

Man says he was informant for FBI in Orange County

He identifies himself in a court filing as having infiltrated mosques in Orange County on behalf of the agency

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As federal authorities press their case against a Tustin man accused of lying about ties to Al-Qaeda, they disclosed this week that some evidence came from an informant who infiltrated Orange County mosques and allegedly recorded the defendant discussing jihad, weapons and plans to blow up abandoned buildings.

On Wednesday, a man who claims to be that informant stepped forward, filing court documents saying that he had served as a confidential informant for the FBI from July 2006 to October 2007 to identify and thwart terrorist operations in the Orange County Islamic community.

The claim by Craig Monteilh, a 46-year-old Irvine resident, that he had been sent by the FBI to infiltrate several Orange County mosques could affect the government's case against Ahmadullah Sais Niazi. His allegations highlight recurring issues about the use of informants by law enforcement agencies and have fanned long-held fears by some Muslim leaders about religious profiling.

Monteilh said in interviews that he had alerted the FBI to Niazi after meeting him at the Islamic Center of Irvine in November 2006 and spending eight months with him. Monteilh said he called himself Farouk Al-Aziz and posed as a Syrian-French American in search of his Islamic roots. Monteilh told the FBI that Niazi befriended him and began to lecture him about jihad, gave him lessons in bomb-making and discussed plots to blow up Orange County landmarks.

"He took me under his wing and began to radicalize me," Monteilh said.

The FBI declined to comment on Monteilh's allegations, which could not be independently verified. Niazi's attorney, deputy federal public defender Chase Scolnick, also declined to comment.

But an FBI agent's testimony in the case Tuesday and interviews with Muslim leaders both appeared to bolster some of Monteilh's assertions about his role in the case.

Special Agent Thomas J. Ropel III testified at a bail hearing for Niazi that the defendant had been secretly recorded by an informant while initiating jihadist rhetoric and threatening to blow up abandoned buildings. Ropel did not name Monteilh but testified that the agency's informant was the same man Muslims had reported to the FBI as an extremist. In June 2007, the Council on American-Islamic Relations reported Monteilh to the FBI as a possible terrorist, said Hussam Ayloush, the council's executive director in Anaheim.

Ayloush said he was “100% sure” that Monteilh was the informant in question and expressed anger and disappointment that the FBI would infiltrate mosques. He accused officials of trying to entrap innocent Muslims, noting that Monteilh has been convicted of grand theft and forgery in the past. He said Muslims had worked hard to develop a partnership with the FBI — and had been assured by J. Steven Tidwell, then assistant director in charge of the Los Angeles field office, at an Irvine forum in 2006 that their mosques were not being monitored. Now, Ayloush said, he has doubts about future relations with the FBI.

“This is religious profiling at its worst,” Ayloush said about the FBI operation.

The Afghanistan-born Niazi, 34, was arrested last week and is scheduled to be arraigned next month on suspicion of perjury, naturalization fraud, misuse of a passport obtained by fraud and making a false statement to a federal agency. Niazi, who has lived in the United States since 1998 and earned citizenship five years ago, is related by marriage to Amin al-Haq, an Afghan militant who fought the Soviet occupation of the 1980s with a U.S.-backed Islamic resistance force that now is branded an Al Qaeda affiliate. Niazi is accused of failing to disclose those ties during his application for citizenship.

Niazi asserted after his arrest last week that he is an innocent man who is being retaliated against by the FBI for refusing to become an informant.

In Tuesday’s bail hearing, Ropel asserted that Niazi was a danger to the community who should be held without bail. But prosecutors offered no testimony regarding the specific plots Monteilh says he told the FBI that he discussed with Niazi, allegedly involving attacks on Orange County shopping centers, military installations and court buildings. Nor was there any testimony about other mosque members allegedly having been involved in those or other terrorist activities, as Monteilh maintains was the case.

Ayloush said he had received numerous complaints from Muslims in 2007 that Monteilh was aggressively promoting terrorist plots and trying to recruit others to join him. Citing such behavior and saying that it made members of the mosque feel threatened, the Islamic Center of Irvine won a temporary restraining order in June 2007 that barred Monteilh from the mosque.

Monteilh filed a petition Wednesday to lift the restraining order, saying that he wanted to clear his name from any suspicion of terrorist activity. He had not contested the original order, he said, because he had been instructed by the FBI not to testify at the hearing. But he said he was speaking out now because the FBI had allegedly violated pledges to remove the restraining order, place him in a witness protection program, give him a final payment of \$100,000 and grant other benefits in an exit package.

“Although the FBI has not fulfilled their promises, I am proud to have participated in the War on Terror,” Monteilh said in the petition.

Monteilh, burly and bald, said he first began working for the FBI in late 2003 as an informant on white supremacist and narcotics cases after making connections with the Aryan Brotherhood during a prison stint for forgery. In 2006, he alleges, he agreed to infiltrate mosques.

During two weeks of training, Monteilh said in an interview with The Times, he was taught

about Islam, Arabic, self-defense and weapons. He said he was outfitted with video and audio recording devices and given specific names of people to monitor. Monteilh said he also was instructed to progress slowly in his embrace of Islam to make his conversion seem natural — wearing Western clothes initially and then eventually growing a beard and donning an Egyptian robe, shawl and head cap.

In August 2006, Monteilh said, he approached his first target: the Islamic Center of Irvine. There, he alleges, he made his declaration of the Islamic faith known as shahada and, as instructed by his FBI handlers, posed as a serious student of Islam.

Several Muslims began to embrace him, he told the FBI, and by December he was approached by Niazi. The pair dined at an Islamic Chinese restaurant in Anaheim and hit it off after Monteilh pledged that he would do everything he could to protect Muslims from harm by infidels. He described Niazi as highly intelligent, devout, resourceful and scholarly, with a temperate mien overlaying the passion of his cause.

In an interview, Monteilh alleged that he told the FBI that Niazi told him that he had been one of 200 people who greeted Osama Bin Laden in 1996 when he took refuge in Afghanistan after being expelled from Sudan. Niazi called Bin Laden an “angel,” Monteilh said — an assertion that FBI Agent Ropel repeated this week as information gleaned from the agency’s informant. Ropel testified Tuesday that Niazi told the informant that it was his “duty to engage in violent jihad.”

Over a year, Monteilh further related in an interview, the FBI paid him sums ranging from \$2,500 a month to as high as \$11,200.

Monteilh said he was cut loose as an informant in fall 2007 because members of the mosque he infiltrated began to suspect that he was working with the FBI.

Kenneth Piernick, a former FBI counter-terrorism official who is a consultant in Virginia, said parsing out what’s true and what’s not, even from someone deemed to be a reliable informant, can be challenging.

“You don’t go talk to choirboys to get information on thugs,” said Piernick, who retired from the bureau in 2003.

He said informants can be egotistical, manipulative and dishonest. Those who are getting paid, he said, have been known to “exaggerate information, or even invent it” to keep the money flowing.

Piernick said common reasons for discontinuing an informant include low-quality or unreliable information.

“In other words, he’s not worth the effort,” Piernick said.

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