


How the FBI Created a Terrorist

 theintercept.com/2015/03/16/howthefbicreatedaterrorist/

Trevor Aaronson Trevor Aaronson 2015-03-16T12:28:31+00:00

IN THE VIDEO, Sami Osmakac is tall and gaunt, with jutting cheekbones and a scraggly beard. He sits cross-legged on the maroon carpet of the hotel room, wearing white cotton socks and pants that rise up his legs to reveal his thin, pale ankles. An AK-47 leans against the closet door behind him. What appears to be a suicide vest is strapped to his body. In his right hand is a pistol.

“Recording,” says an unseen man behind the camera.

“This video is to all the Muslim youth and to all the Muslims worldwide,” Osmakac says, looking straight into the lens. “This is a call to the truth. It is the call to help and aid in the party of Allah ... and pay him back for every sister that has been raped and every brother that has been tortured and raped.”

Osmakac in his “martyrdom video.” (YouTube)

youtube

The recording goes on for about eight minutes. Osmakac says he’ll avenge the deaths of Muslims in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and elsewhere. He refers to Americans as *kuffar*, an Arabic term for nonbelievers. “Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth,” he says. “Woman for a woman, child for a child.”

Osmakac was 25 years old on January 7, 2012, when he filmed what the FBI and the U.S. Department of Justice would later call a “[martyrdom video](#).” He was also broke and struggling with mental illness.

After recording this video in a rundown Days Inn in Tampa, Florida, Osmakac prepared to deliver what he thought was a car bomb to a popular Irish bar. According to the government, Osmakac was a dangerous, lone-wolf terrorist who would have bombed the Tampa bar, then headed to a local casino where he would have taken hostages, before finally detonating his suicide vest once police arrived.

But if Osmakac was a terrorist, he was only one in his troubled mind and in the minds of ambitious federal agents. The government could not provide any evidence that he had connections to international terrorists. He didn’t have his own weapons. He didn’t even have enough money to replace the dead battery in his beat-up, green 1994 Honda Accord.

Osmakac was the target of an elaborately orchestrated FBI sting that involved a paid informant, as well as FBI agents and support staff working on the setup for more than three months. The FBI provided all of the weapons seen in Osmakac’s martyrdom video. The bureau also gave Osmakac the car bomb he allegedly planned to detonate, and even money for a taxi so he could get to where the FBI needed him to go. Osmakac was a deeply disturbed young man, according to several of the psychiatrists and psychologists who examined him before trial. He became a “terrorist” only after the FBI provided the means, opportunity and final prodding necessary to make him one.

Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the FBI has arrested dozens of young men like Osmakac in controversial counterterrorism stings. One recent case involved a rudderless 20-year-old in Cincinnati, Ohio, named Christopher Cornell, who conspired with an FBI informant — seeking “favorable treatment” for his own “criminal exposure” —

in a harebrained plot to build pipe bombs and attack Capitol Hill. And just last month, on February 25, the FBI arrested and charged two Brooklyn men for plotting, with the aid of a paid informant, to travel to Syria and join the Islamic State. The likelihood that the men would have stepped foot in Syria of their own accord seems low; only after they met the informant, who helped with travel applications and other hurdles, did their planning take shape.



FBI Tampa Florida Field Office. (Trevor Aaronson)

Trevor Aaronson

Informant-led sting operations are central to the FBI's counterterrorism program. Of [508 defendants prosecuted](#) in federal terrorism-related cases in the decade after 9/11, 243 were involved with an FBI informant, while 158 were the targets of sting operations. Of those cases, an informant or FBI undercover operative led 49 defendants in their terrorism plots, similar to the way Osmakac was led in his.

In these cases, the FBI says paid informants and undercover agents are foiling attacks *before* they occur. But the evidence suggests — and a recent [Human Rights Watch report](#) on the subject illustrates — that the FBI isn't always nabbing would-be terrorists so much as setting up mentally ill or economically desperate people to commit crimes they could never have accomplished on their own.

At least in Osmakac's case, FBI agents seem to agree with that criticism, though they never intended for that admission to become public. In the Osmakac sting, the undercover FBI agent went by the pseudonym "Amir Jones." He's the guy behind the camera in Osmakac's martyrdom video. Amir, posing as a dealer who could provide

weapons, wore a hidden recording device throughout the sting.

The device picked up conversations, including, apparently, back at the FBI's Tampa Field Office, a gated compound beneath the flight path of Tampa International Airport, among agents and employees who assumed their words were private and protected. These unintentional recordings offer an exclusive look inside an FBI counterterrorism sting, and suggest that, even in the eyes of the FBI agents involved, these sting targets aren't always the threatening figures they are made out to be.

Film by Jeff Stimmel (no audio)

ON JANUARY 7, 2012, after the martyrdom video was recorded, Amir and others poked fun at Osmakac and the little movie the FBI had helped him produce.

"When he was putting stuff on, he acted like he was nervous," one of the speakers tells Amir. "He kept backing away ..."

"Yeah," Amir agrees.

"He looked nervous on the camera," someone else adds.

"Yeah, he got excited. I think he got excited when he saw the stuff," Amir says, referring to the weapons that were laid out on the hotel bed.

"Oh, yeah, you could tell," yet another person chimes in. "He was all like, like a, like a six-year-old in a toy store."

In other recorded conversations, Richard Worms, the FBI squad supervisor, describes Osmakac as a "retarded fool" who doesn't have "a pot to piss in." The agents talk about the prosecutors' eagerness for a "Hollywood ending" for their sting. They refer to Osmakac's targets as "wishy-washy," and his terrorist ambitions as a "pipe-dream scenario." The transcripts show FBI agents struggled to put \$500 in Osmakac's hands so he could make a down payment on the weapons — something the Justice Department insisted on to demonstrate Osmakac's capacity for and commitment to terrorism.

"The money represents he's willing to do it, because if we can't show him killing, we can show him giving money," FBI Special Agent Taylor Reed explains in one conversation.

These transcripts were never supposed to be revealed in their entirety. The government argued that their release could harm the U.S. government by revealing "law enforcement investigative strategy and methods." U.S. Magistrate Judge Anthony E. Porcelli not only sealed the transcripts, but also placed them under a protective order.

The files, provided by a confidential source to *The Intercept* in partnership with the Investigative Fund, provide a rare behind-the-scenes account of an FBI counterterrorism sting, revealing how federal agents leveraged their relationship with a paid informant and plotted for months to turn the hapless Sami Osmakac into a terrorist. Neither the FBI Tampa Field Office nor FBI headquarters in Washington, D.C. responded to requests from *The Intercept* for comment on the Osmakac case or the remarks made by FBI agents and employees about the sting.



Osmakac as a boy. (Photo courtesy of the Osmakac family)

Photo courtesy of the Osmakac family

SAMI OSMAKAC WAS 13 years old when he came to the United States with his family. Fleeing violence in Kosovo in 1992, they had first traveled to Germany, where they stayed until 2000, when they were granted entrance to the U.S. He was the youngest of eight children, and he and his older brother Avni struggled at first to adapt to a new land, a new language and a new culture.

“We came to Tampa, and at first we lived in this really bad neighborhood,” Avni recalls, wearing blue jeans, spotless white Nikes and a white New York Yankees Starter cap. “It was tough, but as we learned the language, things got easier. We adapted.”

The Osmakac family opened a popular bakery in St. Petersburg, across the bay from Tampa. They were Muslim, but they rarely attended the mosque. They didn’t usually fast during Ramadan, and Sami’s sisters did not cover their hair. Growing up, Sami wasn’t particularly drawn to Islam either, according to his family. He suffered the concerns many young men in the United States do, like getting a job and saving up for a car.

In July 2009, one of Sami’s older brothers had returned to Kosovo to get married, and just before Sami was to fly to the Balkans with his brother Avni for the wedding, he had a terrible dream. “An angel grabbed me by the face and pushed me into the hellfire,” he would later tell a psychologist. At the wedding, Avni took a photograph of Sami; he’s clean-shaven and wearing a pressed white suit. He looks happy. On the flight back from the wedding, during the final leg of the journey to Tampa, the plane Sami and his brother were on hit turbulence, losing altitude quickly. “I thought we were going to crash,” Avni remembers. Sami looked horrified.

Osmakac in 2009. (Photo courtesy of Osmakac family)

Photo courtesy of the Osmakac family

That's when something changed in him, according to his family and mental health experts hired by both the government and the defense. Osmakac began to isolate himself from his siblings and attend the mosque frequently. He spoke of dreams about killing himself, and chastised family members for being more concerned about this life than what comes after.

In December 2009, Osmakac met a red-bearded Muslim named Russell Dennison at a local mosque. Dennison, who was American-born, was described by Osmakac as a "revert." Muslims believe that all people are born with an understanding of the unity of Allah, so when a non-Muslim embraces Islam, some Muslims refer to this as reversion rather than conversion. Dennison went by the chosen name Abdullah; he says in a [YouTube video](#) that after being introduced to Islam, his faith grew stronger during a prison term in Pennsylvania. Osmakac's dress changed after he met Dennison. Whereas he had once saved his money to buy nice shoes and Starter caps, he suddenly began to dress like Dennison, according to family members — cutting his pants high at the ankle, buying cheap plastic sandals and sometimes wearing a *keffiyeh* on his head. He refused to cut his beard, which he struggled to grow with any thickness, and he wouldn't wear deodorant that contained alcohol.



It wasn't just his physical appearance that was changing; by the beginning of 2010, his family also believed he was deteriorating mentally. He'd become paranoid and delusional. His skin was pale. He was sleeping on the floor of his bedroom and complained about nightmares in which he burned in hell. He stopped working at the family bakery because they served pork products. Near the end of the year, his family repeatedly asked him to see a doctor. He rebuffed them, saying that the doctors would want to kill him. (Osmakac later told a psychiatrist he in fact "was scared to go to a mental home.")

Russell Dennison (YouTube)



Youtube

Meanwhile, Osmakac's friendship intensified with the red-bearded revert. Dennison, whose videos on YouTube are posted under the username "[Chekdamize7](#)," frequently preached about Islam and ranted about the corruption of nonbelievers. Osmakac's family believed that Dennison encouraged his extreme views, often recruiting him to make videos. Among their efforts was a [two-part series](#) in which they argued combatively about religion with Christians they confronted on the sidewalk.

Over the next year, Osmakac, who was without steady employment, established a reputation as a firebrand in the local Muslim community. He was kicked out of two mosques, and lashed out at local Muslim leaders in a [YouTube video](#), calling them *kuffar* and infidels. In March 2011, Osmakac made his way to Turkey, in the hopes of traveling by land to Saudi Arabia, according to his brother. He'd been told that holy water from Mecca was a cure-all, Avni says — that if he drank it, the nightmares would cease. But Osmakac never got much farther than Istanbul, after encountering multiple transportation mishaps, and getting turned away at the Syrian border by officials who refused to let him cross without a visa. He quickly ran out of money, lost his will and called home for help. His family in Tampa helped purchase a plane ticket for him to return to Florida.

Osmakac would later tell several mental health professionals that he was in fact more interested in traveling to Afghanistan or Iraq to fight American troops, and perhaps even find a bride there. “If I got to Afghanistan or Iraq, someone would marry me to their daughter,” he mentioned to one psychologist. Osmakac got back in touch with Dennison in Florida, and would talk often of returning to a Muslim land so he could marry.



Osmakac's altercation with Keffer, April 16, 2011. (YouTube)

Youtube

ON APRIL 16, 2011, Osmakac was outside of a Lady Gaga concert in Tampa. Larry Keffer, a Christian street preacher with short-cropped brown hair and a thick, white beard, was outside the concert as well. Keffer was wearing a fishing hat, a green camouflage shirt and blue pants.

“Sin is a slippery slope,” Keffer yelled through a megaphone to the Lady Gaga fans as someone else [recorded](#) the demonstration.

Most of the crowd ignored Keffer. A few concertgoers taunted him. He taunted them back. A police officer directing traffic refused to acknowledge the demonstration, while Keffer ranted about Lady Gaga and the devil. Osmakac finally confronted Keffer, pointing his finger in the preacher's face.

“You infidel, I know the Bible better than you,” Osmakac told the preacher.

“What's your message?” Keffer replied, talking into the megaphone.

“My message is, if y'all don't accept Islam, y'all going to hell,” Osmakac said.

The men continued to provoke each other as people milled into the concert venue.

“Go have yourself a bacon sandwich,” Keffer told Osmakac.

“You infidel,” Osmakac said. “You infidel.”

As the argument escalated, Osmakac charged one of Keffer's fellow demonstrators and head-butted him, bloodying the man's mouth and breaking a dental cap. He then charged Keffer. Each wrapped his arms around the other, turning and twisting, until they broke free. The police officer managing traffic charged Osmakac with battery, giving him notice to appear in court. Osmakac was later arrested after failing to show up, Avni says, and his family had to

bail him out; in just a few months' time, Osmakac's red-bearded friend would lead him straight into an FBI trap.



Java Village, owned by FBI informant Abdul Raouf Dabus. (Google Maps)

SAMI OSMAKAC AND Russell Dennison lived in Pinellas County, across the bay from Tampa. In September 2011, Dennison told Osmakac he knew a guy who ran a Middle Eastern market in Tampa. They should go see him, Dennison suggested. To this day, Osmakac doesn't know why Dennison suggested this, or why he agreed to accompany him on the 45-minute drive to the store, called Java Village, near the Busch Gardens theme park.

When they arrived, Dennison introduced Osmakac to the owner, Abdul Raouf Dabus, a Palestinian. Dabus had flyers in his store promoting democracy, and he and Osmakac argued about the subject, with Osmakac contending that democracy and Islam were incompatible.

"Democracy makes the forbidden legal and the legal forbidden, and that's greater infidelity," Osmakac would tell Dabus. "Whoever enforces it is an infidel, is a Satan. Hamas is Satan. Muslim Brotherhood is Satan ... If you don't accept that God is the only legislator, then you become a polytheist, and that's why I'm telling you."

Osmakac didn't know that Dabus would become an FBI informant. His work for the government has until now been secret.

According to the government's version of events, Osmakac asked Dabus if he had Al Qaeda flags, or black banners. Osmakac disputes this, saying he never asked anyone for Al Qaeda flags.

Whatever the truth, the sting had just begun.

| *A psychologist appointed by the court later diagnosed Osmakac with schizoaffective disorder.*

“He asked me if he can work a couple of hours, working and other stuff,” Dabus said in a phone interview from Gaza, where he now lives. “But it wasn’t really like a job. So basically, he was helping whenever he comes. And he got paid.” Dabus acknowledged he was paying Osmakac as the FBI was paying him.

In Tampa’s Muslim community, Dabus is well known. A former University of Mississippi math professor, Dabus was an associate of Sami Al-Arian, the University of South Florida professor who was indicted for allegedly providing material support to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, in a case prosecutors argued proved successful intelligence-gathering under the Patriot Act. Dabus had worked at the Islamic Academy of Florida, an elementary and secondary private school for Muslims that Al-Arian had helped to found in Temple Terrace, a suburb of Tampa.

Dabus was among the witnesses in the Al-Arian trial, and his testimony was damaging to the government’s case. He testified that he had known Al-Arian only to raise money for charitable purposes, not for violence. During cross-examination, Dabus told the defense that he feared that Al-Arian’s trial meant Palestinians in the United States could no longer speak openly about the occupied territories. “There is no longer any security for the dog that barks in this country,” Dabus said.

He also questioned whether Al-Arian’s indictment suggested Muslims had become a new target for the U.S. government. “Our kids, will they have a future here?” he asked. “I don’t know.”

While Al-Arian would continue to battle federal prosecutors, living under house arrest in Virginia until finally agreeing to deportation to Turkey this year, Dabus remained in Tampa, active in the local religious and business community. But he acquired a reputation during this time for running up debts. From 2005 to 2012, he faced foreclosure actions on his home and businesses, as well as breach-of-contract and small-claims cases. In fact, when Dabus met Osmakac, he was in rough financial straits, records show. In July 2011, the bank holding the mortgage on his business’s building was granted approval to sell the property through foreclosure; Dabus owed \$779,447.

It’s unclear why Dabus became an FBI informant, or for how long he worked with the government. He says he was doing his civic duty in reporting Osmakac and the young man’s interest in acquiring weapons, and had not previously worked with the FBI, though an FBI affidavit in the Osmakac case described Dabus as having “provided reliable information in the past.” Money is a common motivator for FBI counterterrorism informants, who can earn \$100,000 or more on a single case. Dabus estimates the FBI paid him \$20,000 for his role in the Osmakac sting, though insists money did not motivate him.

On November 30, 2011, after Osmakac had begun working for Dabus, the two drove around the Tampa area together as Dabus secretly recorded their conversation for the FBI. Osmakac asked if Dabus could help him obtain guns and an explosive belt. However, transcripts suggest he was also having trouble separating reality from fantasy. “In the dream, I was shown that everywhere you go, everything you do, hush your mouth,” Osmakac says. “Don’t say nothing. So, yes, the dream is real. Allah showed me that dream for a reason. And he’s also protected me for a reason.”

A psychologist appointed by the court later diagnosed Osmakac with schizoaffective disorder.



Osmakac and undercover FBI agent “Amir Jones.” (YouTube)

ABOUT THREE WEEKS after this conversation, on instructions from the FBI, Dabus introduced Osmakac to “Amir Jones,” an undercover agent. He might be able to help Osmakac obtain weapons, Dabus told him.

“What are you looking for, so that I know if it’s something I can get you or not?” Amir asks Osmakac.

“I’m looking for, even if ... one AK, at least,” Osmakac says.

“OK.”

“And maybe a couple of Uzi, ’cause they’re better to hide.”

“OK. OK.”

“If you can get the long extension like for the AK and the Uzi, the long magazines—”

“They’re called banana magazine,” Amir says. “OK.”

“And ... couple of grenades, 10 grenades minimum, if you can,” Osmakac says.

“Now, and that’s it?” Amir asks.

“And a [explosive] belt.”

For all Osmakac’s talk, the FBI’s undercover [videos](#) suggest he was less a hardened terrorist and more a comic book villain. While driving around Tampa with Amir, a hidden FBI camera near the dashboard, Osmakac described a plot to bomb simultaneously the several large bridges that span Tampa Bay.

“That’s five bridges, man,” Osmakac says. “All you need is five more people This would crush everything, man. They would have no more food coming in. Nobody would have work. These people would commit suicide!”

Amir Jones, behind the wheel of the car, offered a hearty laugh.

BACK AMONG FEDERAL law enforcement agents, according to the secret transcripts of their private conversations, there were plenty of reasons to joke at Osmakac's expense. FBI employees talked about how Osmakac didn't have any money, how he thought the U.S. spy satellites were watching him, and how he had no concept of what weapons cost on the black market.

The source of their amusement was also their primary source of concern. Osmakac was, in the FBI's own words, "a retarded fool" who didn't have any capacity to plan and execute an attack on his own. That was a challenge for the FBI.

*"Once [the source] gives it to him, it's his money, whether we orchestrated it or not."
— Special Agent Taylor Reed*

"Part of the problem is they want to catch him in the act," FBI Special Agent Steve Dixon says, referring to federal prosecutors. "The attorneys do and stuff, but the problem is you can't show up at a nightclub with an AK-47, in the middle of a nightclub, and pretend to start shooting people, or I mean people —"

"Right," another speaker interrupts.

"— would get killed, just a stampede, just to get away from him," Dixon finishes.

In constructing the sting, FBI agents were in communication with prosecutors at the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Middle District of Florida, the transcripts show. The prosecutors needed the FBI to show Osmakac giving Amir Jones money for the weapons. Over several conversations, the FBI agents struggled to create a situation that would allow the penniless Osmakac to hand cash to the undercover agent.

"How do we come up with enough money for them to pay for everything?" asks FBI Special Agent Taylor Reed in one recording.

"Right now, we have money issues," Amir admits in a separate conversation.

Their advantage was that Dabus, the informant, had given Osmakac a job. If they could get Dabus to pay Osmakac, and then make sure Osmakac used his paycheck to make a payment toward the weapons, the agents could satisfy the Justice Department. "Once he gives it to him, it's his money, whether we orchestrated it or not," Reed says.

In conversations about this plan, FBI agents refer to Dabus as the "source," short for confidential human source. "Jake" is FBI Special Agent Jacob Collins, who transcripts indicate worked closely with Dabus.

"The source has to tell him, 'Hey, listen! You are gonna have to give [Amir] the three hundred bucks,'" says Richard Worms, the squad supervisor. "And that's something Jake has the source tell him. 'And I'll take care of the rest ... and here's three hundred of my money for you.' Is that something you accept?"

"That's a feasible scenario," Amir Jones answers.

"That's what you're going to do," Worms says. "That way, the source has to be coached what to do."

In order to avoid being vulnerable to entrapment claims, the FBI agents didn't want their money being used to purchase *their* weapons in the sting. So they laundered the money through Dabus. In an interview, Dabus implicitly confirmed that arrangement, describing the \$20,000 he estimates he received from the FBI as a mix of expenses and compensation.

"It also shows good intent," Worms says of giving Osmakac the money, according to the transcripts. "He was willing to cough up almost his entire paycheck to get this thing going."

“That does look really good,” concurs FBI Special Agent Taylor Reed.



Osmakac and Amir at a Days Inn in Tampa on January 7, 2012. (YouTube)

AMIR AND OSMAKAC arranged to meet at a Days Inn in Tampa on January 7, 2012. The FBI had the room wired with two [cameras](#), a color one facing the headboard and a black-and-white one looking over the bed and toward the closet door, in front of which Osmakac would film his martyrdom video. Just as the FBI had orchestrated, Osmakac provided the cash to Amir as a down payment on the weapons.

The hotel surveillance video starts at 8:38 p.m. Osmakac is kneeling down on the floor and praying. He then stands and greets Amir, who has laid out the weapons on the bed. There are six grenades, a fully automatic AK-47 with magazines, a handgun and an explosive belt. Outside, a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device is assembled in the bed of Amir’s truck. None of the guns or explosives was functional, but Osmakac didn’t know that.

“You know, they saying they like three trillion in debt, they like 200 trillion in debt,” Osmakac had said, describing their plot. “And after all this money they’re spending for Homeland Security and all this, this is gonna be crushing them.”

Amir shows Osmakac the weapons one by one. He demonstrates how to reload the guns, and how to arm and throw the grenades, as Osmakac had never received weapons training.

“This one’s fully automatic,” Amir says, as Osmakac holds the AK-47.

Osmakac then slips on the suicide vest, as Amir showed him, and sits down in front of the closet, where he’ll record his video. Amir is seated in a chair facing Osmakac, holding the digital camera out in front of him.

The FBI was making a movie — all the agents needed was, in their words, a “Hollywood ending.” Osmakac would give them that final scene.

Osmakac had settled on an Irish bar, MacDinton’s, as his target. The supposed plan, which Osmakac dreamed up with Amir, was for Osmakac to detonate the bomb outside the bar, and then unleash a second attack at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Tampa, before finally detonating his explosive vest once the cops surrounded him.

But that didn’t happen. Instead, FBI agents arrested him in the [hotel parking lot](#). He was charged with attempting to

use a weapon of mass destruction — a weapon the FBI had assembled just for him.

After the arrest, according to the sealed transcripts, the FBI agents intended to celebrate their efforts over beers.

“The case agent usually buys,” one of the FBI employees is recorded as saying. Another adds: “That’s true — the case agent usually pops for everybody.”



Osmakac loading the fake car bomb with Amir. (YouTube)

HOW OSMAKAC CAME to the attention of law enforcement in the first place is still unclear. In a December 2012 Senate floor speech, Dianne Feinstein, chairwoman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, cited Osmakac’s case as one of nine that demonstrated the effectiveness of surveillance under the FISA Amendments Act. Senate legal counsel later walked back those comments, saying they were misconstrued. Osmakac is among terrorism defendants who were subjected to some sort of FISA surveillance, according to court records, but whether he was under individual surveillance or identified through bulk collection is unknown. Discovery material referenced in a defense motion included a surveillance log coversheet with the description, “CT-GLOBAL EXTREMIST INSPIRED.”

If he first came onto the FBI’s radar as a result of eavesdropping, then it’s plausible that as part of the sting, the FBI manufactured another explanation for his targeting. This is a long-running, if controversial process known as “parallel construction,” which has also been used by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration when drug offenders are identified through bulk collection and then prosecuted for drug crimes.

In court records, the FBI maintained that Osmakac came to agents’ attention through Dabus. The informant reached out to the FBI after meeting Osmakac, and soon offered him a job at Java Village.

At trial starting in May 2014, Osmakac’s lawyer, George Tragos, argued that the Kosovar-American was a young man suffering from mental illness, who had been entrapped by government agents.

A difficult defense to raise, entrapment requires not only that the government create the circumstances under which a crime may be committed, but also that the defendant not be “predisposed” toward the crime’s execution. “This entire case is like a Hollywood script,” Tragos told the jury, pointing out that the central piece of evidence was that Osmakac used government money to buy government weapons.

A psychologist retained by the defense, Valerie McClain, testified that Osmakac’s psychotic episodes, along with other mental health issues, made him especially easy for the government to manipulate. “When I talked to him most

recently, he was still delusional,” McClain testified. “He still believed he could become a martyr.” Six mental health professionals examined Osmakac before his trial. Two hired by the defense and two appointed by the court diagnosed Osmakac with psychotic disorder or schizoaffective disorder. The pair hired by the prosecution said Osmakac suffered from milder mental problems, including depression and difficulty adapting to U.S. culture.

Tragos wasn’t able to tell the jury that FBI agents might have agreed with McClain’s assessment of Osmakac. The transcripts of the accidentally recorded conversations among FBI agents weren’t allowed into evidence, but after the trial, District Judge Mary S. Scriven did agree to unseal a number of them, which were heavily redacted by the government before being entered into the court file.

Prosecutors relied on the undercover FBI recordings and Osmakac’s own words to convict him. They played for the jury Osmakac’s so-called martyrdom video. They showed footage of Amir slipping over Osmakac’s shoulder the strap for the AK-47. They filled the courtroom with exchange after exchange of Osmakac’s hateful and violent rhetoric. Prosecutors played up Osmakac’s most ridiculous remarks, including his desire to bomb simultaneously the bridges that cross Tampa Bay. “The most powerful thing you can see are the defendant’s own words. His intent was to commit a violent act in America,” prosecutor Sara Sweeney told the jury.

Following a six-hour deliberation, jurors convicted Osmakac of possessing an unregistered AK-47 and attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction. In November 2014, he was sentenced to 40 years in federal prison.

“I wanted to go and study the religion ... hoping that Allah is gonna cure me one day from the evil inside that I used to believe. But the doctors are saying it’s not evil — it’s mental illness.”
– Sami Osmakac

Entrapment has been argued in at least 12 trials following counterterrorism stings, and the defense has never been successful. Neither Abdul Raouf Dabus nor Russell Dennison testified in or provided depositions for Osmakac’s trial.

The government couldn’t produce Dabus, the FBI’s informant, because he had traveled to Gaza and Tel Aviv, where he says he was receiving treatment for cancer. He says his involvement with the FBI was limited to the Osmakac case — to reporting a suspicious man who was asking about Al Qaeda flags. Dabus disputes the FBI’s claim in court records that he was known to provide reliable information in the past.

“I did my job with them. I went away, and it is over,” Dabus says. “But I do not regret, and I would never regret to call again.”

Before Dabus left the country, the bank was granted approval to sell his Tampa home through foreclosure. His family owed \$302,669, or about \$50,000 more than the house was worth. Java Village is now shuttered. The signs are still on the outside of the building. Inside, the shelves are knocked over. Canned and dry goods litter the floor. Two dogs now guard the property.

Dennison, the red-bearded man who introduced Osmakac to Dabus, remains a mystery. He left the area shortly after Osmakac’s arrest, and emails he sent in late 2012 to a mutual friend he shared with Osmakac suggest he was fighting in Syria.

Osmakac’s family suspects much of Dennison’s story is a lie, and that he was, and likely still is, working with government agents. How else could Dennison have so conveniently delivered Osmakac to Dabus?

Confidential FBI reports on Dennison, copies of which were provided to *The Intercept*, do not address whether he’s been linked to a government agency. But the reports suggest the red-bearded man had a peculiar knack for becoming friendly with targets of FBI stings. After Osmakac’s arrest, FBI Special Agents Jacob Collins and Steve Dixon interviewed Dennison at Tampa International Airport, according to one report. Dennison was headed to

Detroit, and from there, he said he hoped to go to Jordan to teach English. Dennison described how he was in contact with Abu Khalid Abdul-Latif, whose real name is Joseph Anthony Davis, a 36-year-old Seattle man who, like Osmakac, was troubled and financially struggling, lured by a paid informant into an FBI counterterrorism sting in June 2011. Abdul-Latif is serving 18 years for his crime.

Osmakac is now in USP Allenwood, a high-security prison north of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

“I was manipulated by [the FBI],” Osmakac says in a phone call from prison. He says he only wanted to move to a Muslim country, where he hoped to find a wife. Instead, he says, Dabus and the FBI exploited his mental problems and pushed him in different direction.

“I wanted to go and study the religion and get married, have children, just have nothing to do with this Western world,” Osmakac says. “I wanted to study Arabic and the religion in depth, hoping that Allah is gonna cure me one day from the evil inside that I used to believe. But the doctors are saying it’s not evil — it’s mental illness.”

Osmakac’s family is trying to raise money for an appeal.

“If my brother was truly part of a plot to kill people, I’d be the first one in line to condemn him,” Osmakac’s brother Avni says. “But my brother was mentally ill. We were trying to get him help. The FBI got to him first.”

This story was reported in partnership with the Investigative Fund at The Nation Institute.

Illustration by Jon Proctor for The Intercept