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Terror Trap: It's Easy for the FBI to Bust Extremist Plans They Help Create

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Jordan Furr and her family were in Bush Intercontinental Airport, just about to board the plane to Toronto when federal agents barreled down the jetway and changed their lives forever.

As one agent threw her husband, Michael Wolfe, against the narrow tunnel's steel wall and slapped on the cuffs, two other agents pulled the couple's infant son out of Furr's arms and grabbed the stroller holding the couple's daughter.

Furr, 22, screamed for her kids as an agent escorted the 23-year-old Wolfe to the gate and out of the terminal, to God knows where. The agents who grabbed the couple's children handed them to Children's Protective Services officials; Furr was handcuffed and escorted through the airport, on full display.

As far as Furr knew, she and Wolfe were going to Turkey to help Syrian refugees fleeing President Bashar al-Asaad's brutal regime. By that time, June 2014, tens of thousands of civilians, including children, had been slaughtered. U.S. officials and aid workers on the ground claimed al-Asaad was using chlorine gas on his own people. Syrians were fleeing by the millions — nearly 1.5 million alone to Turkey, according to the U.N.

But now, with a quick, sinking feeling, Furr knew what had happened. Her family was never meant to make the flight to Toronto and on to Turkey, where they were planning to stay, indefinitely and rent-free, with their wealthy friend Melissa.

Two days earlier, as the family drove from Austin to Houston, Furr asked a question that had been on her mind for some time. What if Melissa and Melissa's husband, Rasheed, the very people who encouraged Furr and Wolfe to sell all their belongings and relocate halfway around the world to assist these refugees, weren't who they said they were? What if Furr and Wolfe were walking into a trap?

Wolfe had reassured her that Rasheed and Melissa were good, godly people. For the past ten months, the North Carolina transplants had been close friends. But even for the sake of argument, Wolfe said, he and Furr weren't doing anything wrong. They weren't breaking any laws.

Furr's support for her husband outweighed her skepticism. Since they had both adopted the Muslim faith two years earlier, she had seen her husband grow into a responsible, confident, empathetic man. He had given up the drugs and crawled out of that hardened, protective shell. She loved him more than ever. But he was still a guy. And Furr knew that sometimes guys have to learn on their own. So she was just going to sit back, keep her mouth closed, and wait for the I-told-you-so moment.

And now here she was, being paraded through the terminal like a circus animal. At least she wasn't wearing her hijab. A petite white woman with strawberry-blond hair, Furr didn't look the part of a stereotypical terror suspect. She was the spectacle, but she wasn't dressed the part.

In an anteroom, separated from her children, Furr was told that Wolfe was being arrested. They didn't say why. For five hours, they grilled her about her husband's intentions. They asked her what she knew. She said she knew about humanitarian aid and refugees. They said she was lying, that there was no way she couldn't have known about what Wolfe was really going to do.

The following day, national headlines announced that the FBI had foiled another terrorist attack. Wolfe was going to Syria for jihad; he had pledged allegiance to ISIS, officials said. He was one of dozens of homegrown "lone wolf" extremists arrested in recent years — a record 56 in 2015 alone — and one of more than 200 who have traveled or attempted to travel abroad to support a terrorist organization, according to FBI officials.

And the problem was purportedly mushrooming: In 2015, FBI Director James Comey stated that the bureau had roughly 900 open investigations of homegrown extremists across the country.

As the prosecutor in Wolfe's case says, "We are in an epidemic situation right now in this country."

But it's unclear how much of the epidemic is of the FBI's making. As is the case with many, if not most, of these arrests, Wolfe's "terrorist" plot was largely instigated and planned by the FBI itself — thus making it easy for agents for thwart.

Civil rights advocates have criticized the use of so-called "preemptive prosecution," accusing the FBI of manufacturing, and then entrapping, criminals — often low-hanging fruit who can be easily swayed — for the sole purpose of inflating statistics and maintaining billions in counterterrorism funding.

But authorities say these measures are vital to national security, and that prosecuting someone after they've already carried out an attack doesn't make anyone safer.

Federal prosecutors have real power over defendants like Wolfe; with enhancements, a violation of the law prohibiting the lending of material support to terrorists can lock a perpetrator away for life. Most often, the accused don't have the means to defend themselves at trial, so they take pleas in exchange for lighter sentencing, and the bulk of whatever evidence prosecutors have against them — if any — is never introduced into court.

In most cases, all the public has to go on is a sufficiently vague arrest warrant and a blustery press release from the U.S. Department of Justice. It does not matter if, like Wolfe, the defendant never expressed any harm or hatred toward Americans, domestically or abroad. If, say, a defendant planned to give $100 and a pair of boots to a guy in Jaysh al-Islam, so that that guy can go fight a guy in Jaysh Tahrir al-Sham, it's still terrorism, and you can still be locked up for a very long time. The scenario's the same if an undercover agent provides the money and boots.

As an added measure to clamp down on the release of any actual information — as was the case in this story — prison officials can deny interview requests under the guise of "security."

With defendants, their families, and many in the Muslim community largely scared into silence, it can be difficult to gauge just how much an undercover operative may have influenced or induced a suspect into a terrorist plot.

What seems evident, though, is that the first steps of Wolfe's journey to that jetway in Houston began when, out of nowhere, two special people who claimed to be Muslim turned up in Austin, looking for friends and a faith-based connection.

And, wanting to be good Muslims, Wolfe and Furr let them into their lives.

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Nearly two years after Wolfe's arrest, it's unclear just what he was planning to do in Syria, and what the United States government prevented from happening.

"I don't have a crystal ball to tell you that," federal prosecutor Gregg Sofer told the Houston Press.
And, he explains, that's sort of the point: The idea is to see what a suspect is capable of and then stop him before he can do it.

The operation was necessary, Sofer explains, because Wolfe's clique "was of great concern to law enforcement here in Austin for a variety of different reasons, and for the public safety, that organization was investigated."

And, after its ten-month sting, the FBI believed that Wolfe was a real threat. An agent's affidavit supporting Wolfe's arrest warrant stated that Wolfe went so far as to join an undercover agent in Cross-Fit workout sessions, a clear sign, in the agent's view, of military training. He had also bought a pair of glasses so that he could see better on the battlefield.

At Wolfe's sentencing, in June 2015, U.S. District Court Judge Sam Sparks voiced his opinion about the FBI's methods: While Wolfe was guilty, Sparks said, "I'm always concerned in these cases as to the role of the confidential informants who guide these people like Mr. Wolfe to conduct what, in all probability, would have never happened in the first place."

The FBI agent's affidavit in support of Wolfe's arrest warrant states that Wolfe referred to Al Qaeda affiliates in Syria as "righteous brothers." It states that Furr said Wolfe was "ready to die for his [religion]…He's ready to die for someone; for something."

But two years earlier, when Wolfe converted to Islam, there did not appear to be any talk about dying. According to those closest to him, that didn't happen until the FBI got involved.

In a letter from prison, Wolfe claims that "the idea for jihad came up gradually," after Rasheed said that he was planning to move to Turkey and then cross into Syria to fight against al-Assad's forces. Soon, Wolfe couldn't resist the cause.

"My reason for this, to fight and possibly die, was for the betterment of my fellow man," he writes. "I wanted to fight against...a government that turned it's guns on it's own men, women, and children [sic]…While our government pussyfooted around the issue, the Syrian people were taking the fight to Bashar's doorstep."

Before then, Wolfe's interest in Islam was strictly life-affirming. It seemed to bring to Wolfe a sense of accountability and direction, and some formal guidance that might have otherwise come from a father. Wolfe's father abandoned him shortly after he was born, moving to Houston and eventually starting a new family.

Growing up, Wolfe had a bit of a chip on his shoulder. When Wolfe was a little boy, his grandmother Jeannie Jaques told him he could give his absent father a nickname.

"He nicknamed him 'Asshole,'" Jaques says. It was the only curse word she allowed in the home.

Wolfe was raised primarily by his grandparents. Jaques says she and her husband, Karl, tried their best to make up for Wolfe's absent father. Sometimes, Wolfe wasn't receptive. He had a bad temper and fell in with a drug-abusing crowd. In 2008, when he was 17, he was charged with pot possession and for shoplifting from Walmart. The following year, he was convicted of assaulting a family member, a misdemeanor. Jaques says the charge stemmed from a row between Wolfe and his mother. Wolfe's mother did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

In high school, Wolfe dated Furr off and on. She went to a different school, and she had difficulties of her own. She spent a lot of time in foster homes, longing for stability. She looked for it in religion. When she was still in her early teens, she lived in a foster home with a Jewish girl, and Furr temporarily embraced that faith.

After high school, Furr's interest in religion seemed to work its way into Wolfe. Furr says Wolfe began to read as much as he could about different religions. Islam was just one of many he looked into. Of course, being only fitfully employed, Wolfe had plenty of time.

He couldn't afford a gym membership, but he found a facility just down the road from his grandparents' home, and a manager there let him work out for free in exchange for odd jobs, Jaques says. Someone there started talking about Islam, and told him about some introductory classes at the North Austin Muslim Community Center. Wolfe and his friend Josh checked it out. Josh eventually stopped going, but Wolfe stuck with it.

"Each time he would go, I could see a difference in Michael," Jaques says. There were no more saggy pants and backwards baseball cap. One day, he asked her if she would buy him a crisp white button-down shirt. Jaques was floored.

The turnaround in attitude and wardrobe was enough for Jaques to overlook the one attribute she didn't care for in her grandson's new devotion. The child simply did not look good with facial hair.

"I don't know where Muhammad came up with, you know, you've gotta have a beard," Jaques says. "But whatever."

Furr recalls, "He was just so wonderful to be around. I just saw a complete 180 in his character. I didn't even know this person was possible in Michael…He was always just such a shell of a person, you know, because he had been hurt so bad."

Jaques says Wolfe's grandfather wasn't crazy about Wolfe's new interest, but, for the most part, it was not an issue. Jaques kept the peace, telling the man, "We still only believe in one god. He just has a different name."

Things changed, Jaques says, when Wolfe kept coming back from classes with two of his fellow Muslim brothers who seemed to keep a tight grip on him. Jaques thought of them as pushy recruiters, not just study buddies. Other recruiters, she says, were even talking to Wolfe's younger brother, Trevor, still in high school.

After a few months, they were joined by a few more men from the mosque, and they'd sit in the living room and watch videos on a laptop.

The FBI affidavit for Wolfe's arrest warrant mentions one of those videos, Syria: Stories of Conquest, which was part of a series called "The Light Revelations." The series seemed to begin benignly enough, with discussions of how scientific discoveries backed up the Koran, before veering off into proof of Illuminati takeovers and shameless ISIS propaganda. In the video cited in the affidavit, ISIS personnel are depicted as part freedom fighters, part Red Cross aid workers, bringing comfort and food to hungry children and toothless old people.

One night, in the kitchen, Wolfe got into a heated argument with his friends Josh and Karl "over, of all things, Jesus Christ," Jaques says.

Wolfe believed that the Koran stated that Jesus was a prophet, not the son of God. Karl and Josh disagreed. Josh took things further, calling Muhammad a pedophile. Wolfe's bad temper came back; he took out his frustration by throwing cans of food around the kitchen. He pulled off his shirt and invited Karl to step outside.

"Sure as shit, they get to the door, Michael goes outside...And Karl just closes the door and walks back in," Jaques says.

Soon after that, his recruiters helped Wolfe move out of his grandparents' house and into a new apartment paid for by the Muslims and their little circle. For about a year, Wolfe did not see his grandparents.

Jaques felt like the recruiters were keeping both Wolfe and Furr away from her.

"That's when I started feeling like it was a cult," she says.

Furr herself wasn't crazy about some of the converts Wolfe seemed drawn to. One in particular seemed a little extreme. Wolfe and Furr met "Ali" and his wife, fellow white converts about the same age, at the mosque one day. (None of Wolfe's friends or family interviewed for this story disclosed "Ali's" name, out of concern that he is still under investigation)

Furr says she and her husband "tried to give them the same beautiful welcome that we had when we came to the community."

Ali was just the type of boisterous convert that raised eyebrows; the kind who insists on blathering on about conflict overseas, and about his dubious understanding of "the J." Jihad. He talked about spreading Shariah law. When brothers like Ali talk about jihad, imams — who are well aware of the potential of FBI informants or undercover agents in their mosque — get nervous. It's the last kind of attention they need.

As Furr explains, "I was told from the day I became Muslim that I should always watch what I say, how I carry myself and what I do around the mosques or around anyone, because...there are several informants in our community."

Guys like Ali were informant-magnets. She still liked him, but she was concerned for him. She knew him as a harmless loudmouth. But other people might not feel the same way.

Furr says, "This brother would talk about sort of more controversial issues at the mosque that you don't talk about, because they have little microphones everywhere and people that are dressed up with...the whole hijab on, that are wired to the teeth, just waiting for you to say something like that."

Ali, she says, became persona non grata among Austin's mainstream Muslim community.

"The imams at the masjid [mosque] were like, 'Dude, don't bring this to my front door...don't mess with my mosque.'"

One imam was so concerned, Furr says, that he wouldn't even speak with Ali. Once, she says, Ali tried to engage the imam, who wouldn't bite. The imam just grabbed a dry-erase marker and wrote on the big whiteboard at the head of the main prayer room, making sure he wrote large enough for the security cameras to see.

"So that way, nothing could be misconstrued," Furr says.

After a while, Furr began to notice that Ali's stink was rubbing off on her and Wolfe. She didn't feel they were as welcome at the masjid anymore. Ali didn't mean to, but he seemed to be alienating this group from the rest of the community. But, to other young, mostly white newcomers, he was incredibly charismatic. He turned a lot of people on to his interpretation of the Koran.

To this day, Furr and other friends of Wolfe's believe that Ali was the FBI's initial target. After all, he was extremely vocal and influential. Court documents indicate that Wolfe was not the FBI's initial target, but do not state who was.

"The FBI put it to me this way," Furr says. "The reason they want to take him out is not in fear that he will hurt anyone particularly, but that he will influence minds so much so that someone may go out and do something."

One day in 2013, after Ali came back from visiting some family in North Carolina, he introduced Wolfe and Furr to some new friends he said he just happened to meet at the airport. Fellow Muslims named Rasheed and Melissa (or, as they're referred to in the FBI affidavit, Undercover Employees 1 and 2). They had all talked on the flight back to Austin. They were new in town and didn't know anyone. They deserved a warm welcome.

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Rasheed looked to be in his mid-30s, a towering, muscular African-American, who said he was a security consultant for military contractors overseas. It paid well. He drove a black Escalade and seemed to have money to burn. He said he was from New Jersey, but he had met his wife, Melissa, in California.

He was a recent convert; Melissa was a previously lapsed Muslim from a wealthy family in Turkey. She didn't have to work. They both traveled a lot; Rasheed disappeared for weeks at a time, often to Jordan, and Melissa spent a lot of time in California caring for an elderly aunt. Or maybe it was a cousin. It wasn't always clear.

They had an immaculate two-bedroom apartment on Riverside, just south of the North Austin Muslim Community Center. Furr noticed that every time they went over for dinner, nothing ever looked out of place. Nothing had moved out of place between visits. It was as if no one ever lived there.

Before long, Rasheed and Melissa were spending time not just with Wolfe and Furr, but with another convert couple, Jason and Rebecca. (This couple asked that their names not be used, so as not to attract further scrutiny from the FBI.) The couples would visit each other's home, staying up until three or four in the morning, drinking coffee, playing games. Rasheed and Wolfe, it turned out, had similar taste in music and movies. They just clicked. At least once a week, the brothers would get together for study sessions; the sisters would hit Target.

Melissa was maybe 30 and beautiful, with flawless skin. When the women got together at someone's house, they'd take off their hijabs and let their hair down. While everyone else's locks were tangled from being scrunched up all day, Melissa's were in mint condition.

Jason said that during the guys' time, Rasheed like to talk about current events. He was always traveling abroad, sometimes going to places suffering heavy conflicts, so he was often interested in various warring factions. He'd toss names out to Wolfe. Often, Jason says, Wolfe would say that he'd been reading up on the groups that Rasheed liked to talk about.

"He would be like, 'Well, these people are freaking crazy,'" Jason says.

Rasheed was a fitness fanatic who liked to invite Wolfe and Wolfe's younger brother, Trevor, over for pizza-and-UFC-match nights. Trevor saw how quickly his brother took to Rasheed. Trevor may have harbored reservations, but it was hard to dog a guy who was into pizza and cage-fighting.

Trevor's issue was the timing of Rasheed's entrée into his and Wolfe's world. Looking back on it now, he believes it happened shortly after one of the strangest encounters he'd had at the masjid. He was a recent convert, brimming with "the pride you take when you feel like you find the truth you've been missing your entire life."

And then one day at prayer, a brother walked up to the Wolfes and introduced himself as a member of the Austin Police Department. The man seemed friendly enough, but then he started commending the brothers on how fine and decent they looked, and what fine police officers they would make. Had they ever considered a career in law enforcement? The more conspiracy-minded of the two, Trevor felt a slight shock.

"When I heard that...my heart dropped, because that's not something anyone would ever ask you normally," Trevor says. "You never have a cop walk up to you and just go, 'Well, wow, you look like a fine person — you ever consider joining the police force?'"

From there, Trevor says, it only got weirder. The guy "immediately started talking about like, you know, 'Do y'all like guns, do y'all like shooting, do y'all like hunting?'" For Trevor, this line of questioning was a bit of a conundrum. As a country boy from Texas, he liked to hunt. "My neck is redder than the back of the sun," he says. But if you're a Muslim who liked to go out into the woods with a rifle — that was different.

Trevor says he never heard anymore from the friendly neighborhood officer, but it was shortly after that that Ali turned up, talking about extremism and "the J," and generally making Trevor uncomfortable. He just didn't want to be around the guy. And then came Rasheed.

"Picture in your mind a six-foot-six or -seven black man with biceps larger than your head, with a build that literally reminds you of a tank, and the first thing he says to you is that he is ex-special forces," Trevor says. "And then come to find out he's one of the nicest people you will ever meet. Or so you think."
When Rasheed asked the Wolfe brothers if they wanted to work out with him, Trevor jumped at the chance. This guy was the definition of cut.

Rasheed took the brothers out to the woods near Walnut Creek and started a workout routine that took Trevor by surprise. He told the Wolfe boys that he wanted to teach them some things he'd learned overseas. Like reconnaissance; like how to best navigate the terrain; like how to make a compass out of twigs and a rock.

While this was going on, Trevor says, Rasheed asked how they would feel in a Red Dawn situation, referring to the movie about enemy forces invading the U.S.

All Trevor could think to say was, "Man, that would fuckin' suck."

But to Rasheed, it was more than just a passing conversation. It seemed like he truly wanted to know how the Wolfes would react to a complete societal collapse. Trevor suddenly realized that Rasheed was teaching them military "bug-out" maneuvers.

"It started to kind of click to me at that point what was going on," Trevor says. "OK, OK, he's got us out in the middle of the forest, he's ex-military, he's talking about foreign invaders. He was trying to get us to say, you know, like, 'We should perform military tactics.' And then I was like: 'Oh my God. Oh shit.'"

Trevor's concerns were only magnified when Rasheed disappeared for weeks at a time without any explanation. On one occasion, Trevor asked Ali where Rasheed had gone. Only after much prodding did Ali relent: Rasheed, he said, had gone to Jordan. When Trevor asked why, Ali said he couldn't tell him.

After that, Trevor kept away from both Rasheed and Ali. Moreover, others in their little group started making noise about Rasheed and Melissa possibly being FBI.

Furr says that Ali became convinced the couple were spies. Ali and another brother came to Furr and Wolfe's home one night, pulled Wolfe out of bed, took him outside, and told him he needed to be careful.

"When my husband came back inside and talked to me, he said he couldn't believe it," Furr recalls. "…He couldn't call this man a liar. He couldn't put this man down."

Wolfe's friend Jason says that the line was drawn one night at study session, when Wolfe stood up and chastised his brothers for "backbiting" — for violating the Koran by calling Rasheed a liar without proof. Wolfe said he had no reason not to trust his brother Rasheed, nor should anyone else.

Jason puts it this way: "Once [Wolfe] stood up in front of everybody and, like, basically proclaimed his trust for this brother and was completely appalled and offended that anybody would think he was a spy, the FBI was like, 'Bingo. Here's our guy.'"

Later, after Wolfe was arrested, Trevor was visited by an FBI agent who broke the news.

Trevor was incredulous. He described his reaction like this: "You're going to tell me that my brother just went out, out of the blue, with his two children and his wife, to a different country to go fight and sacrifice his life?…Something super-wrong has happened, and someone has been tricked very bad."

Trevor had some understanding right away of how much trouble his brother was in, but it didn't really hit Jaques until she visited him in the Caldwell County Jail, in Lockhart, where he was being held after his arrest. Waiting to see her grandson, she had a chance to speak with an attorney from Austin, who was there to visit a client.

"You could tell he was a bigwig, too, just by his boots and his belt buckle and all that shit," Jaques says. The attorney said he wouldn't defend Wolfe for less than $50,000.

"Right then and there I knew we were in deep shit," she says.

Later, Jaques says, an FBI agent told her that things could be much worse. If this had all been real, the agent said, Wolfe would probably be dead now. Simply put, the FBI had saved his life.

"He said as soon as they got to Turkey, they would've been shot and killed," Jaques recalls. "And [Furr] would've been raped and tortured...and I was going, 'Oh my God.' And you know, at a point, he had me believing it. I actually thanked the motherfucker."

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The Richardson-based Muslim Legal Fund of America recommends that people offering tips about possible extremists exercise caution and make sure their own rights are protected.

After 9/11, the rules on how the government can spy on its citizens changed.

The U.S. Attorney General Guidelines that kept domestic surveillance in check were revised to explicitly state that FBI agents were not prohibited from going to mosques to conduct investigations. By 2008, U.S. Attorney General Michael Mukasey's guidelines stated that the FBI's "central mission" was to prevent domestic terrorist acts. Therefore, agents no longer needed "any particular factual predication" to spy on Americans.

As Sofer, the federal prosecutor in Wolfe's case, explains, "Prosecuting a completed terrorist attack is...in some senses…a loss for the government. Our goal is to prevent, not pick up the pieces after someone has successfully harmed American citizens."

He adds, "To the notion that we don't know what these people would do…How many San Bernardinos do we need to see to determine what they're willing to do? That's a case in which clearly people will say that [the] government didn't do enough."

The FBI's newfound focus on counterterrorism was brought to the forefront in large part by a 2011 Mother Jones story describing how "federal law went from a focus on fighting crime to preventing crime." As reporter Trevor Aaronson put it, "Instead of accountants and lawyers cracking crime syndicates, the bureau would focus on Jack Bauer-style operators disrupting terror groups."

Around the same time, a reporter for Wired got a hold of embarrassing FBI documents that seemed to describe an inherent terroristic bent to Islam as a whole.

Reporter Spencer Ackerman turned up training manuals that excerpted the most militant verses of the Koran, identifying them as key "drivers" of the Islamic faith, and buttressed these with truly weird graphs and charts showing how Islam was operating in a sort of primordial, violent stage that Judaism and Christianity had long surpassed. As one graph illustrates, fundamental followers of the Torah and the New Testament started mellowing out by the year 610, while, for believers in the Koran, "this moderating process has not happened."

Bureau officials later said those training materials were only used briefly, and had been discontinued even before they were leaked. For these counterterrorism efforts, the bureau was given billions. This was more than enough to spread around to some 15,000 informants.

Nearly all of the most publicized "terror plots" since 9/11 were designed by FBI operatives. One of the most notorious involved the arrests of four men in 2009 for plotting to bomb synagogues in the Bronx and fire Stinger surface-to-air guided missiles at military cargo planes near an airport in Newburgh, New York.

At trial, it was revealed that the ringleader, a middle-aged anti-Semitic Walmart stocker named James Cromitie, was largely induced by an FBI informant, who provided nonfunctional bombs, and the promise of $250,000 and free luxury vehicles. The informant, Shahed Hussain, was

facing immigration charges for slipping into the U.S. with a fake British passport. Instead of sending him to jail, the FBI sent him to New York mosques to troll for extremists. He was paid $100,000 for his work.

At trial, Judge Collen McMahon found Cromitie guilty, rejecting his claims of entrapment. But she also called his plans “a fantasy terror operation,” saying, “Only the government could have made a ‘terrorist’ out of Mr. Cromitie, whose buffoonery is positively Shakespearean in its scope.”

John Mueller, a Cato Institute fellow and political science professor at Ohio State University, who has written extensively about pre-emptive prosecution, contrasts the FBI’s counterterrorism efforts with how the Secret Service deals with disgruntled yahoos who rant about killing the president.

“They do not insinuate an encouraging informant into the ranter’s company to eventually offer crucial, if bogus, facilitating assistance to the assassination plot,” Mueller wrote in April 2015. “Instead, they pay the person a Meaningful Visit and find that this works rather well as a discussion device...It seems entirely possible that this approach could productively be applied more widely in terrorism cases.”

Of course, some experts argue that lone-wolf terrorists are greater in number, and instead of targeting an individual, they crave a maximum body count. One must only turn to the study of lone-wolf terrorism that George Washington University’s Program on Extremism published in December 2015. The study examined 71 individuals charged “with ISIS-related activities since March 2014.” Fifty-six were arrested in 2015 alone.

In it, Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes state that “ISIS-related mobilization in the United States has been unprecedented. As of the fall of 2015, U.S. authorities speak of some 250 Americans who have traveled or attempted [to travel] to Syria/Iraq to join [ISIS].”

The study does not criticize FBI undercover operations, but suggests that other tactics, such as “intervention to help sway individuals from the path of radicalization,” also might be effective. However, the authors also write that some organizations “would like to implement counter-ISIS messaging online, yet worry that their activities might inadvertently attract the attention of law enforcement.”

The authors specifically relate that “American Muslims consulted for this report expressed willingness to engage ISIS supporters online, yet hesitated to do so for fear of falling onto the FBI’s radar by engaging in dialogue with radicals.”

For many Muslims, the FBI’s interest in what goes on in their mosques and in their communities is a sensitive area. The Press reached out to imams in Austin for their perspective on the use of undercover operatives in their houses of worship, but we didn’t hear back.

Abeer Syed, who attends the North Austin Community Center, where Wolfe and Furr formerly prayed, says that while some imams may be reluctant to speak candidly with reporters, they and others in the community want to educate children and young adults about the dangers of both religious extremists — who target the young and naive both online and in person — and undercover operatives.

"All we can do is inform our community and say, 'Hey, listen, entrapment is real,'" Syed says. "What happens is, they're going to come in to the new converts, and they're going to try to feed them extremist thoughts and see if the new converts, you know, take the bait. Unfortunately, some of them do."

And unfortunately, some religious leaders are so scared of being FBI targets that they do their best to expel the young, misguided converts with extremist bents, when the better solution would be to bring them into the fold and explain how their bizarre interpretations are a perversion of the Koran.

Syed says, "We are aware that we have crazies within our own community; it is not a topic that is ignored…We want our children to come to the mosque regularly to dispel misunderstandings and confusions about [Islam], to give knowledge so that the children know that this is not a[n] Islamic cause…We recognize that there is a problem, just like any other community has a problem…This can be easily fixed if they attend the mosque regularly and integrate into the community."

Syed looks at it as a three-step program, saying, "You need to first educate your kids about the message of love the Koran gives. Second, you need to protect your children from online recruiting. Third, you need to protect your children from entrapment cases, because it's real."

Syed describes her mosque's relationship with the FBI as a "one-way street." Agents secretly attend mosques to spy on congregants, but unlike other law enforcement personnel in Austin, they won't give talks or talk about extremism in public.

The FBI appears to prefer snitch-oriented communication, rather than open dialogue. Recently, the bureau launched a fancy online tutorial to help high schoolers learn to identify — and turn in — "extremists." Titled "Don't Be a Puppet," it's both an educational and a fun way to turn in a suspected terrorist: The user clicks on a series of boxes with titles like "What is Violent Extremism?" and "Who Do Violent Extremists Affect?"
"Free the puppet in each section and make all of the boxes turn white," the web page states. "Then you will earn an FBI certificate."

Every year, the North Austin Muslim Community Center hosts a Ramadan open house and invites members of the FBI and other authorities, Syed says. Cops have spoken. Firefighters, too.

“We’ve only had one FBI agent show up one time, and I want to say that was like three years ago,” Syed says. “And he did not speak at the event.”

This would not surprise Charles Swift, attorney and director of the Richardson-based Constitutional Law Center for Muslims in America, who says that in Texas, the FBI has “one community liaison agent who is responsible for most of Texas and a large part of Oklahoma,” but at least 50 operational agents working on counter-terrorism working out of the Houston, Austin, Plano, and Dallas-Fort Worth field offices.

Swift calls this dichotomy the bureau’s twin programs of “show and dough.”

“For show, the FBI community liaison officer tells the community leaders that the FBI wants to work with the community to counter violent extremism,” Swift says via email. “At the same time, the operational agents are going for the dough by inserting informants into the community with directions to recruit anyone they can to violent extremism. When the operational agents succeed in overcoming the efforts of the community, the story is the FBI stopped another terrorist attack, and that is what gets the dough.”

Instead of catching an actual terrorist, Swift argues, the tactic just drives a wedge between law enforcement and mainstream Muslims.

“The successful terrorist does not talk to anyone,” Swift says. “They read the papers, and they know how the FBI operates. Not only does the FBI not catch these lone [wolves], they admit they have little chance of ever doing so. Instead, the FBI continues to catch the stupid and misguided — who were not a threat and could have easily turned away from terrorism with help. All this does is [alienate] a community and further educate the real person who’s going to attack you. Brilliant.”

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According to Wolfe’s friend Jason, Rasheed and Melissa repeatedly told Wolfe and Furr that things would be better for them in a majority Muslim community. Wolfe’s criminal record would not matter there, they said. He could find steady work.

“They’ll realize that you’re not that same person that you were,” Jason says the couple told Wolfe. And they could live with Melissa’s family.

Jason says it was Rasheed’s idea for Wolfe to use the family’s tax refund to subsidize travel costs. Rasheed seemed to have an answer for everything. Looking back on it now, Jason’s wife, Rebecca, remarks on how sincerely Rasheed and Melissa came across in wanting the best for their friends.

“It could not have been all fake,” she says. She remembers one time when Rasheed had to go out of town as usual, “and he picked up one of [Wolfe’s] kids, and he was hugging the kids and then started to cry….He seemed very genuine, like he genuinely cared about the family. Now, it kind of makes me sick to my stomach.”

As it got closer to the departure date, Rasheed and Melissa weren’t around as much. Rebecca says Melissa would never return her texts, but she’d always respond to Furr. And always from a different number.

Rebecca and Furr now think Melissa’s purpose was to keep the women distracted while Rasheed plied the initial target, and then Wolfe. The more one-on-one time Rasheed had with Wolfe, the more isolated he could get him, the more he could influence him, they feel. Plus, it would be less suspicious for a couple to work their way into a social group and build trust than a single man.

This alone time — be it working out, watching UFC, or talking about the Koran — cemented the bond between target and agent. Furr noticed that nearly every time Wolfe returned from his guy-time with Rasheed, he would be talking about “the J.”

Furr says of her husband, “This is a guy who didn’t have a dad, who barely had a mom, who was just looking for something to call home. Looking for friends, looking for a new way of life, looking for a way to provide a life for me and our children together, and wanting to get away from dumb kid stuff. So of course, he latched onto a 30-year-old man [sic] who was interested in all the same things as him, all of a sudden, coincidentally, liked all the same movies, music, every single thing down to the T.”

The problem was, the couple didn’t have the money to follow Rasheed’s plan. At the time, Wolfe was unemployed, and Furr worked as a home health-care assistant. They sold everything they owned and used their tax refund to buy the plane ticket and passports. Wolfe even volunteered to be a guinea pig for a medical study to further stretch the family’s budget. The saving grace was that they believed they had a free place to stay in Turkey — a nonexistent home promised by one of the two undercover agents working Wolfe’s family.

The FBI affidavit attached to Wolfe’s arrest warrant states that nearly up until the day of departure, in June 2014, Wolfe harbored reservations. He “struggled with whether to stay or go.” He was concerned about in-fighting among the groups in Syria, among other things.

Rasheed suggested that Wolfe man up, telling him, “We are not going for a holiday,” the affidavit states.

Rasheed also suggested a sort of fraternity pledge-week program: If Wolfe at least flew to Turkey, he would be close enough to examine the various groups himself and figure out which one was best for him. The bottom line was, Wolfe had to decide quickly — if he waited too long, he wouldn’t be able to refund the family’s tickets.

Sofer, the prosecutor, says, “Mr. Wolfe signed up for this. Nobody put his arm behind his back. Nobody put a gun to his head. This was, at the time, something that he wanted to do, and, in fact, he took tremendous steps to do that.”

And, Sofer adds, “What the United States is most concerned about is these people coming back. Now you have the United States passport. Now you’ve engaged in the brutal violence that’s taking place overseas, receive[d] training from these organizations, and come back into the United States. That is a nightmare for us…for the citizens of Austin, for the citizens of the country.”

Those closest to Wolfe say such a scenario was never in the cards. And domestic terrorism did not seem to be part of Rasheed’s sales pitch. But somewhere along the way, she says, lines may have gotten blurred. Rasheed hammered home the awfulness of Muslim brothers — children, even — being slaughtered every day, and how they needed more than just blankets and food.

“The way that it was all played out, and the way that it was put into our hands, was, ‘You need to get your ass up, get over there and help these people,’” Furr says. Rasheed said he was only saying what the Koran demanded.

Furr says Wolfe may have thought “the biggest part of being a man was to go over there and physically defend people and help them, and help lead this revolution, which in that time…wasn’t the evolution of ISIS; it was the revoluition of the people, you know. The revolution of the oppressed.”

She adds that every time she went to Rasheed with concerns about things that she’d read about this budding ISIS movement, that maybe they weren’t fighting for freedom, she was rebuffed. She wanted to wait and see how things played out. Furr says that when she came to Rasheed and Melissa about the subject of medical care — what might happen if one of the kids got sick over there — they got a call from a family, supposedly in Turkey, who lived near Melissa’s relatives. The dad was a doctor. Top-notch medical care would not be an issue, he said.

Wolfe, Furr says, was particularly appalled at the idea of Muslims killing Muslims. He did not want to be involved in any kind of extremist, territorial squabble. This hesitancy, Furr claims, only made Rasheed ramp up the rhetoric.

“The reason why Rasheed was saying ‘Push, push, we need to do this now,’ and the reason we didn’t put it off for another year,” she says, “was because he said ISIS is starting to get a lot of bad flack, and we need to get over there...so we can start to make their name better.”

It seemed to work.

In a letter to the Press, Wolfe writes, “The fact that I [chose] to join the Islamic State is almost irrealevent in this issue [sic]. At the time, they were the most humble and inviting of all the groups in Syria. This was before all the in-fighting began to take place. I explained to Rasheed

that I wanted no part in the pointless killing. My only goal and intent was to fight the Syrian government. Not the Syrian people, not the American people. The Tyranical Syrian Government [sic].”

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In a faint phone connection from Pollock Federal Prison, near Alexandria, Louisiana, Wolfe only has a few minutes to answer questions.

It is, by design, an inconvenient way to gather information. Because the prison continually denies media requests, Wolfe has been relegated to a bit player in his own story.

Was he going to Turkey or Syria to conduct “violent jihad,” as the government says? Was he going there to help ISIS expand the caliphate?

“Islam is not spread by the sword, so never once in my mind did I agree or accept the fact that I’m going over [t]here to force people out of their house and home in order to accept Islam or spread Islam by violence,” Wolfe says in a soft-spoken voice. “In my mind, it was always that there are Muslims...over there who are being persecuted, and they need to be helped.”

He adds, “Anybody, whether they’re Muslim or not, comes to you for aid and assistance — if they come to you for protection, you have to give it to them, whether they be Christian or Jew or whatever…”
If things go as planned, Wolfe will remain in prison until 2022. His children will be nine and eight when he’s released.

Furr has been scrambling to stay afloat. She says she’s lost four jobs since Wolfe’s arrest. She stopped wearing her hijab to work, to cut down on the attention, but it never took long for a new employer to Google her.

“There may have been a flaw in my husband’s thinking at the time,” she says. “And there may have been a time where he wanted to go across seas and help people that were getting killed by their government. But…I did not — nor did he — ever understand or think that it could ever come to this…that your own government would do this to you.”