

FBI pushed Muslims to plot terrorist attacks: rights report

July 21, 2014 | Agence France-Presse (AFP)

The FBI encouraged and sometimes even paid Muslims to commit terrorist acts during numerous sting operations after the 9/11 attacks, a human rights group said in a report published Monday.

"Far from protecting Americans, including American Muslims, from the threat of terrorism, the policies documented in this report have diverted law enforcement from pursuing real threats," said the report by Human Rights Watch.

Aided by Columbia University Law School's Human Rights Institute, Human Rights Watch examined 27 cases from investigation through trial, interviewing 215 people, including those charged or convicted in terrorism cases, their relatives, defense lawyers, prosecutors and judges.

"In some cases the FBI may have created terrorists out of law-abiding individuals by suggesting the idea of taking terrorist action or encouraging the target to act," the report said.

In the cases reviewed, half the convictions resulted from a sting operation, and in 30 percent of those cases the undercover agent played an active role in the plot.

"Americans have been told that their government is keeping them safe by preventing and prosecuting terrorism inside the US," said Andrea Prasow, the rights group's deputy Washington director.

"But take a closer look and you realize that many of these people would never have committed a crime if not for law enforcement encouraging, pressuring and sometimes paying them to commit terrorist acts."

US Attorney General Eric Holder has strongly defended the FBI undercover operations as "essential in fighting terrorism."

"These operations are conducted with extraordinary care and precision, ensuring that law enforcement officials are accountable for the steps they take -- and that suspects are neither entrapped nor denied legal protections," Holder said July 8 during a visit to Norway.

The HRW report, however, cites the case of four Muslim converts from Newburgh, New York who were accused of planning to blow up synagogues and attack a US military base.

A judge in that case "said the government 'came up with the crime, provided the means, and removed all relevant obstacles,' and had, in the process, made a terrorist out of a man 'whose buffoonery is positively Shakespearean in scope,'" the report said.

The rights group charged that the FBI often targets vulnerable people, with mental problems or low intelligence.

It pointed to the case of Rezwan Ferdaus, who was sentenced to 17 years in prison at age 27 for wanting to attack the Pentagon and Congress with mini-drones loaded with explosives.

An FBI agent told Ferdaus' father that his son "obviously" had mental health problems, the report said. But that didn't stop an undercover agent from conceiving the plot in its entirety, it said.

"The US government should stop treating American Muslims as terrorists-in-waiting," the report concluded.

Mike German, a former FBI agent now with the Brennan Center, said FBI counterterrorism excesses were a source of concern -- "concerns that they both violate privacy and civil liberties, and aren't effective in addressing real threats."

But JM Berger, a national security expert, said law enforcement faces a dilemma: it can't just ignore tips or reports about people talking about wanting to commit a terrorist action or seeking support for one.

"The question is how to sort out which cases merit investigation and which do not," he said.

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