

Introduction

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, serve as constant, stark reminders that America has enemies in the world who seek to kill American men, women, and children, any way they can. Sometimes, the enemies are here at home.

—Attorney General John Ashcroft,
October 16, 2003, announcing plea agreements
in the Portland Cell conspiracy

IT WAS STILL dark when Nuradin Mahamoud Abdi stepped outside his apartment on the North Side of Columbus, Ohio, around six o'clock on the morning of November 28, 2003. It was Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, one of the busiest days of the Christmas shopping season. Many others who were awake and leaving their houses at the same predawn hour were headed toward the malls and big-box stores like Target and Best Buy and Wal-Mart that were open hours early to accommodate the traditional Black Friday shoppers. Central Ohio's outsized retail centers, especially Polaris to the north and Easton on the far east side, were sure to be jammed. By some estimates, greater Columbus has too many malls for its million-plus residents, a potential problem for some retailers but a boon, at least temporarily, for bargain hunters.¹

Abdi, however, was going in the other direction, both literally and figuratively. As a Muslim, he had little reason to care about the frenzy of gift giving leading up to Christmas. Keys in hand, the Somali native was still in his nightclothes, going out to warm up his car before leaving for early morning prayers at Masjid Ibn Taymia, a mosque catering to the city's large Somali population. After that, it was off to work at his cell phone store in a small Somali mall about a mile away. The thirty-one-year-old Abdi had a lot on his mind as he opened the glass door of his apartment building, stepped under a red awning, and walked into the chilly air of a dark, late-November

day. He and his wife, Safia Muse, had two young children and a third on the way. He was working long hours at the store he'd opened just two months earlier, hoping to get it off the ground. His goal was to save enough money to buy a house within the next two years. His mother, two brothers, and a sister also lived in Columbus, and the city, with its solid economy and Somali population second only to that of Minneapolis, was the place Abdi called home. Although he'd traveled out of the country in recent years, he told anyone who asked that he had no plans to leave Ohio. In any case, it wasn't as if his homeland, in its second decade without a functioning government, had much to offer a young entrepreneur.²

From the dark, someone called Abdi's name. He looked over, and a man approached him. The man said that his name was John Corbin and that he was an FBI agent. He showed Abdi his badge and asked him to wait a few minutes. While they stood there, Corbin made a call on his cell phone. "I have Abdi," he told the person on the other end. "He's standing with me here." The two waited for several minutes until at least five cars pulled up. Two men got out and began to search Abdi. They removed his wallet and the other contents of his pockets, then handcuffed him. Richard Wilkens, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement resident agent-in-charge for Columbus, told Abdi they had to check whether he had a bomb in his possession. He didn't. In his wallet, agents found a will, written in Arabic, that referred in part to his intent to travel to conflict zones in Afghanistan.³

A second ICE agent, Robert Medellin, told Abdi he was being arrested for violating federal immigration laws. When Abdi asked what type of violation, he got a curt reply: "You will know about it." Another FBI agent, Stephen Flowers, then asked Abdi for permission to search his apartment. He consented. One thing was clear: it looked like Abdi wasn't going to make it to morning prayers.⁴

Agents loaded him into an SUV and drove to FBI headquarters on the tenth floor of a building in the city's Brewery District just south of downtown. He was taken to a room for questioning, accompanied by Medellin and FBI agents. At 7:42 a.m., he signed a form waiving his *Miranda* rights. Medellin took the lead in the interview, telling Abdi he'd committed a lot of immigration violations and the only way to help himself was to cooperate with the FBI agents in the room. One of those agents, Flowers, then took over. The questions were numerous: Tell us about your background, your

family here in Columbus, your travels abroad since you first came to the United States. Do you know of any threats or planned attacks against the United States or its allies? Do you remember a meeting FBI agents had with you last spring, when we discussed something a friend of yours—a man named Iyman Faris—had said about you? A statement he'd attributed to you?⁵

The questioning lasted for hours. Although the agents told Abdi he'd violated federal immigration laws, they didn't explain those violations or show him any documents detailing their allegations. Later that day, he was transferred to the Kenton County Detention Center in Covington, Kentucky, across the river from Cincinnati, where the headquarters for the FBI's southern Ohio division were located. Around noon, Medellin brought Abdi's lunch. He tried to reason with the prisoner. He'd been an immigration officer for twenty-seven years. He'd seen cases like this before. Medellin had observed Abdi's children at the apartment that morning, had seen his infant daughter; if he wanted to be with them, he told Abdi, he needed to cooperate. "What did I do?" Abdi asked. Medellin repeated he'd committed many violations.

"Can I see them?" Abdi asked.

"You are going to see them," Medellin said, before leaving him alone with his lunch.

Later that day, Abdi placed ten collect phone calls from jail, trying unsuccessfully to reach his family and a friend.⁶

The questioning continued Saturday, November 29, and lasted hours more, through the morning and afternoon, and well into the evening. Agents had a lot of information about Abdi, they reminded him, again and again, and he wasn't telling them what they needed to know.

At last Abdi said, "What are you looking for?"

Medellin glanced at Wilkens, then looked back at Abdi.

"We want to know information about Iyman Faris," he said.

Abdi countered by telling them he hadn't been brought in to talk about Faris, a friend of his from another mosque, and asked again what immigration violations he'd committed. He wanted to phone his wife to let her know he was all right, but the agents wouldn't let him place the call.⁷

The timing of Abdi's apprehension and the forceful way in which federal agents took him into custody were puzzling. But Abdi

couldn't have been entirely surprised by this encounter. Of course he remembered their previous meeting. It had been April 2, when agents visited his cell phone store and asked him about conversations he'd had with Faris. Faris, Abdi well knew, was in a lot of trouble with the government. Big trouble. But what did that have to do with him? He'd already disavowed the things the agents said he and Faris had talked about. He was a Muslim, he told them. Our faith forbids us from harming anyone. Back in April, he'd even allowed the agents to search his apartment, and they'd found nothing. He'd produced a valid immigration document at the time and explained how he had come to the United States five years earlier after being smuggled through Mexico. The agents had dutifully noted all this and gone on their way.⁸

But that was then: nearly eight months later, something had changed. And the hours of questions were starting to wear Abdi down.



FOLLOWING THE 9/11 attacks, almost every American community experienced a moment of awakening from the illusory dream that such events happened only in faraway lands. For many, including people in Ohio, the new reality began with the calling up of active duty troops and reservists and National Guard members, first to help rout the Taliban in Afghanistan, then to take part in the invasion of Iraq. By the middle of 2003, Ohio in general and Columbus in particular had contributed their fair share of soldiers to fight the war on terror overseas. In tiny McConnellsville in southeast Ohio, more than four hundred members of a single Guard unit had been called up in one deployment. Eight Ohio soldiers had been killed in Iraq, including two—Private Brandon Sloan and Sergeant Robert Dowdy—on March 23, 2003, just three days after the invasion.⁹

Still, the idea that people in Columbus were in personal danger, that people living right next door meant harm, was not on people's minds. Of course Americans had seen such threats emerge elsewhere—in suburban Buffalo, for example, where several Yemeni Americans had been charged in October 2001 with providing material support to terrorists based on their visits to a training camp in Afghanistan. Or in Portland, Oregon, where almost exactly a year later, six defendants, including five U.S. citizens, had been charged with counts of material support, alleging they tried to go to Afghanistan

to fight against American military forces. The televised perp walk of alleged homegrown terrorists across the cable news channels was familiar, but it was something that happened to someone else, someplace else.

All that changed on June 19, 2003, when Attorney General John Ashcroft stepped before the cameras in Washington to make a nationally televised announcement.

“On any given day, Iyman Faris appeared to be a hard working independent truck driver,” the attorney general said. “Working out of Columbus, Ohio, he freely crisscrossed the country, making deliveries to airports and businesses without raising a suspicion.”

“But Faris led a secret, double life,” Ashcroft continued. “He traveled to Pakistan and Afghanistan, covertly met with Osama Bin Laden, and joined Al Qaeda’s jihad against America.”¹⁰

A secret double life? A meeting with bin Laden? Jihad against America? Above all, in Columbus, Ohio? This was as mild-mannered a place as a big American city can be. Overshadowed by Cleveland and Cincinnati, with their bigger metropolitan areas and more colorful histories, Columbus was a humble locale: the quiet state capital, a laboratory for the nation’s fast food preferences, a white-collar town dominated by government and higher education. Generally speaking, the most consternation the city experienced involved the fortunes of Ohio State University’s football team. It was a place where the threat of terrorism was something you heard about on the radio while inching along in rush hour traffic in the SUV President George W. Bush had told you to go out and buy as a sign of normality in a time of war.¹¹

Now the city’s time in the cable news sun had come. Over the next few days Columbus learned of and was amazed by the bizarre tale of Faris, a Pakistani American (and U.S. citizen) who had been married for a while to a preacher’s daughter from Kentucky and who was alleged—when he wasn’t playing cricket or driving his big rig or lying on the couch watching TV—to have cased the Brooklyn Bridge at the behest of none other than Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the architect of the 9/11 attacks.



ONE WEEK AFTER the September 11 attacks, Congress passed Senate Joint Resolution 23, allowing the president to use “all necessary and

appropriate force” against those who planned, committed, or aided in the attacks. The goal: to prevent future acts of terror against the United States “by such nations, organizations or persons.” The resolution was the beginning of what would become a two-front war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Almost immediately, the government opened a third front on alleged terrorists operating within U.S. borders and presumably having the same goals as the 9/11 hijackers. This was a more complicated effort. It lacked any notion of a conclusion or what, exactly, would constitute victory, other than a lack of further attacks. One telling measure was the unprecedented growth of the FBI, the foot soldiers of this third front. When FBI director Robert Mueller assumed his job just one week before the 9/11 attacks, about a third of the agency’s budget, or about \$1 billion, and roughly 6,900 employees were assigned to counterterrorism and counterintelligence. By 2005, that spending had jumped to \$2.2 billion, and 12,466 FBI personnel—an increase of nearly 80 percent—were devoted to terrorist-type threats.¹²

The targets of these beefed-up investigative efforts lived in ordinary American towns and cities. Alleged jihadists, homegrown or immigrant, had addresses in places like Lackawanna, N.Y.; the Virginia suburbs of the District of Columbia; Lodi, California; Liberty City, outside Miami; the Cherry Hill neighborhood of Philadelphia; Detroit; Cleveland; and Toledo. Because the government cast so wide a net, reports of the number of accused varied widely and were based in part on one’s definition of terrorism—was fund-raising for Hezbollah, for example, equivalent to attending jihadist training camps in Pakistan or Afghanistan? One comprehensive 2010 study by researchers at Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill determined that 139 Muslim Americans had committed acts of terrorism-related violence or had been prosecuted for terrorism-related offenses in the eight years after 9/11. A 2009 study by Human Rights Watch analyzed 119 federal cases with 289 defendants, almost all of them from post-9/11 indictments. A 2006 study by New York University’s Center on Law and Security cited a much higher figure of 510 individuals who had been classified at some point as terrorist cases.¹³

Many defendants were prosecuted under the “material support” provision of the federal terrorism laws (either 18 USC 2339A or 18 USC 2339B), facing allegations that they assisted terrorists by

providing equipment, expertise, training, or, in some cases, themselves as participants. This charge of making available the basic fuel to feed the terrorist fire became the default accusation brought against most of the homegrown terrorism suspects after September 11. In cases in which deals were cut, the government often dropped other charges in exchange for a defendant's agreement to plead guilty to a single count of providing or conspiring to provide material support. Though the statute was challenged frequently, courts by and large upheld its constitutionality.¹⁴

The accusations were troubling, to say the least: plans to bring down the Sears Tower; blow up fuel lines at JFK Airport; shoot up Fort Dix; destroy synagogues in Brooklyn; detonate backpacks on mass transit throughout New York City; or in the case of Iyman Faris, cut the cables of the Brooklyn Bridge. And universally, charges were brought before violence was carried out. For better or for worse, the investigation of terror cases at home since 9/11 had consisted almost entirely of "what-if" scenarios.

OHIO IS A political bellwether—no Republican has been elected president without winning the state, and only two Democrats have done so in more than a century. As Ohio goes, so goes the nation. President Bush made the case for war in Iraq in a speech in Cincinnati in 2002. Senator John Kerry repudiated the war in a speech in the same Cincinnati hall in 2004. Bush returned to Ohio in 2005 to push for renewal of the Patriot Act. As the war on terror at home goes, so goes Ohio.

In January 2004, Fawaz Damra, the imam of one of Cleveland's largest mosques, was arrested on suspicion of hiding his ties to the group Palestinian Islamic Jihad when he applied for U.S. citizenship in 1994. Damra also had been criticized for hateful comments about Jews he had made in a 1991 speech, comments he later blamed on hostility from prejudice he picked up as a youth in the West Bank. His trial stirred up strong feelings about tolerance and the post-9/11 environment. Damra was convicted in June 2004 and deported to the Palestinian territories the following year.¹⁵

In 2005, police in the southeastern Ohio city of Marietta arrested two Arab American men from Detroit after they were discovered carrying hundreds of dollars in cash and several cell phones they'd purchased at area stores. The allegation: they were amassing tools of

destruction that could be used as bomb detonators or hard-to-trace communication devices for terrorists. The men faced preliminary charges of terrorism until authorities discovered they were guilty of little more than the sin of American capitalism: the prepaid phones, it turns out, were a hot commodity overseas. All this unfolded and was resolved in a matter of days, but not before suburban Detroit's sizable Arab American population directed charges of prejudice and misunderstanding at police.¹⁶

In February 2006, federal authorities shut down an Islamic charity in Toledo and arrested three Arab Americans, accusing them of training and plotting for the purposes of waging jihad against U.S. forces in Iraq. The case against them was based on the work of an undercover FBI informant passing himself off as a former soldier disillusioned by the conduct of the war. The informant's early efforts at infiltrating Toledo's sizable Muslim community were so troubling that community members even contacted the FBI to report him.¹⁷

Early in 2009, the FBI began looking into the disappearance of as many as twenty young Somali men from Minneapolis. It was a case that resonated loudly in Columbus, which has the country's second-largest Somali population after that of the Twin Cities. Federal prosecutors said most of the men traveled to Somalia to join the terror group al-Shabab, linked to al-Qaida by the U.S. State Department. One of the men carried out a suicide bombing in Somalia in October 2008, the first American to participate in such an attack. People were not disappearing in Columbus, not yet, but Somali leaders and police had grown increasingly concerned about the alienation that many young men were experiencing, particularly after graduating from high school with few job prospects. In the fall of 2009, the Somali president, Sheik Sherif Sheik Ahmed, attended the United Nations General Assembly, then embarked on a tour of U.S. cities with large Somali populations. His trip included stops in Chicago, the Twin Cities, and finally Columbus, where in early October Ahmed addressed city and university leaders and later an overflow crowd of Somali residents at the Villa Milano hall on the north side of the city. Ahmed declared that solving his country's problems required both the help of the U.S. government, bound to Somalia by mutual threats from al-Qaida, and the help of Somalis who had immigrated to the United States.¹⁸

Stories of alleged terrorists in Ohio had faded by the summer of 2009, only to be resurrected by the case of a teenage girl named

Fathima Rifqa Bary. In July, the seventeen-year-old Muslim ran away from her family's suburban Columbus apartment to Florida, saying she feared death by honor killing for having converted to Christianity. Rifqa, a popular cheerleader, seemed an unlikely candidate to spark a national debate about religious tolerance. Then a lawyer in Florida known for taking up conservative causes stepped into the fray. He attempted to link a large suburban mosque the girl and her family occasionally attended with alleged terrorist conspiracies at another mosque earlier in the decade. The case ignited a storm of allegations and counter-allegations in the blogosphere. Evangelical Christians warned of the evils of Islam and the dangers converts allegedly faced, while Muslims countered with accusations of kidnapping and brainwashing. As that debate raged, Rifqa went to live in a foster home in Columbus, estranged from her parents and even her younger brothers, all of whom she refused to speak to.

SOON AFTER THE U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, a headline circled the wraparound digital news display on the *Columbus Dispatch* building on the east side of Capitol Square in downtown Columbus: "Another American Soldier Killed in Iraq." There had been a lot of those headlines recently, so many the words had become almost poetic in their dreary repetitiveness. On a smaller scale, the same was true of reports of the arrest of yet another Muslim American for plotting against the United States. The unconscionable had become commonplace. And despite years of investigations and prosecutions, such cases continued through the decade. On one troubling weekend in September 2009, the FBI announced the foiling of three separate plots: one to detonate backpacks in New York City subways and buses; another to destroy a Dallas skyscraper; a third to blow up the federal building in Springfield, Illinois.

One of the biggest concerns the FBI faced as the decade wore on was the lone wolf, the individual who expressed terrorist sympathies but was not connected to any organized cell. Take the case of Abdulhakim Muhammed, a young African American man who grew up in Memphis as Carlos Bledsoe. On June 1, 2009, in Little Rock, Arkansas, Muhammed allegedly opened fire on a military recruiting office, killing one soldier and injuring another. In two separate jailhouse calls to the Associated Press office in Little Rock, Muhammad said he didn't consider the killing a murder because U.S. conduct in

the Middle East justified the shooting. The previous year, Muhammad had gone to Yemen as an English teacher. After overstaying his visa, he was jailed for a time: it was during this period behind bars, according to his father, Melvin Bledsoe, that he began to be radicalized. Here, too, was another Ohio connection. Muhammad had spent a very short time in Columbus sometime before 2007, living with a roommate in a low-rent apartment complex on the city's northeast side, his goal apparently to get an Ohio driver's license.¹⁹

IN 2003, THE government began pursuing three accused terrorists from Columbus. Though the three were considered co-conspirators, they were accused in separate indictments of vastly different crimes. Their alleged plots ranged from the Brooklyn Bridge plan to attacking civilians in Columbus to bombing U.S. military facilities and European tourist resorts. Like practically all defendants charged with material support since 2001, none of the three had carried out an actual crime of physical destruction. They never pulled a trigger; they never detonated a bomb; and the Brooklyn Bridge is still standing.

September 11 created unprecedented challenges for the federal agencies assigned to investigate and prosecute allegations of terrorism at home. Success was measured by the absence of new attacks; failure, by the unimaginable. By-the-book procedures were invisible; mistakes, a source of public outcry. Overzealous prosecutions were inevitable; less rigorous pursuits, out of the question. Relations between law enforcement and the country's growing Muslim population would ebb and flow—ebb, far more often than not—but would never be the same again. And most troubling, there did not appear to be an end in sight. The government investigated here; a new allegation emerged there. A cell was smashed one day; a lone wolf took up the cause the next. The specter of a perpetual struggle loomed large in November 2009, when U.S. Army major Nidal Malik Hasan allegedly opened fire at Fort Hood in Texas and killed thirteen fellow soldiers, and again the following month, when a Nigerian national allegedly attempted to bring down Northwest Airlines Flight 253 as it approached Detroit from Amsterdam on Christmas Day. As Abdulhakim Muhammad, the alleged Little Rock shooter and onetime Columbus resident put it, the attack he was accused of was “definitely not the end of it.”²⁰

ALMOST TWO DAYS had passed, and Nuradin Abdi still hadn't been able to contact his family. Finally, on Sunday, November 30, hoping cooperation would help, Abdi relented and told investigators things they appeared to want to hear. He confirmed information they'd learned from Faris. He told them additional details about his immigration status. The interrogation went on as agents moved him from his cell to an office for questioning and back again. Late that night, at 10:15 p.m., agents took an affidavit from Abdi, which he then signed. The following day, at 5:35 p.m., almost fifty-six hours after he'd first been taken into custody outside the Northland Arms apartment building on Tamarack Boulevard, Abdi was served with an arrest warrant by ICE agent Robert Medellin. At the same moment, Abdi was handed a notice that the government intended to terminate his asylum status in the United States.²¹

For the FBI, the need to take Abdi into custody the day after Thanksgiving of 2003 made absolute sense. They'd been keeping a close eye on the Somali immigrant for months, ever since Faris had told them of a chilling conversation he, Abdi, and another man had had a year earlier at a suburban coffee shop. The three were furious at civilian casualties in the ten-month-old U.S. campaign in Afghanistan and had discussed ways to vent their anger. Each had a different idea, a different plan. Faris threw out the possibility of blowing up the Hoover Dam, an idea the others agreed could cause widespread damage. But it was Abdi, Faris told the FBI, who suggested a terrorist attack as close to home as possible. He proposed shooting up a shopping mall with an AK-47.²²

The FBI had learned of Abdi's threat months ago, but now, as Black Friday dawned and stores began to open to throngs of shoppers, agents believed the time had come to act. Investigators had found out too much since that April meeting. Apprehending Abdi on his way to morning prayers, even though agents lacked an arrest warrant, was the only way the FBI saw to thwart the possibility of a massacre in a packed shopping center on one of the busiest retail days of the year.

Two years and two months after the worst domestic terror attack in U.S. history, the government agents reasoned, what else were they supposed to do?²³