

THE SUCCESS OF COUNTERTERRORISM EFFORTS DIFFICULT TO EVALUATE - BUT FBI AGENTS SAY THEY ARE TRACKING LEADS EXHAUSTIVELY

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There have been documented successes, some embarrassing failures, high-profile arrests and one costly public apology.

There also has been no second terrorism strike on American soil.

But assessing whether the FBI has actively prevented such a tragedy is virtually impossible. Counterterrorism operations across the country are so shrouded in secrecy that the bureau won't even say how many agents are assigned to them.

Some "disruptions" - FBI jargon for interrupted suspected terrorist activity - are never disclosed at all.

One thing is clear, according to special agents who spoke to the Seattle P-I on condition of anonymity: They are exhaustively tracking leads.

Joint Terrorism Task Force squads, comprising investigators from the FBI, other federal agencies and local law enforcement, are the foot soldiers in the war on terrorism's domestic front. While every agent carries a caseload, they are also constantly "shagging down leads" from a variety of sources, including the National Security Agency's controversial wiretap program.

Field agents grumble that FBI headquarters is constantly issuing directives, trumping the street wisdom of local agents. Said one: "We don't have the time to respond to the trends we recognize because we're too busy responding to the trend du jour."

The agent suggested that efforts to prevent another terrorism attack are sometimes excessive, especially when it comes to electronic surveillance.

"A lot of monitoring is going on that is not warranted," the agent said.

The FBI's track record in the Northwest, echoing the country as a whole, is mixed.

One of the biggest triumphs came well before the terrorist attacks, in 1999. U.S. border guards in Port Angeles arrested a nerve-racked Algerian, Ahmed Ressay, and found a trunkload of explosives in his rented car. Ressay, authorities learned later, was part of a plot to bomb Los Angeles International Airport on the eve of the millennium. After 9/11, Ressay provided the FBI with a wealth of information about the terrorist underworld.

In 2002, the FBI office in Seattle arrested James Ujaama, breaking up a plan to start a terrorist training camp in Bly, Ore., with links to al-Qaida. He could have been sentenced to as much as 25 years in prison for helping the Taliban with training, computing services and facilities, but instead was sentenced to two years behind bars in return for his ongoing cooperation with investigators.

Local authorities credit increased vigilance for possibly thwarting a strike in 2004 on Washington's ferry system - deemed a top terrorist target today. Coast Guard intelligence officers reported that "two Middle Eastern males were observed studying the schematic" of one of the ferries during a cruise and abruptly walked away when an employee approached.

A license plate check revealed that the pair's vehicle was also suspicious - rented by someone who had given a fictitious business address. No arrests were made, but the episode was one of several deemed "highly likely" to be "preoperation planning" for an attack.

State and federal agencies responded by taking steps to improve ferry security - introducing bomb-sniffing dogs, barring unaccompanied freight and adding surveillance equipment. State Patrol troopers began riding the ferries, and heavily armed Coast Guard SWAT boats began accompanying vessels.

The case of Rainier Valley barber Ruben Shumpert - also known as Amir Abdul Muhaimin - is less clear.

In November 2004, the terrorism task force raided a dozen locations around Seattle, arresting Shumpert and 13 others. Task force agents branded the Crescent Cut Barbershop "an anti-American training ground for Muslims."

Shumpert, an ex-convict who converted to Islam, was never charged with a terrorism-related crime. He was released in November 2006 on personal recognizance pending sentencing on weapons and counterfeiting charges, only to flee to Somalia.

Others arrested were African immigrants from Islamic countries accused of immigration fraud, or American Muslims accused of bank fraud. None faced terrorism charges.

The raided barber shop was frequented by Abraham Sheik Mohamed, the imam of a local mosque. Federal agents asserted that he raised money for the Islamic holy war against the West. But he was not charged with a crime - just with lying on his immigration papers.

At an immigration hearing, which has looser standards of evidence and proof than criminal courts, FBI agent David Rubincam testified that he heard from four confidential sources that Mohamed once belonged to al-Itihaad a-Islamiya, a Somali group that the State Department has labeled a terrorist organization.

A federally protected witness with a history of multiple felonies told the immigration judge that he heard the imam preach in a "derogatory" fashion about a nearby Jewish neighborhood and synagogue. "That one day we'd have to take the neighborhood and if it was by force - so be it, God willing."

Mohamed was deported.

The biggest FBI blunder in the Northwest to come to light was the case of Oregon lawyer Brandon Mayfield. Agents arrested the Muslim convert after the FBI incorrectly matched him to a fingerprint lifted from a bag of explosive detonators linked to the March 2004 train bombings in Madrid, Spain, that killed 191 people.

In settling the case later, the government apologized to Mayfield and agreed to pay \$2 million in damages.

"I look forward to the day the Patriot Act is declared unconstitutional, and all citizens are safe from unwarranted arrest and searches by the federal government," Mayfield said after the settlement was announced.

Internationally, the three main legs of America's intelligence community - the FBI, the CIA and the military - have worked together to capture most of the 9/11 terrorists, with Osama bin Laden a notable exception.

Nationally, the bureau has had some limited success: the dismantling of a massive cigarette-smuggling ring stretching from North Carolina to British Columbia that provided money to Palestinian terrorists; the six young Yemeni Americans from the Buffalo, N.Y., area who were arrested and charged with providing material support to terrorists.

Over the past 5 1/2 years, there've been plenty of alerts - but no acts of terrorism. Are we lucky, or are our counterterrorism efforts paying off?

Asked a former FBI agent: "How do you measure that deterrence factor?"

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- **Caption:** PhotoMERYL SCHENKER/P-I FILE: An agent with Immigration and Customs Enforcement and a Seattle police officer secure the front door of an Islamic shop and upstairs mosque raided in November 2004 by the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force. No terrorism arrests were made, but an imam suspected of raising money for an African terrorist organization was deported.

- **Memo:** P-I SPECIAL REPORT: THE TERRORISM TRADE-OFF

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