamic community didn’t share his extremist, violent views of jihad. “They just don’t get it,” he complained.

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After Rafiq and Hussein gained his trust, Smadi told them it felt wonderful to share his real self with them and not be the fake person that he was to everyone else.

Despite ongoing efforts by the undercover agents to talk Smadi out of the operation, he plowed forward with unrelenting determination. The harder they pushed, the more passionate he was in committing jihad. During a meeting with Hussein at a Dallas hotel on May 12, Smadi made his intentions perfectly clear: “I want to destroy . . . targets . . . Everything that helps America on its war on Arabs will be targeted.”

Throughout the spring, Smadi researched types of bombs and scouted possible sites in the Dallas area for a terrorist attack. On July 16, Smadi had settled on a target — Fountain Place, a gleaming 62-story office building in the heart of the Dallas business district. With a twisting blue-green glass exterior, the building has been one of the most recognizable structures in the city’s skyline. It got its name because it rose from a tree-lined water garden featuring 172 dancing fountains, waterfalls, and pools. Among its tenants at the time were government agencies and banks, including the Wells Fargo bank.

“God willing, the strike will be certain and strong,” Smadi emailed Rafiq. “It will shake the currently weak economy in the state and the American nation because this bank is one of the largest banks in the city. . . .

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“ . . . The bank has billions of dollars. Let’s say that the bank has collapsed . . . The losses will be excessive in credit-card information. Millions of people would incur losses: unemployment, poverty, hunger, and a strike to the head of the government. Don’t forget the psychological impacts for the loss of this beautiful building.”

Five days later, Hussein traveled to Italy, Texas, and picked up Smadi, who directed him to drive to the Wells Fargo bank at Fountain Place. Hussein dropped him off so Smadi could conduct his own reconnaissance of the building. When Smadi returned, he said that he had found a good place to plant a bomb that would “rock the foundation.”

During their fourth meeting together at a Dallas hotel, Hussein mentioned that the sleeper cell could forward a video message from Smadi to bin Laden before the bombing. Given the opportunity to address his hero, Smadi became emotionally overwhelmed. To prepare a statement for this meaningful occasion, he spent hours on his laptop researching passages from the Koran, the sacred text of Islam.

In a hotel room that was bugged with recording devices, Hussein set up a tripod and video camera for Smadi. The terrorist had no clue that members of the CT-2 squad were watching everything on a monitor in the next room. An Arabic-speaking interpreter was by their side to give them a real-time translation.

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Wearing a red-and-white-checked head covering that hid everything but his blazing eyes, Smadi made an impassioned seven-minute video for bin Laden. He told his idol that Allah had allowed “for me to join your organization from inside the enemy’s midst.” Of the impending bombing, Smadi said, “I hope that you are delighted by what you see, and the greatest joy will be after the success of the operation.” A minute later, he wagged his finger and declared, “The date of the blessed strikes, September 11, was a celebration for us. So let us make another date a celebration for us that history will mark.” Referring to all-out conflict in the U.S., Smadi said, “I cannot wait to be with you in this war on the same land, Allah willing.”

Watching him on the monitor, Petrowski and the agents felt chilled by his ardent devotion to bin Laden. “It’s amazing that someone can be that committed to evil for no apparent, rational reason,” Petrowski told his team. “I had served in the Middle East for the military and for the Bureau and had come face-to-face with people like him. But that was a world away, not in a hotel in a city where we and our families live.”

A month later, on August 26, Smadi met with Hussein for the fifth time and discussed plans for bombing Fountain Place. He wanted the sleeper cell to make him an explosive device that would collapse the entire building. He insisted the bomb have a complicated arming system and be detonated by cell phone. According to his plan, he would transport the bomb in a truck that he would park in Fountain

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Place's underground garage. Once he was a safe distance away, he alone would enter the numbers on the cell phone to set off the bomb.

Agents Howell and Marshall asked the bomb lab at FBI headquarters in Quantico, Virginia, and bomb technicians in Dallas, Texas, to build a bomb that met Smadi's specifications. The technicians created an explosive device that looked real in every way — except it wouldn't actually blow up. The fake bomb included a timer, 550 pounds of explosive-grade ammonium nitrate fertilizer, and inert (meaning inactive) blasting caps placed within inert C-4 explosive blocks. All the elements of the bomb were packed inside a series of large rubber storage containers linked together with wires.

On September 18, Rafiq replied in an email to Smadi's question about when the attack should take place: "This holiday celebration that you prepared for along with Brother Hussein shall occur on Thursday, the twenty-fourth of this current month. Brother Hussein will bring to you the gift that you requested him to prepare."

The gift was a black 2001 Ford Explorer Sport Trac packed with the fake explosives.

Two days after the email, Smadi wrote back, "Let the drums of victory be struck in our holiday. We know that Allah is with us. We ask Him to bless our gift with His angels protecting and assisting us. On this day I tell you that I am ready to receive the gift. Thank you . . . May this be only the beginning, and what is coming will be greater."

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The day before the planned attack, Smadi moved out of his residence and into an isolated mobile home that he intended to use as a hideout. Agents Marshall and Howell, leaders of the five-man takedown team that would arrest the terrorist, were methodically going over their checklists.

On September 24, the day that Smadi imagined would bring him jihadist glory, the CT-2 team got into position to execute the final phase of the sting.

With FBI agents, police, cameras, and listening devices watching and recording his every move, Smadi met Hussein on the top outdoor deck of the West End Parking Center several blocks from Fountain Place. In honor of this highly anticipated day, Smadi was dressed from head to toe in black — with a bright red tie. He even wore a black cowboy hat.

“Let’s go get a smoke, say a prayer, relax, and take some time,” Hussein suggested.

Smadi shook his head. “No, we’re doing this right now.”

Hussein then gave Smadi the keys to the bomb-laden vehicle. Inside was a list of instructions on how to activate the bomb and use the cell phone to trigger the blast. After inspecting the explosives that were crammed in the back and in the covered bed of the vehicle, Smadi hopped in and drove alone toward Fountain Place.

Petrowski was in a parked car along the terrorist’s route. As Smadi drove past, the agent got a good look at him and was struck by how intense he appeared. Smadi was leaning

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so far forward that his chin was almost touching the steering wheel, and his face was contorted into a cold stare that alarmed the veteran agent. Instantly vanishing in Petrowski's mind was any lingering doubts that Smadi would chicken out. This young jihadist was all in.

Smadi drove the vehicle into the underground garage at Fountain Place and parked in a spot reserved for bank customers. Then he followed the detailed instructions to arm the bomb. After he set it, he got out of the Explorer, locked it, and walked across the street during the busy lunch hour.

Hussein picked him up and drove back to the top of the West End parking deck so they could watch the death and destruction from a safe vantage point. As they stepped outside, Hussein offered Smadi earplugs, but the terrorist declined, saying he wanted to hear the full effects of the blast. Smadi then snapped a picture of the building he thought he was about to destroy.

Hunkered in a stairwell about 20 yards away were Howell, Marshall, Bird, and the rest of the takedown team, all clad in bulletproof vests. Although they couldn't see anything outside because they were hiding, they had been following Smadi's movements by listening to radio transmissions from the surveillance units. The team knew exactly where Smadi was on the parking deck because Hussein had delivered him to a prearranged spot near the doorway to the stairs. No one said a word. All were ready to spring into action once the signal was given.

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Outside, Smadi dialed the cell phone number that he believed would trigger the explosion. The number, however, didn't blow up the building. Instead it lit the cell phone in Howell's hand. The agent held it up for the rest of the takedown team to see. Flashing for just an instant in the minds of the agents were the haunting 9/11 images of the collapsing World Trade Center towers.

Cursing in Arabic because Fountain Place was still standing, Smadi dialed the number again. He was totally oblivious to the takedown team that quietly charged out of the stairwell behind him. "FBI! You're under arrest!" Howell announced. Agents shoved Smadi to the ground, pinned his arms and legs, handcuffed him, and lifted him to his feet. Meanwhile, another agent hustled Hussein away. It was all over in a few seconds.

The moment he heard that Smadi had been arrested, Petrowski had mixed feelings. He was incredibly proud that members of his team, who had put their hearts and souls into this operation for nine months, had done such a magnificent job. *Thank goodness we found him before any terrorist organization did*, the agent told himself. And then he was struck with a disturbing thought: *How many more Hosam Smadis are out there that we don't know about?*

Immediately after Smadi's arrest, Howell and Marshall questioned him for several hours. The agents had spent more time preparing for this interview — about two months — than for

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any other in their careers, so they were fully versed in his emails and conversations with the undercover agents.

Smadi kept trying to minimize his crime, claiming he never actually carried out any act of terrorism. When he learned that the FBI had been keeping an eye on him for nine months, he asked Howell, “Why didn’t you stop me for, like, everything?”

The agent replied, “You had the free will to stop doing this at any time, and you chose to go all the way through and plant the bomb.”

Later in the interview, Howell told Smadi, “And time and time again, in every email, in every phone call, in every face-to-face meeting, and then today, you chose to do the wrong thing. That’s over one hundred times.”

By the end of the four-hour interrogation, Smadi was deflated and defeated.

“After Smadi’s arrest, there was a lot of chatter on jihadist websites around the world,” Petrowski recalled. “As for retaliation, all of our names and faces got out there. Yeah, it was a concern. But it was part of the job.”

The agent said his team was helped by local police, the multiagency Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF), attorneys in the U.S. Department of Justice, and the FBI Counterterrorism Division in Washington.

In May 2010, Smadi pleaded guilty to one count of attempted use of a weapon of mass destruction. Five months later, he was sentenced to 24 years in prison. After serving

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his time, he will be deported to Jordan just like his brother was shortly after the arrest.

During his sentencing, Smadi, who was dressed in an orange prison jumpsuit, told the court, “I am so ashamed for what I did. I am guilty of this ugly, evil crime that targeted innocent people — women and children . . . I am very sorry for my action . . . Osama bin Laden is a bad man. I hate al-Qaeda.”

U.S. District Court Judge Barbara Lynn was unmoved. “Every day from this day forward, Mr. Smadi, I want you to think of the people in that building,” she told him. “They are completely innocent people whose lives you were prepared to end. For what? You were about to commit one of the great travesties and injustices of our time. That is a burden you will have to carry.”