

The Florida terror attack that never was: a case study in media hysteria, anti-Muslim bigotry and police abuse

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An incident earlier this month involving three Muslim medical students traveling to Florida is indicative of the efforts of the government and media to spread fear and panic and use the “war on terrorism” as a pretext for implementing police-state measures.

Some two weeks after a massive “anti-terror” operation that closed a major interstate highway for the better part of September 13, it has emerged that the young men branded by the TV networks as likely terrorists were nothing of the kind. They were involved in no terrorist plot and broke no laws. Their only “crime” was their Islamic appearance.

The story began at a Shoney’s restaurant in Calhoun, Georgia on September 12, the day after the one-year anniversary of the terror attacks. The three men—Ayman Gheith, 27, Kambiz Butt, 25, and Omar Choudary, 23—had stopped to eat on their road trip to Florida, where they were to take up residence and continue their training at Larkin Community Hospital in South Miami.

Eunice Stone, who was sitting at a nearby table, claims she heard the men talking about a planned terrorist attack. Stone told Fox News she heard one of the men say: “They think they were sad on 9/11, wait until 9/13.” The three men have insisted that “9/11” was never mentioned in their conversation. They were discussing plans to transport a car—not carry out a terrorist attack.

During the Fox News interview with Stone, the right-wing scoundrels, i.e., news moderators, who populate that network spared no superlatives in congratulating the informer for exemplifying the spirit of patriotism and vigilance demanded by the Bush administration.

Appearing on a Fox News interview program September 16, Omar Choudary explained: “My plans were to buy a car in Miami, and I was talking about how, if I didn’t find one in Miami, I would have one shipped

from Kansas City, and I would have that brought down. And then Kambiz asked me, ‘Do you have enough to bring it down? That might be expensive,’ and I said, you know, ‘I’ve got some connections, and I should be able to bring it down without too much cost.’”

Stone apparently reacted to the “bring it down” reference. She followed the men to their two cars in the restaurant parking lot, wrote down their license plate numbers and made an emergency 911 call to the police to report what she interpreted as plans for a terrorist attack in Miami. What followed was a full-scale mobilization of the police and media in response to the alleged plot.

A nationwide terror alert was sounded, and FBI agents searched through databases for any links between the men and terrorist organizations. The three were detained by Florida state troopers at around midnight September 12, after one of their cars was stopped for allegedly failing to pay a toll. All the major networks descended on the scene of the arrest, broadcasting bulletins warning of a terrorist threat.

A section of “Alligator Alley,” part of Interstate 75 in South Florida, was shut down throughout most of September 13, as authorities interrogated the men and searched their belongings. Police officers with bomb-sniffing dogs and robots searched the two cars. Investigators exploded what appeared to be a backpack taken from one of the vehicles.

The massive police operation was the news of the day that Friday, with all of the cable networks devoting virtually all of their coverage to the latest terrorist threat. The all-too-familiar methods of yellow journalism were on full display: repeated film clips of the suspects’ cars surrounded by police cordons on the closed-down interstate; breathless commentaries by news moderators, endlessly reiterating the most vacuous and meaningless

bits of information, gossip and rumor; “expert” input from paid terrorism consultants, speculating wildly about the possible motives and potential targets of the plotters.

The FBI and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation ransacked the motel room in Calhoun, Georgia where the three had spent the night prior to their restaurant stop, searching for incriminating evidence. They found nothing. Georgia investigators are reportedly looking into whether the three can be prosecuted under a state law prohibiting “terroristic threats.”

The dragnet spread north early the next morning to Hanover Park, Illinois, a Chicago suburb, where it was discovered that the license plate numbers of two brothers in that town were the same as those on a temporary Illinois plate issued to one of the detained men in Florida. Television cameras were parked on the street where Salud and Fernando Munoz lived, and news choppers circled overhead. Police eventually sealed off a one-block stretch in front of their home.

Salud Munoz was questioned by police and was mobbed by reporters as he left the local police station. Fernando was sent home from work after reporters swarmed his job site. The brothers were finally cleared that afternoon.

Back in Florida, after 17 hours of investigation, the authorities were unable to turn up a single piece of incriminating evidence against the three medical students, and they were released. The highway employee who originally told police that Kambiz Butt had run her toll booth changed her story when a video showed that both cars had paid the \$1.50 toll.

“The toll taker suggests that her inaccuracy was the result of her nervousness at having been asked to watch for these vehicles,” the Collier County Sheriff’s Office said in a statement. The \$126 ticket given to Butt was voided.

Following the incident, the administration at Larkin Community Hospital reported they had received some 200 emails, some of them threatening, urging the hospital to exclude the men from the facility. The hospital initially responded by canceling their internships, citing security concerns, but subsequently said the men would be allowed to continue their studies at Larkin.

Kambiz Butt commented, “We’re medical students. We are not terrorists. Our concern in life is to become doctors. We want to help people. We do not want to hurt.”

Ayman Gheith, who has a long beard and wore a skull cap at the rest stop, commented that Ms. Stone may have been influenced by his appearance. “She saw, obviously, the way I was dressed and maybe she put a little salt and

pepper into her story,” he said. Commenting on their ordeal, Gheith added, “I learned that injustice, regardless against whom, is wrong. It is against us today, tomorrow it could be against you.”

Having tarred the three students as dangerous would-be killers, the media dropped the story after it turned out to be without substance. In typical fashion, the news outlets offered no explanation for their sensationalist and hysterical reportage.

Wall Street Journal columnist Brendan Miniter defended the police operation and media hysteria in a comment published on September 17. “Such vigilance is necessary,” he wrote, “precisely because terrorists hide among the population, pretending to be ordinary citizens.”

Whatever Eunice Stone thought she overheard in that Georgia restaurant, her response was bound up with the atmosphere of suspicion and panic that the Bush administration and the media have sought to foster over the past year. In the guise of the fight against terrorism, the government has carried out a sweeping assault on basic democratic rights—including secret detentions without trial and expanded domestic spying. Hundreds of Middle Eastern immigrants have been rounded up, jailed for months on end, and deported. These attacks have gone unchallenged by the Democratic Party and the mainstream media.

This fall, the Justice Department plans to fully activate its “Operation Tips” program—which will recruit workers in the transportation, trucking, shipping, maritime, mass transit and other industries to spy on US residents and report any “suspicious” activity to the authorities. The Florida incident provides a glimpse of the type of methods the government intends to utilize, and the dangers posed to the democratic rights of the American population, citizens and non-citizens alike.



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