

Bomb Investigation Fallout: Lives in Disarray - Search For Bomber Turns Life Upside Down for Pakistani in Dallas

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Mohammad Shafi did not die in Wednesday's Oklahoma City bombing, but he says he's a victim all the same.

The Pakistani man said his life was turned upside down by the explosion at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. Investigators raided his North Dallas apartment, interrogated him for eight hours and detained two fellow countrymen who were staying with him.

They were identified in news reports all over the world as possible suspects. (The Dallas Morning News did not carry the men's identities.) That was before FBI agents arrested Timothy McVeigh, turning Mr. Shafi and his friends into historical footnotes.

But for Mr. Shafi, 27, the residue remains of those first hours after the bombing.

Black fingerprinting dust still covers the carpet, books and toiletries at Mr. Shafi's apartment near the corner of Royal Lane and North Central Expressway. It's also on his spice jars, toothbrush and walls. Federal officials haven't returned his comforter and other bedding, which they confiscated for testing.

Mr. Shafi's interrogators also were suspicious of a black box that stands near the apartment's sliding-glass door. The box holds a massage table. But federal agents thought it might be a bomb, and they decided to evacuate the building.

Mr. Shafi said he's barely slept the last few days and tries to avoid his neighbors, slipping back into his apartment at odd hours. He says he may move out at the end of the month.

"Now all my neighbors might look down on me because they don't know what is going on," he said. "It is kind of embarrassing to come home right now."

Yet Mr. Shafi, who works and attends college in North Texas, said he understands why the FBI did what it did. "It was one of those incidents where people have to rush . . . to find the links," he said. "If I was the FBI, I would have done the same thing."

He dances around the delicate issue of whether investigators unfairly targeted Muslims in the first hours after the bombing. He said he understands that they may have initially been considered a link to the 1993 bombing at New York's World Trade Center. The man convicted of masterminding the blast is Pakistani.

An Oklahoma highway patrolman set off the investigation. He remembered stopping a sedan for a traffic violation the day of the bombing. The car had been rented by Mr. Shafi's friends - two brothers who were in the United States illegally and have since left Dallas.

The brothers traveled from Dallas to Oklahoma City early Wednesday to obtain documents that would let them legally stay in the United States, Mr. Shafi said.

The brothers had been in Dallas about a week before the bombing occurred, he said. They came from New York, and a cousin of Mr. Shafi's asked him to house the brothers while they took care of their immigration business. After striking out in Dallas, they decided to try their luck in Oklahoma City, Mr. Shafi said.

As they neared Oklahoma City, they asked a patrolman for directions to the immigration office.

The officer apparently grew suspicious later after tracing the tags and finding that the car had been rented at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport.

Mr. Shafi said police were probably on the lookout for Muslims.

"There are people asking for directions every day," he said. "How come the cop took the time to remember the description, took time to write down the (license) number? It is very unclear for me why it is like this."

Around 5 p.m. Wednesday afternoon, agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms went to the suburban convenience store where Mr. Shafi works. They wanted to ask him about the brothers.

He was taken to downtown Dallas, where agents questioned him for eight hours. One of the brothers said he was interrogated for 16 hours before being released.

Mr. Shafi, who is studying computer science and satellite communications at Brookhaven and Richland colleges, said he worries Muslims are too often associated with terrorism.

"Just because of a few bad fish you cannot give the whole pond a bad name," he said. "Islam is about peace, it's about love, and it's about punishment for those people who destroy love, who destroy lives."