

Terrorism case in Lodi, California begins to unravel

Patrick Martin
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Within days of the June 5 arrest of two Lodi, California men supposedly linked to Islamic fundamentalist terrorism, the case has begun to come apart at the seams. Attorneys for the two men, a Pakistani immigrant and his US-born son, announced Thursday that there were significant discrepancies in the affidavits used by the federal Department of Justice to charge their clients.

The affidavit released to the news media on June 7 said that the younger man, 23-year-old Hamid Hayat, had attended a terror-training camp in Pakistan along with “hundreds” of other would-be terrorists, and returned to the US intending that “potential targets for attack would include hospitals and large food stores.”

These details were the focus of a flood of sensationalized coverage in the American media, portraying Hamid Hayat as a prospective mass killer, and his father, Umer Hayat, a 47-year-old ice cream truck driver, as the mastermind of a terrorist cell who was in direct contact with Al Qaeda.

Neither allegation, however, was in the affidavit actually filed with a federal court in Sacramento the same day. Instead, the two men were charged only with lying to federal investigators about Hamid Hayat’s itinerary during a recent visit to Pakistan. Three other men, also Lodi-area Pakistanis, were detained on suspected immigration violations. None of the five have been charged with carrying out or planning to carry out any violent act.

Johnny L. Griffin III, who represents Umer Hayat, told the press, “Notwithstanding the alarming statement made in the affidavit, the government has only charged each of the defendants with one count of making a false statement to a federal agent. They are not charged in this complaint with committing any terrorist acts, and they are not charged in this complaint with supporting

any terrorist acts.”

Griffin accused the government of “releasing information it knew it could not authenticate.” Wazhma Mojaddidi, who represents Hamid Hayat, said, “We question how this got out and why this got out.”

The Justice Department denied that it was deliberately attempting to precipitate an anti-Muslim witch-hunt in California, claiming the difference between the two documents was “an unfortunate oversight due to miscommunication.”

Press reports citing federal sources said that the initial target of the investigation was one of the three men detained on immigration charges, Mohammed Adil Khan, a Lodi-based imam. The secretive court which authorizes wiretapping under the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) approved FBI spying on Khan three years ago.

A cousin of Hamid Hayat told the press that the FBI had begun investigating the Hayats because of anonymous phone calls. “They have something against Hamid’s dad,” he said. “Because of that they kept calling the FBI and saying they are terrorists.”

Lodi is an agricultural town 40 miles south of Sacramento and a center of wine-making. It would seem an unlikely focus for a terrorist conspiracy. But it has a sizeable Pakistani immigrant community, about 2,000 out of the 40,000 population, who can be easily scapegoated for their Muslim religion and traditional dress.

All that is known for certain about the case is that Hamid Hayat, like many young Muslims, was outraged by the US invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq, and that in 2003 he went back to his family’s ancestral village in Pakistan for a visit, and stayed on to study at an Islamic school run by his grandfather. He returned to the US on May 29, 2005, flying into San

Francisco International Airport.

US officials claim that Hayat's grandfather is an associate of Maulana Fazlur Rehman, a long-time leader of Islamic fundamentalist groups in Pakistan. Rehman is now head of the MMA, a party formed by several such groups which has a strong presence in the Pakistan parliament and controls the state government in Baluchistan.

Even if true, a family connection to Rehman would prove nothing, since Rehman is currently a political ally of General Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistani military dictator who is the principal US stooge in the region.

Even more peculiar is a description in one version of the FBI affidavit of the Al Qaeda camp that Hamid Hayat allegedly attended. Identified as "Tamal," the camp was reported to be close to Rawalpindi, where Pakistan's military and intelligence commands are headquartered, and to the Pakistani capital Islamabad. In the past, the US government has always claimed that suspected Al Qaeda camps were located in the primitive mountainous areas in western Pakistan, near the Afghan border, not in the densely populated Punjab region closer to India.

The loose ends and inconsistencies in the initial reports on this case suggest that, as in most previous "terrorism" prosecutions in the US, some combination of government provocation, anti-immigrant bigotry and sheer incompetence is involved. In this case, there is an evident political motivation, since the Bush administration is engaged in an intense campaign to renew in full and expand the 2001 Patriot Act.

Lurid stories in the media of Al Qaeda-type terrorist cells operating in the US and well-publicized anti-terrorist prosecutions would be considered within government circles as useful in stoking up fear and insecurity in the public and inciting suspicions of Muslims—just the right environment for pushing through Congress a consolidation and expansion of the police-state provisions of the Patriot Act.



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