

### Case 8: Columbus and the Brooklyn Bridge

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Like Jose Padilla (Case 2), Iman Faris is an American who for various reasons linked up with al-Qaeda before 9/11, met Osama bin Laden, and connected to the putative “mastermind” of 9/11, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM). In early 2002, he was sent on a surveillance mission to the United States by KSM, and there seem to be two key episodes on this trip.

First, he met with a couple of friends in August 2002 in a coffee shop near Columbus, Ohio. One of the men, outraged at the US attack on Afghanistan, suggested shooting up a local mall. Faris appears to have suggested that a bomb might be better, and the third man dismissed the idea as “stupid.” That was the Columbus mall plot: there was no followup whatever.

Second, later in 2002, Faris traveled to New York City to scout out possible terrorist targets at the behest of KSM. Although most New Yorkers might proudly insist that their city is fairly festooned with lucrative targets, the only one Faris looked at was the Brooklyn Bridge. He drove over it once, noticed that there were quite a few cops around, thought the support cables too big or difficult to cut through, informed KSM of this profound discovery, and then, his curiosity and/or patience exhausted, drove back to Columbus. That was the Brooklyn Bridge plot: there was no followup whatever.

The police presence at the bridge probably stemmed in part from the testimony-under-torture earlier in 2002 (see Case 2) of the captured al-Qaeda operative, Abu Zubayda, who suggested that al-Qaeda had the Brooklyn Bridge on a target list that also contained the Statute of Liberty and an undifferentiated array of shopping malls, banks, supermarkets, water systems, nuclear plants, and apartment buildings—none of which have actually been struck by any terrorists in the subsequent nine years in the United States, not even in Columbus, Ohio.

Then, in 2003, KSM was himself captured. He quickly fingered Faris as one of his go-to guys, and Faris, already under surveillance, was arrested some days later. In turn, he also soon blabbed, and this spurred on the investigations of his two Columbus coffee shop buddies.

As Drew Herrick suggests, the three do seem in some sense variously have been up to no good, but any danger they presented, particularly within the United States, seems to have been quite limited.

Addendum, February 2013: A book has now been published on this case: Andrew Welsh-Huggins, *Hatred at Home: Al-Qaeda on trial in the American Midwest* (Swallow Press, 2011)

## Case 8: Columbus and the Brooklyn Bridge

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### 1. Overview

In August 2002, three friends, Iyman Faris (a naturalized U.S. citizen), Natadin Abdi (a U.S. immigrant from Somalia), and Christopher Paul (born in the U.S.) met in a coffee shop near Columbus, Ohio. Before 9/11, Faris had spent time at an al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan where he met Osama bin Laden. The other two had had some training at camps in Africa, also before 9/11. In 2002, Faris also met the reputed principal architect of the 9/11 attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM).

Outraged by the American invasion of Afghanistan that had taken place in late 2001, they discussed attacking a local mall. Abdi advocated using automatic weapons like an AK-47 to shoot up the mall, but Faris convinced him that a bomb would be more effective.<sup>1</sup> Paul, far the most technologically sophisticated of the three, dismissed the entire idea as “stupid.” Later there may have been some further highly informal meetings on the issue, but nothing ever really came of the idea. In the end, the planning and the execution of the plot was left to Abdi, who never did much of anything about it.<sup>2</sup>

Later in 2002, Faris traveled to New York City under orders from KSM to survey possible terror targets within the United States.<sup>3</sup> After basic internet research Faris decided on the Brooklyn Bridge as a potential target and believed that “gas torches” could be used to bring the bridge down. However after conducting physical reconnaissance of the bridge (which consisted of driving over it once), Faris concluded that an attack was unlikely to succeed because of the bridge’s structural design and because of the New York Police Department patrols there, and he never sought to acquire the equipment necessary for such an attack.<sup>4</sup> He reported his findings to KSM and then quickly returned to his home in Columbus. However, warrantless wiretaps may have gained knowledge of the plot even before Faris traveled to the Bridge; the NYPD had been alerted of a potential Bridge plot (hence the enhanced patrols), and the FBI was keeping tabs on his whereabouts.<sup>5</sup>

KSM was captured in Pakistan on March 1, 2003, and he fingered Faris who was then visited by the FBI on March 19. Facing charges of providing material support to al-Qaeda, Faris, as part of a plea bargain, worked as an FBI informant for several months in mid-2003.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. v. Abdi, (S.D. OH.), No. 2:04CR88, Opinion and Order, Filed July 23, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> NEFA Foundation, The Columbus Mall Plot, August 2007.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. v. Faris, (E.D. VA), No. 03-189-A, Statement of Facts, Filed June 19, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Lichtblau, “Threats and Responses: Terror; U.S. Cities Al Qaeda in Plot to Destroy Brooklyn Bridge,” *New York Times*, June 20, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> James Risen and Eric Lichtblau, “Bush Lets U.S. Spy on Callers Without Courts,” *New York Times*, December 16, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

It was in this role as an informant that Faris helped lead to the arrest of Abdi.<sup>7</sup> On June 10, 2004 Abdi was indicted and charged with conspiring to provide material support to terrorists, but he was only arrested in November 2003 out of fear that the upcoming holiday season, specifically Black Friday during the Thanksgiving period, might convince him to finally act.<sup>8</sup> On July 31, 2007, Abdi pled guilty and received a ten-year sentence.

Only Paul was actually found to possess bomb-making resources. However, he was not directly involved in any plots inside the United States.<sup>9</sup>

On October 28, 2003 Faris was convicted and sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Both the Brooklyn Bridge and the Columbus plots seem to have been primarily aspirational with little chance of success. Although all three men attended terrorist training camps, Faris never had access to gas torches nor believed that the bridge plot was feasible. Similarly, Abdi did not have any materials to make a bomb and also did not possess any weapons. Moreover, he had reportedly not decided on which mall to target or even conducted basic logistics work.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Nature of the adversary

Faris was born June 4, 1969 in Kashmir, Pakistan. In May 1994, he entered the U.S. and was later granted naturalized citizenship in December 1999.<sup>11</sup> Very little is known about Faris' background before his entrance into the United States. Growing up in Pakistan, he reportedly became friends with an unnamed terrorist in the 1980s but neither prosecutors nor media outlets seemed to have found any indication of radicalization until his visit to an Afghan training camp in 2000.<sup>12</sup>

Sometime during 1994 Faris met Geneva Bowling, and they married in 1995. In the late 1990s, Faris set up permanent residence in Columbus, Ohio, with his wife and took on a job as a truck driver. Attorney General Ashcroft claimed that from the very first moment Faris' job and choice of city was a front.<sup>13</sup> However, there has been no evidence to substantiate this fact. Faris' wife, friends, and neighbors saw no abnormal behavior until after Faris' separation from his wife.<sup>14</sup>

Faris and Bowling had severe marital disputes and at one point Faris was contemplating suicide.<sup>15</sup> In early 2000, Faris' neighbors filed noise complaints but

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. v. Abdi, (S.D. OH.), No. 2:04CR88, Indictment, Filed June 14, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. v. Abdi, Opinion and Order.

<sup>9</sup> NEFA, Columbus Mall Plot.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> This timeline is reconstructed based on Lichtblau 2003; NEFA, Columbus Mall Plot; and GlobalSecurity.Org, "Movements of Iyman Faris," 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Lichtblau 2003; Pierre Thomas, Mary Walsh, and Jason Ryan, "Officials Search for Terrorist Next Door," ABC News, September 8, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> Lichtblau 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas et al. 2003; Daniel Eisenberg, "The Triple Life of a Qaeda Man," *Time*, June 22, 2003.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas et al. 2003; Eisenberg 2003.

this was primarily a product of loud music and not of any intentional malice.<sup>16</sup> A gunshot was also reported but this was found to be from a gun range that Faris' son built in the basement. Perhaps this could indicate some aggressive tendencies but no in-depth analysis has been conducted. In early 2000 Faris and Bowling separated according to their neighbors.

Up until his separation, it seems that Faris was a socially well-connected individual. He maintained good relations with neighbors, co-workers, the local religious community, and his wife. Faris has not been linked to any criminal or drug related activities, and there are no signs of loneliness, unhappiness or humiliation until after his separation.

Later reports indicate that in 2003 Faris was put on antidepressants and received psychological counseling.<sup>17</sup> However, the counselor found no evidence to indicate that Faris was mentally unfit. Furthermore, the timing of the antidepressants and counseling came while Faris was acting as an informant for the FBI and therefore are more likely a result of environmental factors not a preexisting condition.

It is likely the shattering of his social life led him to sever most social connections and begin to withdraw. This is the most likely point of radicalization since he was otherwise economically well off and independently minded. Furthermore, at age 31, Faris was not particularly young or susceptible to indoctrination nor was there any indication that he was a target of such indoctrination.

In late 2000, after his separation, Faris traveled to Afghanistan, a decision that was solely his and not a product of external radicalization. He soon met Osama Bin Laden. In late December 2001, after 9/11, Faris traveled to Karachi, Pakistan, and reportedly helped al-Qaeda operatives illegally obtain airline tickets. In early 2002, Faris met KSM and soon left for the United States in April on his surveillance mission. The Brooklyn Bridge surveillance and the Columbus mall meeting both took place later in 2002.

In his testimony, Faris indicated that his primary motivation was the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.<sup>18</sup> However, this seems unlikely because Faris traveled to an Afghan training camp in 2000 and displayed a willingness to help al-Qaeda in late 2000 and early 2001—for example, to order some needed sleeping bags. At best, the war in Afghanistan (the war in Iraq began only after he was arrested) may have strengthened his interest in attacking the Brooklyn Bridge and the Columbus mall, but it seems clear that he was radicalized before that event took place. Although he likely believes that the Afghanistan war actually did motivate some of his actions, it seems likely that he wanted his actions to be viewed in a politically favorable light rather than as a product of societal disconnect and familial stress.

In terms of capabilities, Faris seems to have been extremely interested in helping al-Qaeda, but lacked any real mental or physical aptitude. His time at the

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<sup>16</sup> Lichtblau 2003; Eisenberg 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Lichtblau 2003.

<sup>18</sup> NEFA Foundation, KSM's Brooklyn Bridge Plot, August 2007.

training camp likely instructed him on asymmetrical techniques and on explosives, but it is unclear how well this information stuck since none of his plots involved any actual expertise other than the Columbus mall plot (which never led to a constructed explosive device or any indication that Faris knew how to make such a device). Upon returning to the U.S. in 2002, Faris was intensely involved in hiking trips with Abdi and Paul but did not demonstrate the same technological or marital arts knowledge that Paul exhibited.<sup>19</sup> Although certainly a willing terrorist it seems unlikely that Faris would have been useful for anything other than brute force attacks or limited logistical support. Even his rather perfunctory assessment of the Brooklyn Bridge seems to indicate a fundamental inability to adapt or plan a legitimately feasible plot.

Little is known of Nuradin Abdi primarily because his plot seems to have been deemed less interesting in both the eyes of the national media and the government. Abdi was born sometime in 1971 in Somalia. In January of 1999 he immigrated to the U.S. However, his immigration information was later found to be fraudulent.<sup>20</sup> On April 27, 1999, he applied for a travel document for Germany and Saudi Arabia. However, once again, he knowingly committed an immigration violation by traveling instead to a terrorist camp in Ethiopia.

Although both the media and government agree that his destination was Ethiopia, there is little to no discussion of the quality of the Ethiopian training camp. It is believed that Islamic rebels ran the camp but connections to al-Qaeda and information about the curriculum are sketchy.<sup>21</sup> In fact, *USA Today* reports that Abdi did not even reach the camp but instead “spent the \$3,000 he had been given in hotels and restaurants.”<sup>22</sup> This claim seems to be fairly plausible since Abdi returned overweight, and at no point did he demonstrate any technological expertise.

In March 2000, he returned to the U.S. using the same fraudulent document and settled down in Columbus, Ohio.<sup>23</sup> Around this time, he owned or managed a cell phone shop and had a family.<sup>24</sup> Aside from this, it is unclear whether Abdi was economically self-sufficient or mentally stable. Given the short timeframe, it seems unlikely that any impetus for radicalization took part while Abdi was in the U.S. (January 1999 to April 1999). A much more plausible scenario is that Abdi was radicalized (either of his own volition or externally) while in Somalia. This seems to be substantiated by Abdi’s fraudulent travel documents that he would have been unable to make on his own. Moreover, given the instability of the area it seems credible that Abdi was young and poor when he was radicalized. However, it is particularly interesting that Abdi attended a training camp only after gaining entry into the U.S. If he was radicalized before

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<sup>19</sup> NEFA, KSM’s Brooklyn Bridge Plot; Eisenberg, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> Michelle Malkin, “America’s Insane asylum for Terrorists,” *Townhall*, 2003; John Ashcroft, “Abdi Indictment Announcement.” June 14, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Jarrett Murphy, “Feds Allege Ohio Mall Terror Plot,” CBS News, June 14, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Willing, “Terrorism suspects often seem far from al-Qaeda’s ‘A’ Team,” *USA Today*. May 14, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *US v. Abdi*, Opinion and Order.

entry why didn't he gain training and then enter the U.S? Traveling to Ethiopia prior to entering the U.S. seems to be a much less risky scenario than leaving the country after only three months. Most likely Abdi's trip to Ethiopia like other elements of his Columbus mall plot was not well thought out. Overall, Abdi's warning signs and point of radicalization are unclear.

It is clear that Abdi seems to exhibit extreme anger towards the U.S. for its foreign policies and for what he saw as its criminal tendencies. According to Faris and email records, Abdi wished to "shoot up" a Columbus mall in response to US military actions (presumably in Somalia and Afghanistan).<sup>25</sup> Moreover, Abdi blatantly disregarded U.S. immigration laws twice and exhibited no inhibitions about killing innocent U.S. citizens. Furthermore, he made 40 phone calls to people associated with terrorist related activities even after the FBI had initially interviewed him.<sup>26</sup> This may indicate the sheer strength of Abdi's motivation or be evidence that he was self-radicalized (presumably if he was coerced, the threat of the FBI and his distance from Somalia would have allowed him the freedom to choose).

In terms of capabilities, Abdi seems to have been rather useless. Emotionally, he seemed overly aggressive and likely was unable to hide his emotions. Furthermore, his lack of creativity (simply shooting up a mall) and his sheer stupidity in contacting known terrorist numbers within a few days of the FBI interrogation seems to demonstrate a lack of forethought. In fact, Abdi had not even surveyed any of the Columbus malls or managed to acquire an AK-47 or any materials for bomb making. This in tandem with his reportedly overweight physique seems to label him a mental and physical liability.<sup>27</sup> All of Abdi's actions seem to demonstrate a strong willingness to conspire but little technical or logistical know-how.

Unlike the other two men, Christopher Paul seems to be highly sophisticated both mentally and physically.<sup>28</sup> Paul had attended an Afghan training camp at one time and was found in possession of several books and other material for bomb making. He routinely did wilderness-training hikes and engaged in marital arts training. However, he is of limited concern here because he had no direct connection either to the Brooklyn Bridge or to the Columbus mall plots. He did however, maintain a close relationship with both Faris and Abdi and therefore could have been a reliable source for funding, training, or other forms of expertise. Paul's contact with the men does not seem to have existed until after the men entered the United States and, presumably, had already been radicalized.

By all accounts the three men maintained a strong friendship. They supplied job references for each other, picked each other up from the airport, slept on each other's couches, etc.

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<sup>25</sup> NEFA, Columbus Mall Plot; U.S. v. Abdi, Opinion and Order

<sup>26</sup> U.S. v. Abdi, Opinion and Order.

<sup>27</sup> Willing 2007.

<sup>28</sup> NEFA, Columbus Mall Plot.

### 3. Motivation

All three men, Faris, Abdi, and Paul stated during trial that the U.S. War on Terror was their primary motivation. In Paul's case this seems to be somewhat more plausible since the majority of his plots came after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. However, it is unlikely that the Afghan war and, certainly not the Iraq war were the key motivations for the bridge or mall plots. Furthermore, for all three men the U.S. war on terror was definitely not the primary, or at any rate the initial, motivation for radicalization.

In the case of Faris, neighbors reported that he did not display any warning signs and was a pleasant enough individual until early 2000 when he and his wife reportedly separated. Prior to the separation, Faris and his wife were reportedly undergoing marital disputes and Faris' mental stability was in question. Shortly after the separation, Faris left for Afghanistan. It seems plausible that Faris' disconnect from his wife and his withdrawal from society prompted his decision to radicalize. Faced with the loss of his family and his former social bonds, Faris likely became emotionally distraught and angry. He then began to search for a target for his anger and a new set of social bonds.

A less likely explanation is that his self-radicalization prompted the marital disputes. This option seems unlikely because Faris is not believed to have had any contact with al-Qaeda central until his visit to Afghanistan in late 2000. Regardless, in either case it is impossible that Faris was motivated by the invasion of Afghanistan since his radicalization and training took place prior to 2001.

However, even if Faris' social upheaval created an identity vacuum whereby he chose to align himself with al-Qaeda, his trial testimony does demonstrate some broader political and ethical commitment: he clearly wants to align his motivation with the perceived injustice of U.S. foreign policy. In this respect, it is possible that Faris wished to shed light on the injustice of U.S. hegemony and simultaneously gain a greater sense of legitimacy and fame. By aligning himself with a broader political and social agenda, rather than individual marginalization, Faris was able to tap into a key support base. This view likely ties back into his apparent social abandonment in early 2000. Furthermore, upon returning to the U.S. Faris developed a very close relationship with Abdi and Paul, both of whom had also radicalized.<sup>29</sup> In this view, Abdi and Paul became a social substitute for the loss of Faris' wife.

In the case of Abdi, an assignment of motivation becomes significantly more speculative. Although his confessed motivation is the U.S. war on terror, this does not explain his fraudulent immigration status and his reported travel to an Ethiopian training camp, both of which took place prior to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. Abdi's social and financial life seems to have been relatively stable while in the United States. Given the instability of Somalia, it is more likely that Abdi was radicalized while he was young boy in the 1980s and early 1990s. This would explain Abdi's choice of an Ethiopian training camp rather than a more publicized Afghanistan camp. Abdi likely knew people within the region and had already been radicalized by them.

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<sup>29</sup> Eisenberg 2003; Lichtblau 2003; NEFA, Columbus Mass Plot.

Abdi's confessed motivation of U.S. foreign policy therefore may primarily be political. Specifically, since the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq did not take place till after his radicalization these motivations are not credible. However, growing up in Somalia may have exposed him to U.S. forces in the region during the Clinton Administration. This coupled with other foreign policy decisions within the Middle East may explain his radicalization or, at the least, the radicalization of those around him in Somalia. Unlike Faris, there is no indication that he was socially ostracized or emotionally distraught prior to exploring terrorism.

#### **4. Goals**

There seems to be no apparent grand goal in either the Brooklyn Bridge or Columbus Mall plot. If you believe that U.S. foreign policy supplied motivation then it can be assumed that Faris and Abdi believed that their attacks would force U.S. force realignment, fulfill a revenge capacity for all the injustices, and/or inspire copycat attacks. If you believe that Faris was seeking social inclusion then it would follow that terrorist plotting and execution was merely a mechanism for building social bonds. In any case, there were no explicit goals involved in the plots.

#### **5. Plans for violence**

There are two drastically different levels of violence and practicality between the two plots. The Brooklyn Bridge plot targeted a national landmark and might have inflicted high causality rates by targeting rush hour traffic. The Columbus mall plot was a low scale plot involving little damage to infrastructure and relatively few casualties.

In late 2002 Faris was tasked with investigating the feasibility of a plot targeting the Brooklyn Bridge. The means of attack appears to have been primarily left up to Faris. After some amount of internet research, he believed that a "gas torch" could be used to cut the suspension cables holding the bridge up. However, upon visiting the bridge Faris believed that the project was infeasible due to the bridge's structural integrity and to the high number of NYPD forces on patrol. He subsequently contacted KSM stating, "the weather is too hot," clearly signaling that the plot would not be possible.

The NYPD itself had earlier been apprised of a potential attack on the bridge and consequently had increased its patrols of the bridge. Furthermore, Police Chief Ray Kelly commissioned a vulnerability assessment of the bridge. According to Dick Morris and Ellen McGann, the assessment indicated that a terrorist could be concealed underneath the bridge and be able to target the intersection of the cables.<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately the report has not been released to the public, but Morris' comments still demand scrutiny. He indicates that the report assumed that an assailant would have access to high temperature torches that were capable of cutting through the support cables. Furthermore, the time required to eventually cut through the supports could be lengthy. In both instances, it seems

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<sup>30</sup> Dick Morris and Eileen McGann, *Fleeced*. New York: Harper, 2008, 51-57.



unlikely that a terrorist could smuggle in a high temperature torch and spend a substantial amount of time weakening the supports without being spotted. More importantly, Morris fails to indicate that Faris could not acquire a simple blowtorch let alone a torch capable of weakening the cables. Even more fundamentally, Faris himself believed that the structural design of the bridge made it impenetrable. Consequently, even if, in theory, a terrorist attack could have been possible, these terrorists had neither the requisite knowledge nor resources to destroy the bridge. However, if the attack had succeeded, the number of casualties involved, the economic ramifications, and the damage to U.S. prestige would likely have been extensive.

If the feasibility of the Brooklyn Bridge plot is in dispute, Faris' dedication is not. At every juncture he seemed ready and willing not only to kill innocent civilians but also take whatever steps were ultimately necessary. It is unclear whether Faris would have advocated suicidal terrorism, but his caution in surveying the bridge and in avoiding a clearly suicidal endeavor at the mall may provide some evidence to the negative. In most respects, it seems that Faris simply chose what he thought was a high level target and had few other considerations.

It is also unclear how well his training mapped onto the Brooklyn Bridge plot. Testimony indicates that Faris attended an Afghani training camp from late 2000 to late 2001 and was educated in asymmetric warfare, explosive devices, and weaponry. However, nowhere is it indicated that he received metal work training or had any prior experience with metallurgy. Furthermore, the extent of Faris' surveying seems to have been simply driving across the bridge. Despite meeting Osama Bin Laden and KSM, it seems unlikely that Faris had any unique qualifications in terms of target surveying or structural engineering.

The Columbus mall plot is even less developed than the bridge plot. The plot seems to stem from an August 2002 meeting between Faris, Abdi and Paul, in Columbus, Ohio. In their conversation Abdi proposed an attack with automatic weapons, Faris believed that a bomb would be preferable, and Paul dismissed the entire idea as "stupid." Whereas Faris at least surveyed a target, Abdi, who supposedly was expected to check into things further, seems to have failed even to conduct basic logistics work: he never picked a target, began to assemble resources for a bomb, or sought to acquire any weapons. In fact, it is unclear when or even if Abdi was planning on doing anything.

The technical feasibility of the plot is not in dispute. Even an attack on a crowded Columbus area mall with a non-automatic weapon could kill several people and instill fear. However, what is in question is the feasibility of Abdi being able to attack a mall with either a bomb or a gun—or to obtain either. He reportedly received training at (or at the very least attended) an Ethiopian based training camp. However, his technical, mental and physical prowess is dubious, and the validity of the Ethiopian training camp experience seems to be in doubt.<sup>31</sup> There is no real discussion of the curriculum or success of the particular camp. Second, at no point did Abdi demonstrate any kind of technical or logistical skill.

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<sup>31</sup> Willing 2007.

He was not found to possess any materials related to bomb making or weaponry. Third, Abdi was physically out of shape, and seems to have been somewhat disparaged by Faris and Paul on this score.<sup>33</sup> Finally, Abdi routinely made amateurish mistakes that allowed the FBI to build a case against him. Overall even if the plot itself was feasible, it seems unlikely Abdi could have ever executed it.

Neither Faris nor Abdi was outwardly religiously fanatical, economically destitute, politically motivated, or particularly young (both were in their early 30s), and neither made their real goals clear while the goals that were made explicit seem implausible. A plausible scenario stems from Max Abrahms' observation that becoming a terrorist is often fundamentally a social endeavor.<sup>32</sup> Faris' social upheaval and marginalization after separating from his wife in 2000 could explain his desire to travel to Afghanistan only a few months later. Furthermore, Faris, Abdi, and Paul all maintained extremely strong friendships while in Columbus. These friendships could represent the key benefit that at least Faris and Abdi derived from a terrorist lifestyle.

There seems to be some evidence indicating that the two men were dedicated. Specifically, both took trips to training camps and established connections with other al-Qaeda operatives. However, Faris did not seem to exhibit much patience in scouting the bridge or in developing the gas torch plot. If anything, he seems to have been extremely impatient and quickly discarded the plan. Nor did he demonstrate any real flexibility or learning.

In Abdi's case there is even less evidence of patience, opportunism, flexibility, or learning. Perhaps his inability to pick a target could be construed as a form of patience but laziness seems to be a more fitting explanation. Furthermore shooting up a Columbus mall does not seem to indicate any real patience or flexibility. If Abdi was to shoot or blow up a mall it seems unlikely that he would ever have a chance to launch a second attack regardless of what he learned. Furthermore, it is also unclear what, if anything, he learned while at the training camp in Ethiopia because he never exhibited any knowledge of bomb making or was found to own any bomb making materials.

## 6. Role of informants

Two informants—of a sort—were involved in the plots. KSM informed on Iyman Faris when “interrogated” after his arrest on March 1, 2003, and Faris subsequently informed on Abdi.

KSM admitted that he met Faris in 2002 and sent him on a scouting mission to the United States.<sup>33</sup> For the most part KSM's role was essential to locating Faris. However, according to conflicting reports, the NSA's warrantless wiretaps may have gained knowledge of the plot even before KSM was arrested: even before Faris traveled to the Brooklyn Bridge, the NYPD had been alerted of

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<sup>32</sup> Max Abrahms, “What Terrorists Really Want: Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy,” *International Security*, Spring 2008.

<sup>33</sup> “Verbatim Transcript of Combatant Status Review Tribunal Hearing for ISN 10024,” U.S. Department of Defense, Revised as of March 15, 2007,

a potential plot there and the FBI was keeping tabs on his whereabouts.<sup>34</sup>

For several months in mid-2003, Faris helped the FBI track terrorist activities. It is widely assumed that he was threatened with enemy combatant status and detention in Guantanamo Bay. He was reportedly held in Quantico, Virginia, and asked to contact all his known conspirators. It is unknown how much information Faris gave the FBI, but government sources indicate that Faris' cooperation helped uncover an entire network. What is clear is that Faris directly led the FBI to Abdi and to the Columbus mall plot. As part of a plea bargain, Faris pled guilty and helped the FBI, in exchange for which he received a 20 year sentence in prison and the promise that his family back in Pakistan would be relocated.<sup>35</sup>

## 7. Connections

Faris' connections to al-Qaeda central are quite clear. In the 1980s in Pakistan, he became friends with a known terrorist operative. However, at that point it is unlikely that Faris was radicalized. In 2000, after his separation from his wife, he traveled to Afghanistan and attended an al-Qaeda training camp. Here he likely met several al-Qaeda operatives and reconnected with his longtime friend. Some sources believe that his friend invited him to Afghanistan while others indicate he contacted his friend for information. Regardless, in late 2000 Faris was introduced to Osama Bin Laden and became heavily involved within the network. In 2002, Faris traveled to Pakistan and was introduced to KSM. Upon returning to the United States, Faris made contact with a Baltimore based terrorist, Majid Khan. It is believed that they had first made contact while in Afghanistan in late 2000.

Describing Faris' plot as part of an operating terrorist network seems disingenuous. Although Faris cultivated contacts with al-Qaeda leadership, he was working primarily on his own. Furthermore, since the plot never materialized it is unclear whether there were other operatives in the area ready and willing to help. Despite having knowledge of several terrorists operating within the U.S. it seems unlikely that any of these people were part of a network with Faris. The closest thing to an actual terrorist network seems to be Faris' interaction with Abdi and Paul.

Abdi's connections to al-Qaeda central are far less direct. He grew up in Somalia and it seems possible, given his young age and the instability and radicalization of the region, that he did meet al-Qaeda or Islamic radicals. Abdi presumably had resource connections with somebody—possibly al-Qaeda—because he entered the U.S. on a fraudulent immigration visa and at no point is there any indication that he had any forgery skills. In April of 1999, Abdi illegally traveled to Ethiopia to attend a training camp. Abdi admitted to a credit card scheme that helped Paul pay for resources for al-Qaeda, but otherwise his connections are doubtful.

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<sup>34</sup> James Risen and Eric Lichtblau, "Bush Lets U.S. Spy on Callers Without Courts," *New York Times*, December 16, 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Eisenberg 2003.

Upon being interrogated by the FBI (but before being actually arrested), Abdi made phone calls to approximately 40 numbers that are linked to terrorist activity. This may constitute network activity, but the only real network that Abdi seems personally to have been involved with is his close friendship with Faris and Paul. The three men routinely went on hiking trips and seemed to have discussed terrorist activity on several occasions. However, since the Columbus mall plot never came anywhere near fruition, it is difficult to discern any other party's involvement. Certainly, at the time of arrest, Abdi seems to have been working alone.

### **8. Relation to the Muslim community**

There is no evidence that links any activity within the Muslim community with either of the two plots. Faris, Abdi, and Paul all attended the same mosque and, given their radicalized outlooks, it seems plausible that they had contacts or supporters within the community.

### **9. Depiction by the authorities**

The Brooklyn Bridge Plot was initially kept secret and only the NYPD was informed of the potential dangers. Since the discovery of the plot involved some combination of NSA warrantless wiretaps and, later, KSM's interrogation, the government did not want to divulge many details. The bridge was closed in March of 2002 until adequate police patrols could be put in place. Once the warrantless wiretaps became public, however, the government used the taps on Faris as the prime example of how they were keeping the country safe. As a natural result of this, the government began to view the plot as a well-organized and potentially disastrous attack on the homeland, and Faris was elevated from a mere truck driver to a key al-Qaeda plant. Attorney General Ashcroft viewed Faris as a highly imbedded and dangerous double agent.

The government's rhetoric seems to be largely overblown. As has been discussed, Faris was clearly highly motivated and without moral qualms but he seemed to lack the necessary skill set to pose a real danger. The NYPD's commissioned study of the bridge's vulnerability assumed a perfect world whereby the terrorist threat had access to all the necessary materials and copious amounts of time. However, Faris was unable or unwilling to acquire even a simple blowtorch and certainly could not disappear for months at a time to work on the project without inviting scrutiny. More fundamentally, Faris was under FBI surveillance when he visited the Brooklyn Bridge in 2002. Thus Faris effectively posed little real danger. However, the case does provide evidence that the intelligence community and domestic police forces worked successfully together to uncover the terrorist plot.

The government's rhetoric in the Columbus mall plot seems to be far more alarmist than the one on the Brooklyn Bridge especially taking into account the plot's lack of materialization. Although there had been no target selection and no acquisition of explosives or guns, the government routinely referred to the plot as an attack on the "heartland" of America. Furthermore, Attorney General Ashcroft focused on Abdi as a key link in a chain of terrorist activity that wants to "hit [the

United States] hard.” However, Abdi’s connection to a broader terrorist network is unclear and his personal aptitude for executing the plot is dubious. Even more fundamentally, it seems unlikely that an attack on a shopping mall even with an explosive device could inflict enough death or economic destruction to be considered “hitting us hard.” The Columbus mall plot seems to be a key instance where the government attempted to elevate the nature of the plot in order to lend credibility to its counterterrorism efforts.

## 10. Coverage by the media

Media coverage of the bridge plot was almost equally split between two narratives. The first narrative viewed the “blowtorch” attack on the bridge as laughable and a clear signal of the degraded quality of al-Qaeda capabilities. This narrative never acknowledged the plausibility of the scenario that was outlined by the NYPD’s commissioned study. Furthermore, many media outlets downplayed the connections between Faris and bin Laden and his time spent in Afghanistan. Overall, this media narrative seems slightly irresponsible and the background pieces focused much less on Iyman Faris’ life in Pakistan and the United States than on the legality of information used to uncover the plot.

The second media narrative was significantly more alarming and focused less on the blowtorch mechanism and more on the target. Furthermore, Faris’ training was overplayed and he was viewed as a dangerous member of a growing threat within America. Given the above assessment of his prowess (or lack thereof) it seems that this narrative is less valid than the first. Furthermore, media coverage downplayed the extent of FBI surveillance of Faris and also downplayed the extent of cooperation between the FBI and NYPD.

Unlike the Brooklyn Bridge plot, the Columbus plot did not capture a national spotlight. Coverage seemed to take on two distinct narratives. The national coverage of the plot, specifically by *USA Today*, downplayed the extent of the plot (if that is even possible) and ridiculed Abdi’s physical and mental capacities.<sup>36</sup> The second narrative, pushed primarily by local papers, highlighted the anger and al-Qaeda connections of Faris, Abdi, and Paul. Local papers were more likely to reference the plot as an attack on the “heartland” or on the average American. Furthermore, no local papers explicitly mentioned that Abdi did not decide on a target or possess any weapons. Responsible coverage would likely have been somewhere between the two narratives. Overall, there was a clear lack of interest in Abdi’s time in Somalia or even his life in Columbus.

## 11. Policing costs

Evidence of the policing costs involved in either plot is not well documented.<sup>37</sup> Neither plot was a very long drawn out affair in terms of surveillance.

Iyman Faris visited the Brooklyn Bridge in late 2002, was detained a few months later, and sentenced on October 28, 2003. There were several agents

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<sup>36</sup> Willing 2007.

<sup>37</sup> U.S. v. Faris, (E.D. VA), No. 03-189-A, Statement of Facts, Filed June 19, 2003.

assigned to the case and Faris was followed to New York by an FBI team. Although Faris pled guilty and signed a plea bargain, he still filed an appeal. The largest costs involved were likely from the NYPD mobilizing police officers and commissioning an engineering firm to study the bridge.

The costs seem to be even lower for the Columbus plot. The initial meeting took place in August 2002 and Abdi was arrested in late 2003, indicted on June 10, 2004, and pled guilty on July 31, 2007. Once again, there were several FBI agents and immigration services involved in the case. However, there seems to have been no extensive surveillance of Abdi other than getting warrants for his phone records.

## **12. Relevance of the internet**

The internet did not play a substantive part in either plot except for basic research purposes and to facilitate communication between Faris and KSM. Upon returning to the U.S., Faris began researching gas torches and the Brooklyn Bridge on the internet.<sup>38</sup> This basic research led him to believe that the Bridge might be a suitable target although basic reconnaissance was to prove otherwise. He then used the internet to inform KSM that “the weather is too hot.” For Abdi and the Columbus mall plot there is no evidence that the internet facilitated him in any way. There is certainly no evidence to support the conclusion that the internet played a role in the self-radicalization of Faris or Abdi.

## **13. Are we safer?**

The simple answer—Sure, why not? In both plots it seems that there was blatant disregard for life and clear terrorist aspirations. Granted, neither Faris nor Abdi strikes me as a particularly adept terrorist mastermind. However, the evidence indicates that both men had received some form of training and were at least loosely connected to al-Qaeda central and other terrorists. Consequently, even if Faris and Abdi were incapable of properly conceptualizing and executing a terrorist attack it is still likely that more intelligent persons could have used them for such a plot.

## **14. Conclusions**

In the end, neither Iyman Faris nor Nuradin Abdi seems to have posed a large risk. The quality of their training is in doubt since at no point did they ever demonstrate any expertise or even basic competence with explosives, asymmetric warfare, or weapons. In many respects, the plots were primarily aspirational rather than credible or operational national security threats. However, given the low policing costs involved and the potential for either Faris or Abdi to give aid to legitimately intelligent terrorists, the decision to arrest both individuals seems valid.

Overall, the sheer lack of credible information known about either individual is particularly startling. Both the government and the media have

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<sup>38</sup> Eisenberg 2003; U.S. v. Faris, (E.D. VA), No. 03-189-A, Statement of Facts, Filed June 19, 2003.

incentives to misrepresent the information and create powerful (but not credible) narratives to placate their respective supporters. In the future, the lack of credible firsthand knowledge will likely represent the key stumbling block in determining either the exact point of radicalization or the underlying motivations behind terrorists operating in the United States.