

Terrorism case comes together against Muslim-American 'wannabomber'

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PORTLAND, Ore. (RNS) A year ago, a tall, skinny teen named Mohamed Mohamud stepped out of an SUV just north of Portland's Union Station. There, according to the FBI, the Somali-born American punched 10 digits into a cell phone believing it would ignite a vanload of explosives 16 blocks away.

The van was parked on the southeast corner of Pioneer Courthouse Square on the night of Nov. 26, 2010. Out on the wet bricks, thousands of bundled-up revelers waited for the lighting of the city's 75-foot Christmas tree.

Twenty minutes before the lights sparkled to life, the teen known to friends as "Mo" pushed the phone's send button to detonate the explosives, the FBI alleges. Mohamud heard no blast, only the sudden footsteps of federal agents.

The 19-year-old became one of America's accused "wannabombers." The bomb he allegedly tried to ignite was a harmless fake rigged by the FBI and presented to him by undercover operatives posing as Islamic terrorists. Their suspect, charged with attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction, was part of a series of FBI terrorism stings since 9/11.

Government officials have praised the stings as a means of preventing terrorists from harming people on U.S. soil. In some cases, the FBI has supplied suspects with money, transportation and realistic weapons -- including surface-to-air missiles.

Defense lawyers, including Mohamud's, argue that the operations amount to illegal entrapment. Mohamud became the 14th and youngest suspect to mount an entrapment defense in one of the FBI's stings. The 13 men who previously argued

entrapment have been tried, found guilty and sent to prison for terms ranging from six years to life.

Mohamud's trial is set for May 15.

Prosecutors and defense lawyers haven't talked publicly about the Mohamud case since a few days after his arrest. But their arguments over the release of thousands of pages of evidence -- some classified -- and surveillance files foreshadow a lively trial.

Mohamud's lawyers accuse the FBI of tailing their client, a vulnerable teen with no criminal record, perhaps before he turned 18. Then, they say, the bureau loosed sophisticated operatives on their client and coaxed him into a crime he never would have committed on his own.

Defense lawyers allege that the operatives, well-versed in psychological techniques to gain Mohamud's "compliance," cozied up to him with a plan. The operatives, they wrote, told Mohamud he'd been hand-picked, and they gave him \$2,810 to buy bomb parts and rent a hideout. They also assured him they would sneak him out of the country after the bombing.

Prosecutors say the FBI grew suspicious of Mohamud after learning that a friend of his in the northwest frontier of Pakistan -- a known training ground for terrorists -- had emailed him an apparent invitation to join him. Their court filings also allege that Mohamud wrote articles advocating holy war, which were published in the online publication Jihad Recollections.

They argue that Mohamud was the first to bring up the idea of a bombing, picked Pioneer Courthouse Square as the target and gave a pre-bombing speech in which he criticized his parents for holding him back from jihad. Finally, prosecutors allege, Mohamud eagerly dialed a cell phone number hoping for bloodshed.

Mohamud was in his late teens when his dad, Intel engineer Osman Barre, took concerns about his son to the FBI. But that meeting -- and the year it occurred -- haven't been disclosed in a public case file now 558 pages thick.

Mohamud's defense team has suggested that the FBI might have begun eavesdropping on their client in March 2008, when he was 17.

The defense also pointed out that FBI agents were listening in when state police questioned him in 2009 about a Halloween date-rape accusation at Oregon State University. To prove his innocence (he was soon exonerated), Mohamud took a polygraph exam and let police copy data from his computer and cell phone.

FBI agents weren't involved in the campus case. But they obtained a copy of Mohamud's computer hard drive and three pages of information from his cell phone, court records show. One week later, according to the defense, an undercover FBI agent identified in court papers as "Bill Smith" emailed Mohamud and solicited his participation in violence against the West.

Government prosecutors say the FBI's sting took form in June 2010, when Mohamud tried to board a flight to Alaska for a summer job and learned he was on the no-fly list. The FBI soon interviewed Mohamud, who told agents he had previously planned to fly to Yemen to visit a friend, who later turned up in Pakistan.

A little more than a week later, an FBI operative posing as an associate of Mohamud's friend, sent him an email. The two men agreed to meet in Portland on July 30. There, prosecutors allege, Mohamud first brought up the subject of a car bombing.

Mohamud's defense strategy might be broader than entrapment.

Jail visitation records obtained by The Oregonian show that three potential defense experts have met with Mohamud. Each could offer unique insights about his Muslim identity and childhood in war-torn Somalia.

Dr. Dave Kinzie, an Oregon Health & Science University psychiatrist, began meeting with Mohamud last May. Kinzie, an expert in post-traumatic stress disorder, has studied refugees struggling with memories of war in such countries as Somalia, where Mohamud was born in 1991. He declined to discuss his visits with Mohamud.

Dirgham H. Sbait, a Portland State University professor who holds a Ph.D. in Arabic literature, began visiting Mohamud in July. Sbait acknowledged he's helping Mohamud's defense with Arabic language assistance, but he declined to elaborate.

A man identified as Jeff Eamon met with Mohamud in September. Eamon could not be reached for comment. But online citations credited to a man by that name show he published papers on the impact of anti-terrorist financing policies on Islamic

charities and the reshaping of Muslim identity.

Mohamud moved last June from a corner cell on the fourth floor of the Justice Center Jail, where he spent nearly seven months being protected from other inmates. He now lives in a less restrictive unit, where he socializes with fellow prisoners, takes walks and watches TV.

"For his long-term health, I needed to get him out of there," said Mike Shults, chief deputy of corrections for the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office. "It's never good to isolate somebody for such a long period."

Mohamud's new cell sits about 400 yards from Pioneer Courthouse Square.