

# Eerie similarities in Portland, Baltimore bombing suspects

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PORTLAND, Ore. (RNS) On Nov. 27, a young Muslim named Antonio Martinez phoned a friend in a panic.

The two men had spent weeks planning to bomb a military recruiting office in suburban Baltimore, the government alleges. And now there was news that the FBI -- using undercover operatives -- had arrested a teenager in the attempted bombing of Portland's Christmas tree lighting ceremony.

Now an agitated Martinez, who went by the name Muhammad Hussain, was having doubts about an Afghani man who had joined their scheme.

"I'm not falling for no b.s.," Martinez told his friend.

But it appears he did.

The friend Martinez phoned was an FBI informant, and the "Afghani brother" -- who eventually presented Martinez with a fake but realistic-looking explosive to cement the government sting -- was an FBI agent.

The 21-year-old Martinez was arrested Dec. 8 after he pressed the

buttons of a cell phone to ignite the harmless "bomb" inside an SUV parked at a military recruitment center.

The government's cases against Martinez and Mohamed Osman Mohamud, the 19-year-old student accused of trying to kill Christmas revelers in Portland the day after Thanksgiving, are part of a spike in home-grown terrorist attempts brought to light in the last year.

The unrelated plots in Portland and Baltimore were allegedly put together simultaneously, 2,600 miles apart, by two men with astonishing similarities:

Both are foreign-born, reportedly from good families concerned about their radical beliefs. Both are enthusiasts of Internet sites devoted to jihad, and both cultivated beliefs that the United States is an enemy of Islam. Both men identified their own bombing targets and turned down multiple offers to back out of their plans, according to FBI affidavits.

The two cases, made public in the space of 12 days, join three others in recent years in which defendants were caught in elaborate bomb-plot stings arranged by federal agents, said Karen J. Greenberg, executive director of the Center on Law and Security at New York University.

"There's only a handful of these cases, but they are more frequent now than they have been in the past," Greenberg said. "They're more frequent because this is a strategy the FBI set upon years ago -- and it's taken them awhile to come to fruition."

Across the nation, legal minds have debated whether such stings prevent terrorist acts or persuade young men to act on violent impulses.

But one thing is certain about Mohamud and Martinez: Both men spent a lot of time talking about jihadi violence.

The cases against both men began, in part, on the Internet, where they expressed fanatical views about holy war. Government prosecutors are expected to use their exhortations to battle against possible entrapment defenses, showing that their suspects had predispositions toward violence before undercover FBI operatives ever met them.

Last year, according to the government, Mohamud wrote an article for the online publication Jihad Recollections offering preparation tips for jihadists. He pointed out that Muslims engaging in holy war are obligated to physically prepare "in order to damage the enemies of Allah as much as possible."

On the afternoon of Sept. 29, Martinez -- using creative spelling on his Muhammad Hussain Facebook account -- wrote, "the sword is cummin the reign of oppression is about 2 cease." He followed up two days later with this: "Any 1 who opposes ALLAH and HIS Prophet Peace.Be.Upon.Him I hate u with all my heart."

An undercover informant working for the FBI soon drew the bureau's attention to Martinez's Facebook comments. He struck up conversations with Martinez through the social networking site. By Oct. 22, the government snitch was reporting to his handlers that Martinez had thought about attacking Army recruiting centers.

"He indicated that if the military continued to kill their Muslim brothers and sisters, they would need to expand their operation by killing U.S. Army personnel where they live," according to the FBI's criminal complaint affidavit. "He stated that jihad is not only in Afghanistan or Pakistan, but also in the United States."

The FBI document notes that Martinez introduced the informant to at least three different people he thought could be recruited into their plot, and all three turned him down. So the FBI sent in one of its own.

On Nov. 26, as Martinez and the government's two undercover operatives made plans for the attack on the recruiting center, the FBI in Portland arrested Mohamud in the alleged tree-lighting bomb plot.

News of the Portland arrest reached Martinez the following day in Baltimore. He met with the undercover FBI informant and told him he needed to know more about their Afghani friend. But it wasn't long, the government alleges, before Martinez told the informant he was ready to go ahead with the bombing.

The bureau apparently wanted to set the hook deeper.

The informant told Martinez that their Afghani friend was unwilling to meet with them because he was afraid they were setting up him. When the informant asked what Martinez was going to say to their friend, Martinez replied that he would say they knew what happened to their brother in Oregon, and that they "don't work for those people."

When the three men met, according to the affidavit, the Afghani contact agreed to take part in the bombing and offered Martinez the chance to back out. But the young man was resolute.

"The path I have chosen," he said, his voice recorded by the FBI, "is jihad."