

Two New York women snared in FBI terror “sting”

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Federal prosecutors, the FBI and the New York City Police Department (NYPD) Thursday accused two women from the New York City borough of Queens of conspiring “to use a weapon of mass destruction,” a charge that carries a potential sentence of life in prison.

The two women are named in the complaint as Noelle Velentzas, 28, and Asia Siddiqui, 31. The two are former roommates. Velentzas is a Puerto Rican convert to Islam and a mother of two children, ages 5 and 11.

The arrests in New York were followed on Friday by the arrest of a 30-year-old Philadelphia woman, Keonna Thomas, on charges of intent to join the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) by flying to Turkey and then traveling to Syria.

The substance of the complaint in New York makes it abundantly clear that the “conspiracy” case against them, as in virtually every other prosecution of so-called homegrown terrorists since 2001, was manufactured through the intervention of an undercover operative posing as a terrorist sympathizer. In this case, the job was done by an undercover New York City police detective working under the Joint Terrorism Task Force, which coordinates the actions of the FBI, NYPD and other police and intelligence agencies.

The attention of the FBI and NYPD was apparently first attracted to the pair by a poem that Siddiqui sent in 2009 to an Islamist online publication published by Samir Khan, a US citizen who was assassinated along with Anwar al-Awlaki in a 2011 US drone strike in Yemen. This poem is spun in the FBI’s complaint into a “close” relation between Siddiqui and Al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), of which it provides no evidence whatsoever.

Neither is there any evidence in the complaint that either of the women had any interest in learning how to build a bomb or in obtaining parts for an explosive

device before 2013, when they came into contact with the undercover NYPD detective, who appears to have steered them in that direction.

“In 2013, the UC met with Velentzas on multiple occasions,” the complaint states. “During these meetings, which were not recorded, Velentzas expressed violent jihadist ideology and an interest in terrorism.”

That these sessions were not recorded is likely no accident. Tapes of what was said might well demonstrate that it was the “UC” (undercover agent) who took the lead in advocating terrorist acts.

As far as conversations that were recorded in 2014, much of this evidence appears dubious at best. The 29-page complaint includes no fewer than six footnotes explaining that referenced statements cannot be heard because of a “malfunctioning” recording device.

The undercover detective provided the women with a downloaded copy of “The Anarchist Cookbook,” a 1971 volume that includes instructions on manufacturing crude explosives, as well as a copy of “Inspire,” the Internet publication linked to Al Qaeda, which featured similar material on building car bombs.

In December 2014, in a meeting with the two, the UC suggested the funeral for the two New York City cops shot to death in their patrol car as a bombing target, pointing out that 25,000 police officers had been in attendance. This section of the complaint was sensationalized by the New York tabloids, which neglected to mention that this supposed element of the “plot” was entirely the invention of an NYPD detective.

Other conversations cited in the complaint indicate that the two women were angry over US military interventions in the Middle East. Velentzas told the undercover detective that she had seen President

Barack Obama's speech announcing the onset of the US military intervention in Iraq and Syria and had been "disgusted" by it. The FBI and NYPD clearly sought to exploit this anger and direct it toward a concrete plan to carry out a terrorist attack.

Much of the complaint recounts the study by the two women of high-school-level books on chemistry and electricity along with provocative statements allegedly made in the presence of the undercover cop.

Repeatedly, the targets of the FBI sting expressed concern that they could be targets of government surveillance, a well-founded suspicion given the NYPD's organization of an undercover unit that conducted blanket surveillance of mosques and businesses connected to Muslims.

In one conversation cited in the complaint, Velentzas describes Siddiqui as someone who has "a beef" with the US government, the undercover cop as an "inconspicuous student studying about detonators" and herself as "an outspoken political person."

"You [Siddiqui] got the beef, I got the knowledge and you [the undercover] got the mechanics...that's how it looks on paper," she added. Describing the police, prosecutors and Homeland Security as waging a war on the Muslim faith, she said, "we legitimately, to these people, look like a cell."

The statement is significant in that, while Velentzas describes herself and Siddiqui in terms of their political beliefs, she refers to the undercover cop as the one concerned with "detonators" and "the mechanics." It also makes clear that, while she believes the government could see them as a terrorist cell, she herself did not.

The concern expressed by the two women over government surveillance apparently extended to the undercover detective. The complaint states that Velentzas used her cellphone to "research whether the UC was, in fact, an undercover officer and to learn how to detect the presence of hidden recording devices." In November and December of 2014, the document states, she accessed web pages with titles such as "Learning the identity of a confidential informant," "How to spot undercover police" and "Is S/he an informant?"

The complaint also states that Siddiqui "has recently informed the UC that she will be disinclined to inform the UC regarding her progress in learning how to manufacture an explosive device."

While this last claim was submitted to support the FBI's request for a no-knock arrest warrant to seize the two women from their apartments, it is by no means clear that there was any such "progress" to report. It is more likely that the two women became increasingly uncomfortable with the undercover cop and his attempts to goad them into hatching and carrying out a terrorist plot.

Thus, the case against them lacks any concrete plot, designated target, or explosive device.

New York City's Democratic mayor, Bill de Blasio, issued a statement Thursday praising the NYPD and the FBI, declaring, "This was a conspiracy that was undercut before it could turn into something more dangerous."

On the contrary, the conspiracy, which appears to have been organized entirely by the FBI and NYPD, was undercut because of the women's suspicion of the undercover cop and resistance to being drawn into a terrorist plot of the government's making.



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