

Oregon mosque under FBI scrutiny says it's being pushed to adopt Americanized Islam

by [Helen Jung](#)

June 15, 2012

c. 2012 Religion News Service PORTLAND, Ore. (RNS) On a bright April afternoon, hundreds of worshippers spilled into a Portland parking lot, exchanging hugs and handshakes after the weekly sermon. Children scampered around the property, bordered by a white picket fence. The man who has guided the congregation for more than a decade greeted the faithful.

The scene could be from any Sunday in America. Except this one unfolds on a Friday, among a crowd of U.S. and foreign-born Muslims and local converts. The women, in full-length dresses and headscarves, emerge from a side door while the men, in robes or casual wear, exit through the front.

There's one more distinction: At Masjed As-Saber, Oregon's largest mosque, the people sense that God isn't the only one scrutinizing their spirituality.

In the past two years, the FBI has placed at least five men with affiliations to the mosque, including its longtime religious leader, on the nation's no-fly list, a roster of suspected terrorists barred from flying in the United States. None has been charged with a terrorism-related offense, and federal officials haven't told them why they're on the list.

The unexplained actions are aggravating the FBI's already poor relationship with the mosque and fueling fear and frustration among Muslims that their house of worship appears to be once again in the government's cross hairs.

"It's not that we're doing anything wrong," said Jesse Day, who converted to Islam two years ago and regularly attends the Friday services. But like many others at the mosque who flinch at the sight of a camera and suspect an informant moves among

them, he worries.

"There's this sense of nervousness. ... No one knows who's secretly the FBI," he said.

The FBI's top official in Portland said the agency doesn't go after people based on their religion, ethnicity or where they pray. "Nobody should be living in fear or concerned about random targeting by the FBI," said Special Agent in Charge Gregory Fowler.

But he wouldn't comment about any of the local men detained by the FBI or respond to their allegations that authorities questioned them about the mosque and the imam and proposed that they become informants.

Mosques across the country are under close watch by local and federal authorities. In New York, police have conducted widespread surveillance of Muslim communities, even recording license plates of cars at mosques. In Southern California, the FBI is dealing with fallout from a claim by a former informant who says the FBI coached him to talk of violence to incite other Muslims at his mosque into terrorism-related conversations.

In Oregon, Masjed As-Saber stands out for its traditional focus and charismatic imam, who urges worshippers to stay true to strict Islamic teachings, down to the conviction that men and women shouldn't trim their eyebrows. The imam himself, Sheikh Mohamed Kariye, has been at the center of an FBI investigation. He also is one of 15 men suing the FBI over the constitutionality of the no-fly list.

With little information from the FBI, many at the mosque suspect the government is trying to harass people into a more westernized Islam, said Tugrul Keskin, who attends the mosque and is an assistant professor of international and Middle East studies at Portland State University.

"They are trying to transform them into something that's not Muslim," Keskin said. "As-Saber is a true representation of Islam. (The government has) to accept who Muslims are."

A two-story concrete building with pink trim and a modest minaret, Masjed As-Saber sits on a hill in a neighborhood of single-family homes and apartment complexes.

The Sunni mosque, whose name means "patience," opened in its current location in 1998 and serves as many as 500 people at peak times. Donations collected over

more than 10 years covered the construction costs. The mosque also requests weekly donations of \$3 a person for operations and solicits additional contributions for building improvements.

The mosque serves as a gathering place for lectures, social events, pingpong games, study circles and weddings. It holds an open house for neighbors each year before the holy month of Ramadan and hosts students from area colleges who want to learn about Islam.

But its primary role is as a place of worship with the state's only full-time paid imam. Kariye draws hundreds to the weekly Friday service, which often is so packed that people overflow into the mosque's lobby, hallways and library to listen to his sermon on speakers.

It is a calling that Kariye, 50, recognized as a child, growing up in Somalia. Under the guidance of his father, also an imam, Kariye studied Arabic and Islam from a young age.

Kariye remembers a pivotal moment when he was 13 or 14. His father stood at the front of the room, his back to the congregation as is customary during prayers. About 10,000 people stood behind him.

"When you see your father leading prayers and giving (a) sermon to this large audience -- I was very motivated to follow the right path," Kariye said.

He came to Portland in 1982, leaving Somalia, which was in the grips of political unrest that included harassment of Islamic scholars. A U.S. citizen since 1998, he became the imam at Masjed As-Saber in 1999.

His rise has not gone unnoticed by the FBI. In September 2002, authorities arrested Kariye at Portland International Airport as he and family members prepared to fly to Dubai. He was charged the next day with Social Security fraud, but his arrest by the FBI-led Joint Terrorism Task Force signaled a more ominous suspicion.

The arrest was unusual. A federal prosecutor successfully argued to hold Kariye without bail, saying a customs official at the airport had found traces of TNT on his bags. Tests two weeks later concluded the initial findings were wrong and Kariye was released the following month.

Kariye pleaded guilty six months later to understating his income to qualify for Oregon Health Plan benefits and using a Social Security card with a false birth date to obtain the benefits. A judge sentenced him to probation and he paid \$6,000 in fines and restitution.

But that didn't end the FBI's interest. An affidavit in August 2003 revealed that agents believed Kariye financially supported a group of Muslims -- known as the Portland Seven -- who had tried to reach Afghanistan to fight for the Taliban in September 2001. Most had regularly prayed at Masjed As-Saber and were turned in by an FBI informant at the mosque who recorded hours of conversations with two primary defendants.

Kariye was never charged. The FBI affidavit stated the informant failed to record a key conversation that allegedly described the imam's support.

Then in March 2010, Kariye tried to board a flight to Dubai to visit his daughter, but was blocked by an airport official who told him he was on a government watch list, according to the lawsuit challenging the no-fly list.

In the past year, four men who have or still regularly attend Masjed As-Saber have found themselves on the no-fly list as well: Michael Migliore, Jamal Tarhuni, Mustafa Elogbi and Yonas Fikre.

All said they were asked about their faith. In some cases, FBI agents seemed to suggest that being devout was a sign of extremism, they said. At least two said they were asked to spy at the mosque.

Each Friday afternoon, after a short call to prayer, Kariye steps to a microphone to speak to the hundreds who come to hear him.

First in Arabic and then in English, his sermons often reinforce a message of devotion to Islam amid a culture that reveres wealth, career and material goods as signs of success. He reminds people that their actions in this life will be considered when they face God on judgment day.

"Allah gave you the knowledge," he said at a recent address. "Allah showed you the right path. But you have to stay on the road."

Kariye also touches on current events, telling worshippers of a video clip circulating on the Internet. The clip, he explains, shows Syrian soldiers burying a man alive

because he wouldn't renounce Allah and pledge devotion to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as the only God. Kariye criticized those who were "raising the banner of Islam" while committing atrocities.

The lessons he shares and the customs he follows may seem out of place in a liberal culture such as Portland's. For example, he doesn't shake hands with women who are unrelated, he preaches about women's duties to dress modestly and he writes skeptical employers on behalf of Muslim men who want to follow Islamic custom and grow their beards.

Despite his message of staying true to Islam, Kariye said, it's up to the individual to decide how closely to adhere to this way of life. And even in his traditional reading of Islam, there are elements that seem quintessentially Portland.

Kariye briefly mentioned in one sermon his concerns that nonorganic food is threatening people's health. He spoke of the importance of showing kindness to all, even animals, quoting from the Sunnah about a woman who went to hell because of her poor treatment of her cat.

Kariye's focus on the fundamentals of Islam distinguishes Masjed As-Saber from some of the other mosques that have a less traditional approach, said Mikal Shabazz, former imam of the Muslim Community Center in Northeast Portland.

But Kariye provides a needed foundation for the region's Muslim people who vary greatly in race and ethnicity, said Shabazz, who lectures at Portland State University and at a mosque in Vancouver. He has been accessible for counseling and guidance to Muslims throughout the community -- not just those at As-Saber, Shabazz said.

Masjed As-Saber also takes a leadership role in the larger community, helping organize metrowide events such as picnics and the annual Eid al-Fitr celebration to mark the end of Ramadan. It has advised state and school authorities on accommodating Muslim families and students. And the mosque's president, Imtiaz Khan, has served as a representative to the Portland's Arab-Muslim Police Advisory Committee. Portland police Assistant Chief Eric Hendricks said the two developed a good relationship and that he doesn't know of any reason to be suspicious of the mosque.

What, if anything, ask people who attend Masjed As-Saber, does the FBI know that they don't?

"Why the big secrecy? Why all these years?" said Laila Hajoo, president of Islamic Social Services of Oregon State. If anyone is suspected of wrongdoing, people at the mosque want to know, she said.

"That's the hardship that we're facing," Hajoo said. "We don't know why."

Although the FBI's scrutiny in the past led to convictions of the Portland Seven, the agency has acknowledged missteps both on a local and national level with Muslims. Most recently, the FBI announced it discarded hundreds of training documents that were determined to be biased or inaccurate regarding Islam.

The FBI's Fowler said he can't specifically discuss Masjed As-Saber, the imam or the recent cases. He has never stepped inside the mosque, nor has he spoken with Kariye, whose status as a plaintiff in the lawsuit against the FBI over the no-fly list necessitates the caution, he said.

But he said the agency regularly evaluates its actions and investigations to make sure any information it has is reliable. Fowler also noted that he personally reaches out to Muslim immigrant groups and other mosques or centers to try to build trust.

Mosque leaders worry that the FBI's persistent attention is spilling over into how the public treats them. In March, Wells Fargo abruptly decided to close the bank accounts of the imam and the mosque. Both had accounts at the bank for several years.

A Wells Fargo spokesman, Tom Unger, said he doesn't know the reasons for the bank's decision, but maintained that "neither religion nor any other factors that could be considered discriminatory are included as part of that process" for closing the accounts.

But Unger advised doing an Internet search on the mosque's name, which turns up various links to news stories as well as other websites including those that allege a connection to terrorism.

Those assumptions show the problems the mosque's congregation regularly faces, Kariye said. Mosques don't control who attends and don't have formal members, leaders noted. The government "has the full right to make sure there is no criminal act taking place inside the mosque," Kariye said.

But instead, he said, their actions feel like religious harassment.

"Always (the FBI) will say, 'We are not against Islam -- we are against radical interpretations of religion,'" he said. "A Muslim who is trying to practice the religion -- to them -- is a radical."