

Case 37: DC Metro-bomb plot

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Apparently working from a tip supplied in 2010 by a fellow congregant at Farooque Ahmed's mosque in northern Virginia, the FBI worked a couple of operatives into his confidence. Over some six months, the tiny group plotted to set off bombs at four Washington, DC, Metro stations. Throughout, the operatives seem to have taken the lead. At their first meeting, Ahmed said that what he really wanted was "to fight and kill Americans in Afghanistan" and become a martyr. But the operative said he first needed to endure a "trial period" with al-Qaeda for a terrorism project within the U.S. and to complete the work within six months. Thereafter, Ahmed busied himself carrying out orders to surveil the Metro stations, craftily video recording them with his cell phone, in an effort to pick out the spots where a bomb would inflict the most harm.

In many ways, notes Chad Chessin, the 34-year-old naturalized US citizen from Pakistan was far from a "prototypical" terrorist. Quite well educated and married to a woman who was a member of "Hip Muslim Moms," Ahmed lived in a northern Virginia suburb with her and with his young son—who, as Chessin stresses, he was in the process of abandoning as he took up what he thought was a path to terrorism—but one that led instead to a 23 year jail term.

Because of Ahmed's "introverted personality and lack of confidence prior to being approached," Chessin does not believe that Ahmed would "have sought out al-Qaeda on his own." As noted in the introduction to this book, US intelligence commonly believed in the years immediately after 9/11 that there were thousands of al-Qaeda operatives at loose in the country. However, none, or virtually none, have been uncovered even though tens of billions of dollars have been spent on the quest. It seems unlikely that Ahmed, even if he had tried, would have been more successful. The FBI, however, has fulsomely filled the void.

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1. Overview

On October 27, 2010, Federal Bureau of Intelligence agents arrested 34-year-old Farooque Ahmed, a naturalized US citizen from Pakistan, for his role in what he thought to be an al-Qaeda-directed bomb plot targeting four Washington Metro stations. Ahmed's arrest capped off a six-month sting operation conducted by two FBI operatives in which sufficient evidence was gathered to indict him on three charges: attempting to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization, collecting information to assist in planning a terrorist attack on a transit facility, and attempting to provide material support to terrorists.¹

The undercover operation—which officially began on April 18, 2010—was prompted in January 2010 when the FBI received a tip that Ahmed, along with an associate, aspired to engage in jihad against coalition forces in Afghanistan and/or Pakistan.² According to a board member of the mosque that Ahmed periodically attended, the tipster was likely one of Ahmed's fellow congregants.³ Around the same time, according to an Obama administration official, Ahmed aroused further suspicion by seeking to obtain “unspecified materials.”⁴ The ensuing investigation would focus on Ahmed, and not his associate, perhaps as a consequence of having this extra piece of intelligence that identified Ahmed as a potential threat to national security. Three months later, spurred by an FBI email invitation, Ahmed met with an FBI collaborator, whom Ahmed believed to be an al-Qaeda representative, at a hotel near Washington-Dulles International Airport. At this meeting, FBI agents watched the collaborator hand Ahmed a Qur'an in which were enclosed documents of code words that would later be used to signify meeting times.⁵

In May 2010, in a meeting with one of the two FBI operatives directly involved in the case, Ahmed revealed in a recorded conversation that he wanted “to fight and kill Americans in Afghanistan.” When prompted by the operative on the subject, Ahmed expressed his desire to become a martyr. At this point, the operative expressed his satisfaction with Ahmed, telling him that the organization required the completion of certain tasks over the next six months.⁶ Evidently, the FBI had already formulated a time frame for the closure of the investigation, as Ahmed would be arrested approximately six months later in October 2010.

From May until late October, Ahmed performed several surveillance-

¹ USA v. Farooque Ahmed, “Indictment,” Eastern District of Virginia: Alexandria Division (2010), Case 1:10-cr-00413.

² USA v. Farooque Ahmed, “Affidavit in Support of Application for Search Warrant,” Eastern District of Virginia: Alexandria Division (2010), Case 1:10-sw-569.

³ Annie Gowen and Spencer S. Hsu, “D.C. Metro terror suspect faces hearing,” *Washington Post*, October 29, 2010.

⁴ Peter Finn, Spencer S. Hsu, and Caitlin Gibson, “Man accused of Metro bomb plot,” *Washington Post*, October 28, 2010.

⁵ USA v. Farooque Ahmed, “Affidavit in Support of Application for Search Warrant.”

⁶ USA v. Farooque Ahmed, “Affidavit in Support of Application for Search Warrant.”

based tasks under the direction of the undercover agents. The operatives shrewdly delineated tasks one-by-one to Ahmed rather than giving him the entire project at once, seemingly to maintain the illusion of the plot's importance and the involvement of al-Qaeda—an organization that would be unlikely to trust a prospect so immediately with an operation of paramount importance. Upon closure of the operation, Ahmed had extensively mapped and recorded information on four Metro stations in the immediate Washington, D.C., area. He was made to believe that a bomb would be placed in each of these stations—Arlington Cemetery, Pentagon City, Crystal City, and Court House—in a plot designed to inflict the most damage and cause as many casualties as possible.⁷

As the date of the fake bombing drew nearer, Ahmed set off to meet with the undercover operatives to report on his surveillance activities. On October 27, 2010, he was arrested in Herndon, Virginia, at approximately 9:40 am.⁸ Just minutes earlier, he had passed one of the FBI operatives a thumb-drive with surveillance information on the Crystal City Metro station.⁹ The very same day, he appeared before U.S. Magistrate Judge John F. Anderson in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, where he was ordered to be held without bail until a detention hearing on the upcoming Friday.¹⁰ His detention hearing lasted less than two minutes, as Ahmed opted not to contest his pretrial detention.¹¹ Prior to entering his plea, based on the charges, Ahmed faced a maximum of 50 years in prison.¹² However, after entering a guilty plea on April 11, 2011, Ahmed's sentence was reduced to 23 years in prison followed by 50 years of supervised release.¹³

One of the more controversial aspects of the case—seeming to hold true in the large majority of cases in which law enforcement agents go undercover and pretend to collaborate—is whether the sting operation put the public at risk. Naturally, one could assume that some inhabitants of the Washington metropolitan area would be none too thrilled to find out that the FBI planted a dangerous plot with possibly devastating effects in the mind of a clearly fanatical and deranged individual and then let the plot play out for six months. Officials emphasized, to the contrary, that at no point in the investigation was the public in any real danger, as Ahmed's actions were always scrupulously monitored to ensure swift intervention if he chose to accelerate the plot.¹⁴ David Kris, who at the time served as U.S. Assistant Attorney General for National Security, lauded the work of the FBI, asserting: "Today's case underscores the need for continued

⁷ Finn, Hsu, and Gibson, "Man accused of Metro bomb plot."

⁸ Finn, Hsu, and Gibson, "Man accused of Metro bomb plot."

⁹ USA v. Farooque Ahmed, "Statement of Facts," Eastern District of Virginia: Alexandria Division (2010), Case 1:10-cr-00413.

¹⁰ Finn, Hsu, and Gibson, "Man accused of Metro bomb plot."

¹¹ "Accused Plotter of Metro Bombing, Farooque Ahmed, Appears in Court," *FOX Phoenix*, October 29, 2010.

¹² Naimah Jabali-Nash, "Farooque Ahmed Arrested in FBI Sting Operation, Allegedly Plotted to Bomb DC Metro Stations," *CBS News*, October 27, 2010.

¹³ U.S. Department of Justice, "Virginia Man Sentenced to 23 Years in Prison for Plotting Attacks on D.C.-Area Metro Stations with People He Believed to Be Al-Qaeda Members," April 11, 2011.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Justice, "Virginia Man Sentenced to 23 Years."

vigilance against terrorist threats and demonstrates how the government can neutralize such threats before they come to fruition.”¹⁵

2. Nature of the adversary

Farooque Ahmed was born in Lahore, Pakistan, in 1976. Very little is known about his seventeen years of life there. We know that his father was a successful banker—ascending to the position of vice president of his bank—who afforded his family a comfortable existence. In 1993, his father was transferred to New York, a drastic change, but one that did not seem to have much of an effect on Farooque, his mother, or his siblings.¹⁶ While it is not only possible, but perhaps also likely that Farooque’s time in Pakistan gave rise to his eventual radicalization—especially based on his expressed desire to invoke jihad and kill Americans *in* Pakistan—no one he met in his early years in the U.S. was any the wiser, and unfortunately, due to the lack of available information, any such claim would be unsubstantiated and speculative.

In fact, Ahmed lived in the U.S. for quite a while before any red flags popped up. Shortly after immigrating, although no exact date is available, Ahmed became a naturalized U.S. citizen.¹⁷ As education was highly emphasized in his family, he always felt destined to get a college degree.¹⁸ In 2003, he did just that, obtaining a bachelor’s degree in computer science from the College of Staten Island, which he attended since 1999. Two years after graduation, he moved to Virginia to pursue a career in telecommunications.¹⁹

At this point, something odd happened that perhaps called Ahmed’s integrity into question but cannot be related to his future terrorist endeavors by any means. According to his LinkedIn page—a mechanism used to display one’s educational and work experience to attract employers—Farooque would have obtained a master’s degree from the City College of New York if not for a “political issue” between the computer science and engineering departments at the College of Staten Island.²⁰ The exact text on his LinkedIn reads: “Complete almost MS in (computer Eng) but due to collge [*sic*] of Staten island [*sic*] political issue between computer science and eng department Degree was abandon [*sic*] by the college board of commit.”²¹ Interestingly, however, the City College of New York reports that Ahmed was never a student at the school. His LinkedIn also reports that he was studying risk management and data security at Aspen University, an endeavor he would have been undertaking from his home in Virginia if the claim were true. However, according to the school’s president, he

¹⁵ U.S. Attorney’s Office: Eastern District of Virginia, “Virginia Man Arrested For Plotting Attacks On D.C. - Area Metro Stations With People He Believed To Be Al-Qaeda Members,” October 27, 2010.

¹⁶ “Farooque Ahmed,” muslimsforjustice.org, 2011.

¹⁷ Associated Press, “Farooque Ahmed Described as Quiet Suburban Dad,” *CBS News*, October 28, 2010.

¹⁸ “Farooque Ahmed,” muslimsforjustice.org.

¹⁹ Gowen and Hsu, “D.C. Metro terror suspect faces hearing.”

²⁰ Associated Press, “Farooque Ahmed Described as Quiet Suburban Dad.”

²¹ “Farooque Ahmed,” LinkedIn.com.

never took a class there, either.²² So, perhaps Ahmed was a bit of a fantasist when it came to his qualifications, but that does not really tell us much about what drove him to terror. If anything—and this is a stretch of a connection at best—his untrue and unsubstantiated claims might demonstrate that he would not have followed through with his supposed goal to engage in jihad abroad or to become a martyr.

Related to Farooque's adult life, most everything seemed normal. Sometime after moving to Virginia, Ahmed met his wife-to-be Sahar Mirza, and the two wed, the English-born wife changing her name to Sahar Mirza-Ahmed. According to neighbors, the couple was quiet, but kind enough, sometimes bringing food to neighbors' homes and engaging in chitchat. Although they rarely had guests over to their home, Sahar and Farooque were not antisocial, with Sahar participating in a local club called "Hip Muslim Moms," which was described as "very liberal" by one neighbor,²³ and Farooque active on social-networking sites. There is no reason to believe that their lack of direct hospitality was motivated by secrets within the house. In discussing the Ahmed couple's garb, another neighbor said that "[Sahar] always had her head covered" and that Farooque's dress was "typical" American.²⁴ To sum it up, a neighbor affirmed: "They're a regular, everyday family. That's why it's very shocking to hear this."²⁵ The couple also has a young son, who dresses conservatively.²⁶

However, if anything is illustrative of Ahmed's "dark side," it is the way he acted at his mosque. While he only attended services occasionally and rarely socialized, he did not refrain from making a scene if something ran contrary to his beliefs. At the All Dulles Area Muslim Society Center to Pray, men and women sit together during services, a controversial topic in Islam. While there is certainly no problem with Ahmed having an opinion on the matter, he was described as being relentless, rude, and malicious despite being out-ruled. He continually demanded relegation of women to a different floor. In fact he was so vocal on the subject that a male youth once confronted him during services asserting that Farooque was being disruptive, and a violent altercation resulted. The deputy Imam of the Mosque said of the incident: "[Farooque] was very angry and tried really to fight with him. I noticed a lot of anger. For most of the people at the center, this is what they remember about him. This 'show.' It was unfortunate."²⁷ His only legal infractions were several speeding tickets.²⁸

So, while the red flags were not abundant, they certainly still existed. Ahmed did not demonstrate unsheltered anger in all facets of life, but when it came to his religion, about which he was clearly quite passionate, he left no room for dissent. After Ahmed's arrest, authorities searched his home and found a

²² Associated Press, "Farooque Ahmed Described as Quiet Suburban Dad."

²³ Associated Press, "Farooque Ahmed Described as Quiet Suburban Dad."

²⁴ Caitlin Gibson and Scott Butterworth, "Farooque Ahmed: Neighbors describe the Metro plot suspect," *Washington Post*, October 27, 2010.

²⁵ Associated Press, "Farooque Ahmed Described as Quiet Suburban Dad."

²⁶ Finn, Hsu, and Gibson, "Man accused of Metro bomb plot,"

²⁷ Gowen and Hsu, "D.C. Metro terror suspect faces hearing."

²⁸ Alicia A. Caldwell, "Farooque Ahmed Arrested For Plotting DC Terrorist Attack," *Huffington Post*, October 27, 2010.

biography of Anwar al-Awlaki, an American-born Islamic militant who was known for his extremist views, advocacy of violence in the name of Islam, and connections to numerous instances of terrorism. He was recognized as a senior leader of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula before his death.²⁹ While it is difficult to identify a key moment—or even a critical time frame, for that matter—when Ahmed became radicalized, his immediate acceptance of what he thought to be recruitment into a global terrorist network demonstrates that he likely felt the way he did about the United States for quite some time. Despite some telling characteristics about Ahmed, however, his decision to turn to terror will in many respects forever remain a mystery.

3. Motivation

Based on comments he made to FBI undercover operatives and on his subscription to the virulent teachings of Anwar al-Awlaki—someone who was born in the United States but effectively renounced his roots—it is quite evident that Ahmed’s main motivation was anti-Western/U.S. sentiment. In his first meeting with the FBI operatives—who, of course, he believed to be recruiters for al-Qaeda—Ahmed explicitly expressed his desire to kill Americans in Afghanistan, going so far as to say he would like to be martyred in the process.³⁰ In other words, Ahmed felt that the U.S. had reached such a level of depravity and evil that it was a holy cause, worth ending his life, to go to Afghanistan and kill American soldiers. Later he said he was also willing to murder a mass amount of U.S. civilians.

It is likely that Ahmed was also motivated by a cosmic desire to be rewarded for his actions. Perhaps he believed, as many Islamic extremists do, that he would be sent to heaven for his “defense” of Islam against perceived crusaders. Going hand-in-hand with his anti-Western/U.S. sentiment is the perception of Muslim victimization. As was mentioned earlier, while there is little information about Farooque’s life in Pakistan, the role of his having lived there should not be underplayed. Perhaps there is more to his childhood than will ever be known or understood.

4. Goals

Farooque Ahmed’s goals were many, but they were all woven around the idea of killing U.S. citizens. First and foremost, he wanted to punish the U.S. for what he perceived as serious transgressions against Muslims. Prior to being approached by the FBI operatives, we do not know if Ahmed ever explicitly voiced his desire to join an anti-American terrorist group. However, based on his enthusiasm and lack of hesitation when approached by two people he thought were al-Qaeda representatives, it is a safe assumption that membership in a jihadist terrorist network was likely one of his top goals. Additionally, as he voiced to the first undercover agent in their initial meeting in May 2010, Farooque desired to fight in Afghanistan and kill U.S. soldiers, most optimally being

²⁹ Carol Cratty, “Accused would-be DC metro bomber pleads not guilty in federal court,” *CNN*, November 9, 2010.

³⁰ USA v. Farooque Ahmed, “Affidavit in Support of Application for Search Warrant.”

martyred in the process. As is illustrated by Ahmed’s plans for violence, he had no reservations about killing U.S. civilians either. Finally, the role of positive reinforcement—rather than punishment of the other side—cannot be undersold. While we may never know to what extent, Ahmed very likely thought he would be rewarded with eternal salvation for his “holy” actions.

5. Plans for violence

In January 2010, three months before the launch of an undercover investigation, law enforcement agents received a tip from an undisclosed person—which made its way up to the FBI—that Farooque Ahmed and an associate had expressed interest in engaging in jihad against U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Pakistan.³¹ Around the same time, according to a source within President Barack Obama’s administration, Ahmed attempted to obtain “unspecified materials” that further depicted him to be a significant national security threat.³² Perhaps this extra step distinguished Ahmed from his associate, as the FBI would only pursue the former in its investigation. To what degree Ahmed actually planned to engage in violence prior to being approached by undercover agents will never be known—presenting a significant ethical problem that will be discussed later—but the FBI felt that the threat was real and significant enough to get directly involved.

FBI agents crafted an email to Ahmed in early April 2010 that asked him to meet an al-Qaeda representative on April 18, 2010, in a hotel near Washington-Dulles International Airport. We cannot be sure if Ahmed was suspicious about this meeting but, if he was not, he likely assumed that his message had merely spread around the mosque. In the hotel lobby, FBI agents watched as Ahmed was given a Qur’an containing documents of code words that signified future meeting times by an FBI collaborator whom Ahmed believed to be an al-Qaeda member. Using the code, Ahmed emailed the FBI undercover agents back and scheduled a meeting in a Northern Virginia hotel for May 15, 2010.³³

At this May meeting, Farooque was introduced to the first of two FBI undercover operatives who posed as an al-Qaeda recruiter. The two conversed in Urdu with all audio and video under surveillance. After Ahmed expressed his desire to kill American troops in Afghanistan, as well as to be martyred, the operative feigned satisfaction, telling Ahmed they could use him over the course of the next six months.³⁴ From Ahmed’s perspective, he had just passed an initial test to graduate to a “trial period” with al-Qaeda.

While this case generated controversy regarding whether the FBI put the Washington, D.C., public in danger, the fact that the FBI knew precisely when the case would be closed and Ahmed arrested speaks to its favor. Quite ingeniously, the operative delineated tasks one-by-one, rather than all at once, to not only limit the chance that Ahmed carried out an attack, but also to maintain the guise of being a clandestine, secretive, and relatively untrusting organization. At this point,

³¹ Gowen and Hsu, “D.C. Metro terror suspect faces hearing.”

³² Finn, Hsu, and Gibson, “Man accused of Metro bomb plot.”

³³ USA v. Farooque Ahmed, “Affidavit in Support of Application for Search Warrant.”

³⁴ USA v. Farooque Ahmed, “Affidavit in Support of Application for Search Warrant.”

it is important to recognize a distinction: while Ahmed himself had the idea to eventually go overseas and fight against U.S. troops, the terrorist plot in this case—although not a *real* plot—was devised by the FBI. However, as I attempt to convey later, the fact that Ahmed did not conceive the original idea does not excuse him from his participation in the case, especially because he began to contribute his own novel ideas for death and destruction as his “trial period” with al-Qaeda progressed.

Ahmed was first tasked with gathering information on the Arlington Cemetery Metro station, which he obtained over the course of two visits on July 7 and July 13, 2010. A week after the second visit, Ahmed revisited the first FBI operative and gave him a thumb-drive that contained video of the Arlington station. Ahmed reported that he used a cell-phone to record the video but merely pretended to be talking on the phone. Again, feigning satisfaction, the undercover agent delineated for Ahmed his next mission: doing the same for two more Metro stations and a hotel. The Metro stations were Court House and Pentagon City, and the hotel was in downtown Washington, D.C. Ahmed affirmed that these targets were all optimal for mass casualties.³⁵

On September 28, 2010, Ahmed again met with the first operative, but this time the second operative was also in attendance. The second FBI agent introduced himself to Ahmed as the first agent’s boss, likely in an attempt to show Ahmed that the mission was progressing more intensively. In a maneuver that added to Ahmed’s already extensive culpability, the second operative asked Ahmed if he knew what organization he was aiding. Ahmed clearly stated in response: al-Qaeda. Next, Ahmed presented the fake al-Qaeda members with a thumb-drive of video from the Court House and Pentagon City Metro stations. At this point, the operatives told him that the three Metro stations on which he had collected information, as well as the hotel he had yet to address, would be the targets of a terrorist attack in 2011.³⁶ Again, we see that the FBI designed the plot, bringing up the problem of entrapment. Some have cried foul about the use of entrapment related to U.S. counterterrorism procedures—law enforcement provoking an illegal act out of a suspect—in this case. However, Ahmed’s actions from this point forward reduce, but do not eliminate, the merit of that argument.³⁷ Upon hearing of the plot, Ahmed began enthusiastically giving suggestions. Among his various proposals were to set off the bombs between 4:00-5:00 pm to ensure mass casualties and to put the bombs in specified, optimal locations within each station. Then, gaining confidence in his standing, Ahmed suggested adding an attack location at Crystal City station and using wheeled suitcases rather than backpacks that the “al-Qaeda” members provided. Virtually positive that none of this would come to fruition, the FBI operatives accepted all of Ahmed’s ideas.³⁸ The entrapment argument loses further steam when considering the *United States v. Russell* (1973) Supreme Court case in which it was decided that the

³⁵ USA v. Farooque Ahmed, “Affidavit in Support of Application for Search Warrant.”

³⁶ USA v. Farooque Ahmed, “Affidavit in Support of Application for Search Warrant.”

³⁷ Eric Schmitt and Charlie Savage, “In U.S. Sting Operations, Questions of Entrapment,” *New York Times*, November 29, 2010.

³⁸ USA v. Farooque Ahmed, “Statement of Facts.”

applicability of entrapment as a defense can only be tested subjectively.³⁹

The conversation then shifted to Ahmed's training with firearms, his desire to participate in jihad abroad, his plans to visit Mecca via the "hajj" pilgrimage, and his intention to finance Mujahedeen in Afghanistan with \$10,000. The FBI agents cited this last aim, financing a U.S. enemy, as one rationale necessitating a warrant to search Ahmed's home.⁴⁰ Importantly, Ahmed's expressed desire to fight in Afghanistan and/or Pakistan demonstrates that he did not plan on martyring himself during this bomb plot. Unbeknownst to him, there were never any bombs in the first place.⁴¹

Finally, the case began to close in around Ahmed in October 2010. After performing surveillance on the Crystal City Metro station—the last of the four to be mapped—Ahmed scheduled a meeting with another person whom he believed to be a member of al-Qaeda. After passing off a thumb-drive with the Crystal City station information and five Metrocards to be used by five al-Qaeda suicide bombers at the five locations on Wednesday, October 27, Ahmed was arrested at 9:40 am.⁴²

Later that day, he appeared before U.S. Magistrate Judge John F. Anderson in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, where he was ordered to be held without bail until a detention hearing on Friday.⁴³ His detention hearing lasted less than two minutes, as Ahmed opted not to contest his pretrial detention.⁴⁴ Ahmed faced the following charges: attempting to provide material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization, collecting information to assist in planning a terrorist attack on a transit facility, and attempting to provide material support to terrorists.⁴⁵ Together, these charges warranted a maximum of 50 years in prison.⁴⁶ However, after entering a guilty plea, Ahmed's sentence was reduced to 23 years in prison followed by 50 years of supervised release.⁴⁷

6. Role of informants

In this case, there were informants in both the traditional and untraditional sense. Without a tip from a confidential informant—who, according to a board member of Farooque's mosque, was likely one of Farooque's fellow congregants⁴⁸—the FBI would not have been able to perform the operation (at least at that time) and mitigate the risk posed by Ahmed. This informant represents a traditional informant. Also vital to the case were confidential informants utilized by the FBI to interact with Ahmed, such as the person who

³⁹ 411 U.S. 423, 93 S. Ct. 1637, 36 L. Ed. 2d 366 (1973)

⁴⁰ USA v. Farooque Ahmed, "Affidavit in Support of Application for Search Warrant."

⁴¹ USA v. Farooque Ahmed, "Statement of Facts."

⁴² USA v. Farooque Ahmed, "Statement of Facts."

⁴³ Finn, Hsu, and Gibson, "Man accused of Metro bomb plot."

⁴⁴ "Accused Plotter of Metro Bombing, Farooque Ahmed, Appears in Court," *FOX Phoenix*, October 29, 2010.

⁴⁵ USA v. Farooque Ahmed, "Indictment," Eastern District of Virginia: Alexandria Division (2010), Case 1:10-cr-00413.

⁴⁶ Jabali-Nash, "Farooque Ahmed Arrested in FBI Sting Operation, Allegedly Plotted to Bomb DC Metro Stations," *CBS News*, October 27, 2010.

⁴⁷ U.S. Department of Justice, "Virginia Man Sentenced to 23 Years."

⁴⁸ Gowen and Hsu, "D.C. Metro terror suspect faces hearing."

gave him the Qur'an in the hotel lobby and the "al-Qaeda" representative with whom he met just before the arrest. Due to the secrecy of the operation, it has not been revealed whether these informants were actually *members* of the FBI, but in either case they certainly played an important role in convincing Ahmed of the operation's legitimacy. Finally, the untraditional "informants" in this case were the two FBI undercover agents, who ran the sting operation and were truly responsible for bringing Ahmed to justice.

However, some people will maintain that the FBI undercover operatives played an unethical role in this case. The key question relates to entrapment and whether Ahmed would have acted the way he did if not for coaxing by law enforcement. At base, critics are correct: Ahmed likely would not have plotted to bomb Metro stations if not for the placement of the idea in his head by the FBI. However, I believe the turning point of the case—where the entrapment argument becomes null and void—to be when Ahmed stopped being merely *reactive* and began formulating *proactive* ideas. Ahmed's suggestion to bomb the Crystal City station and to use wheeled suitcases were his own novel ideas that represented individual, uninfluenced, and calculated thought. That prospective terrorism belonged to him and no one else. Sure, it could be argued that Ahmed was entrapped at first and consequentially lost himself in the mission, giving rise to these novel ideas. But I think a more appropriate explanation is that Ahmed had intentions to commit terrorism all along; he just needed a means to put his plans into actions.

Due to his introverted personality and lack of confidence prior to being approached, I do not believe Ahmed would have sought out al-Qaeda on his own. However, as has been demonstrated through the events of this case, given the opportunity to gain membership to what he thought was truly al-Qaeda, Ahmed would not think twice. Furthermore Ahmed would be a suitable—if not ideal—candidate for the real al-Qaeda due to his deep-seated hatred of the U.S. and strong sentiment of being wronged. Luckily, U.S. law enforcement got to him before he had the actual opportunity to cause real damage.

7. Connections

Although al-Qaeda was not directly involved in this case, the terrorist plot operated around the idea of a "terrorist network." Ahmed, who lived in suburban Virginia with a wife and young son, is not your prototypical terrorist. While it is not necessarily relevant that Ahmed came from a relatively wealthy family that stressed education—as research does not support the notion that terrorists are bred from poverty and a lack of education—one is hard-pressed to find the rationale behind his terrorism due to his seemingly comfortable upbringing. Where were the grievances? Where was the "trigger event?" I would go so far as to say that—prior to coming into contact with radical Islamist doctrine as propagated by the likes of Anwar al-Awlaki—in Ahmed's case, there probably were no grievances or triggers.

However, Ahmed fell prey to al-Qaeda propaganda. Coming from a religious background, Ahmed maintained a strong connection with Islam into his adulthood. His periodic trips to mosque services should have been spiritual,

pacifying trips, as they are for the astronomically large majority of Muslims. Yet, something about Ahmed's personality, perhaps a propensity for anger, made him combust. All it took for him to become radicalized was exposure to marginalizing material—related to U.S. misconduct in Muslim lands—like that preached by the recently-deceased Yemenite cleric al-Awlaki. Perhaps, to a degree, Ahmed already felt socially downtrodden. His case is enigmatic, because there really does not seem to be a “perfect storm” of precursors for terrorism as there often is.

With that said, the ability of al-Qaeda to peak the interest of someone like Farooque Ahmed is a frightening display of its influence. We have come to understand that the “fringes” of society are often susceptible to terrorism, but if recruits can be picked from the middle of the pack, the phenomenon becomes that much more problematic. Let us hope that Ahmed was a “fringe-dweller,” and that there was just more than meets the eye in terms of his marginalization. Ahmed was a best-case scenario for al-Qaeda: a lone wolf operative inspired to violence without *any* risk or actual connection to the prevailing organization.

8. Relation to the Muslim community

In this case, Farooque Ahmed's relationship to the Muslim community was crucial. Without testimony about his behavior at mosque, we would perhaps be left with no understanding about his path to terrorism. In striking contrast to his perception by his neighbors, members of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society Center to Pray virtually formed a consensus opinion about Ahmed's character. He was viewed as disruptive, disrespectful, and menacing, perfectly exemplified by his choice to engage in a fight with an adolescent. In fact, Ahmed was such a frightening figure that one member of the mosque is suspected to have alerted the authorities about his capabilities, spurring the entire investigation. Classified as angry by the deputy Imam, Ahmed just seemed not to fit in at mosque.⁴⁹ Naturally, there was little if any support from his fellow congregants regarding his actions.

9. Depiction by the authorities

The manner in which this case was depicted by the authorities is extremely relevant, since, due to the FBI's role in directing Ahmed's actions, if any violence had actually come to fruition the FBI would have been considered at least partly responsible. In fact, I was shocked not to be able to find *any* commentary on the irresponsibility of law enforcement by allowing this plot to move forward. Sure, Ahmed would have been hard-pressed to carryout any attack on his own, as he was never given access to any real weapons, but his previous attempt to obtain “unspecified materials” does make him seem like a possibly dangerous, unilateral actor. In part, the lack of criticism can be attributed to statements made in the immediate aftermath of the case's revelation when U.S. Assistant Attorney General for National Security David Kris proudly declared, “Farooque Ahmed is accused of plotting with individuals he believed were terrorists to bomb our transit system, but a coordinated law enforcement and intelligence effort was able

⁴⁹ Gowen and Hsu, “D.C. Metro terror suspect faces hearing.”

to thwart his plans.”⁵⁰ The trumping up of the fact that no violence *did* occur, along with emphasis that no weapons were ever truly accessible to Ahmed, may have played roles in decreasing the “what if” questions that would otherwise naturally have surfaced.

10. Coverage by the media

Because this case was under wraps for so long, and especially because the bomb plot did not actually come to fruition, this case received very limited media coverage. As recently discussed, the FBI experienced relatively no backlash for its decision to orchestrate a bomb plot, even if there were no bombs in the first place. In this sense, the media was responsible not to prompt an unnecessary fight. Rather than fixating on what some could perceive as a governmental miscalculation—a tactic the media generally love to trumpet for ratings—the media opted not to frame the sting in a negative light. Without doubt, the media plays a deciding role in how current events are remembered, so had certain outlets wanted to portray the arrest of a would-be terrorist as a risk management debacle rather than as a law enforcement triumph, history may have remembered this saga quite differently.

Coverage of the event was by no means alarmist, as the danger had already subsided, but some people naturally grew fearful over the plot, as reported by media outlets. In a *Huffington Post* article, an interviewee discussed how she would likely ride the Metro less often, if ever, as a result of this plot.⁵¹ Through mere inclusion of that quote, it can be assumed that other people in the metropolitan area reevaluated their own transportation security, but there is no fault to be delineated there. In general, most of the reporting of this case focused on Farooque’s trial, sentencing, and any factors from his past that might have contributed to his desire to join al-Qaeda and wage jihad against Americans.

11. Policing costs

While no figures are readily available, it can be assumed that policing costs were significant in this case. From April to October of 2010, two FBI undercover operatives maintained the illusion that they were members of al-Qaeda. In addition to the payment of both operatives, all involved collaborators, and the support staff that aided the main operation, the FBI had to incur costs to ensure that each “actor” was perceived as authentic-looking, as undercover operatives and collaborators likely had to wear disguises. Additionally, constant, around-the-clock surveillance of Ahmed, which was necessary to ensure that he would not carry out violence on his own, was a costly by-product of the investigation. The case was only very briefly in court. At first Ahmed did not enter a plea at all—leading to him being held without bond.⁵² Soon thereafter, he

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of Justice, “Virginia Man Sentenced to 23 Years.”

⁵¹ Caldwell, “Farooque Ahmed Arrested For Plotting DC Terrorist Attack.”

⁵² MSNBC Staff, “Man charged with D.C.-area subway bomb plot,” MSNBC, October 27, 2010.

shifted his plea to not guilty, but on April 11, 2011 he agreed to plead guilty as part of a plea deal that significantly reduced his sentence.⁵³

12. Relevance to the internet

The internet played a prominent role in the case in several regards. First, Ahmed was able to gain access to Anwar al-Awlaki's sermons. It is more likely that Ahmed sought these sermons out as a consequence of his prior radicalization than that the sermons radicalized him in and of themselves, but there can be no doubt that al-Awlaki's preaching augmented Ahmed's hatred of the U.S. and encouraged him to act violently. However, with that said, law enforcement officials have clarified that Ahmed and al-Awlaki—who was still alive when this case was in motion—never made actual contact.⁵⁴ Furthermore, we can speculate that Ahmed's radicalization—a process believed to have occurred once permanently in the United States—drew roots from jihadist message boards and other tools on the internet to recruit would-be terrorists. Next, email was vital in the undercover operation, as it was the primary means of communication between Ahmed and the two "recruiters" with whom he was dealing. Again, to maintain the illusion of being the clandestine, fail-proof network that al-Qaeda portrays itself to be, the FBI undercover operatives likely would not employ cell phones, which are so easily traceable. Finally, the internet played the important role of harboring the information Ahmed collected. While the FBI undercover operatives need not have actually stored the videos, diagrams, and maps of the Metro stations, they deceived Ahmed into thinking that the thumb-drives he was giving them were actually being put to use. In this sense, the internet helped lure Ahmed into a sense of security that his work was going toward an important, valid mission.

13. Are we safer?

On April 8, 2011, three days before his acceptance of a plea deal and subsequent sentencing, Ahmed made the following statement: "I know that what I did was wrong, and that a significant punishment must and will be imposed for what I did. But no punishment could be greater than the disappointment I already feel for engaging in this conduct, and for letting myself and my family down. I know that my conduct could have endangered many people, and I am happy that nobody was actually injured. I am truly sorry for my conduct, and I especially regret that I have let down my family (particularly my wife and young son), my faith, and my country."⁵⁵ Ahmed's comments are a bit mysterious. Why would someone who already resigned himself to accepting a plea deal, who had so much pent-up anger against the U.S., and who was *willing to die* for his cause in the long run express remorse if he were not truly sorry? Based on this logic, Ahmed

⁵³ Carol Cratty and Jim Barnett, "Guilty plea entered in thwarted Metro station bomb plot," CNN, April 11, 2011.

⁵⁴ Associated Press, "Next Question for FBI in D.C. Jihad Plot: Why?" *Fox News*, October 29, 2010.

⁵⁵ USA v. Farouque Ahmed, "Defendant's Statement Regarding the Offense," Eastern District of Virginia: Alexandria Division (2010), Case 1:10-cr-00413.

truly did see the error of his ways, and it could be argued that we are not all that safer with Ahmed behind bars. Perhaps he simply needed a reality check about the evil of his actions.

However, to the contrary, I believe Ahmed's imprisonment does make us safer. It seems likely that any and all remorse felt by Ahmed stemmed from his coming to an understanding of his family's plight. This realization speaks to Ahmed's humanity, but it does not illustrate his reformation from being a dangerous person. In fact, I think that given the opportunity, Ahmed would likely attempt to strike against the U.S. again—perhaps with more prudence for his family's sake—as his level of virulence and hatred does not subside overnight, or over years, for that matter. Furthermore, as was illustrated by his rapid radicalization, which seemingly occurred without a significant “trigger event,” Ahmed is an unpredictable individual who, in light of his heinous attempted crime, deserves incarceration.

14. Conclusions

The DC-Metro bomb plot is an intriguing case for a number of reasons. First, Farooque Ahmed presents an interesting narrative for an antagonist, as his past does not seem to be filled with the red flags that have come to characterize the modern-day terrorist, and his present—a thirty-four year old man living in suburban Virginia with a wife and son—does not exactly set-off the “terrorist radar” either. However, this case shows that terrorism is not only the tool of perceived “crazies.” In fact, understanding the phenomenon in that manner is not only useless, as it will not help us catch the openly radicalized terrorists, but also detrimental, because it allows a significant amount of would-be terrorists to go undetected.

Next, the case has a degree of controversy because of elements of entrapment and public endangerment. As previously explained, I do not think the FBI's tactics can be classified as entrapment, because Farooque Ahmed demonstrated in the latter part of the investigation that he had his own, novel ideas related to terrorism. While some people have and will continue to cry foul about undercover sting operations like the one employed in this case, I believe this technique is a valuable tool if used on the most dangerous people, as they allow justice to be served *before* innocent lives are taken, not the other way around. Related to public endangerment, I was surprised to see no public outcry about the FBI's actions. To a degree, responsible framing by the media contributed to this lack of upheaval, as refreshingly, news outlets decided to portray this investigation for what it actually was: a triumph against terrorism.

There is a final element to consider, and it deals with the selfishness of Farooque Ahmed—just like countless terrorists before him—in leaving behind his family. Sure, Ahmed may have subscribed to the “higher-calling” theory, but that does not excuse his selfishness in abandoning his wife and son. While he sits in prison for years and years, they will need to find a way to support themselves without him. Surely, Ahmed did not *plan* on going to prison—which we know for a number of reasons, including his stated intention to fight abroad and die a martyr—and his statement regarding the offense suggests remorse, likely due to

his family's inevitable future plight, which may have been impressed upon him by post-arrest meetings with his wife and son. However, as a by-product of the dangerous game he was playing, he was putting the livelihood of his wife and son at risk, and he has no one to blame but himself for their current situation. Our minds cannot be changed that Ahmed's risk was a despicable chance to be taken, but I just hope that future prospective terrorists have the humanity to at least consider their *own* families—if not the families of the innocent people they are about to kill—before making an irreversible mistake.