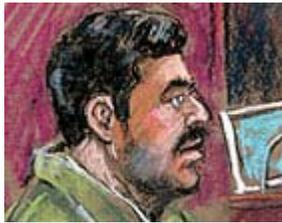


National News

As terrorism plots evolve, FBI relies on Agent John Q. Public

By Josh Meyer, Times Staff Writer
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Shnewer

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WASHINGTON — The FBI has hailed the breakup of an alleged plot to kill soldiers at Ft. Dix, N.J., as a major success story. But federal authorities acknowledge that the case has underscored a troubling vulnerability in the domestic war on terrorism.

They say the FBI, despite unprecedented expansion over the last 5 1/2 years, cannot counter the growing threat posed by homegrown extremists without the help of two often unreliable allies. One is an American public that they lament is prone to averting its attention from suspicious behavior and often reluctant to get involved. The other is a small but growing army of informants, some of whom might be in it for the wrong

reasons — such as money, political ax-grinding or legal problems of their own.

Such dependence on amateurs is "not something that we would like. It's something that we absolutely need," said Special Agent J.P. Weis, who heads the FBI's Philadelphia field office and the South Jersey Joint Terrorism Task Force, which conducted the Ft. Dix investigation.

Weis and other FBI and Justice Department officials acknowledged they probably never would have known about the six men and their alleged plans had it not been for a Circuit City employee who reported a suspicious video.

And, they said, an FBI informant was instrumental in gathering evidence to file criminal charges by infiltrating the men's circle for 16 months as they allegedly bought and trained with automatic weapons, made reconnaissance runs and discussed plans.

Weis and others said the bureau had to rely on the public and on informants in domestic counter-terrorism investigations because of the changing nature of the global jihad and the threat it posed within the United States.

Militants who have associated with known Al Qaeda figures or spent time in training camps have for the most part been identified and either arrested, deported or placed under surveillance, senior FBI and Justice Department officials said.

The primary threat now comes from individuals with no criminal backgrounds and few if any ties to militants overseas, officials say. Operating locally without the need to travel or send communications overseas, these people can evade security nets such as international wiretaps and travel surveillance.

Weis — like other federal law enforcement, counterterrorism and intelligence officials — described them as "lone wolves, cells that stay below the radar screen."

"Nobody really knows about them. They're not affiliated with any major group but held together by a common ideology," Weis said. "So to try and infiltrate them, some of the traditional means may not be effective."

FBI officials estimate thousands of these disaffected individuals could be in the United States, from radical Muslims to individuals who sympathize with the global jihad for nonreligious political reasons, such as opposing the war in Iraq.

Counter-terrorism officials say FBI agents and local police cannot possibly be everywhere they need to be in order to identify potential terrorists. And even the FBI's most expert counter-terrorism profilers have no foolproof way of predicting which individuals might turn radicalized thoughts into deadly acts of violence, the officials say.

"When does a person who has been a passive supporter of the cause cross over and become an operational person? That's the tough question," said one senior FBI counter-terrorism official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he was not permitted to discuss ongoing investigations. "It's risk management, where the stakes are as high as they can possibly be.

"As we saw in the Virginia Tech shooting, it doesn't take more than the will to do something to actually be able to pull it off."

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, authorities have arrested about 60 such individuals in the United States and charged them with terrorism, according to the FBI official and other sources. Dozens of others have been deported or are under surveillance.

The men arrested this week in and around Cherry Hill, N.J., are all foreign-born Muslims. But five of them — Mohamad Shnewer, Serdar Tatar and brothers Shain, Dritan and Eljvir Duka — were described by friends and family as not being religious radicals and rarely, if ever, discussing anti-American views.

They were arrested Monday night when two of them allegedly tried to buy automatic weapons from the FBI informant. Shnewer, Tatar and the Dukas have been charged with conspiracy to kill U.S. military personnel.

The Dukas, ethnic Albanians from the former Yugoslavia allegedly in the United States illegally, also were charged with violations of federal gun laws.

A sixth man, Agron Abdullahu, was charged with aiding and abetting illegal immigrants in obtaining weapons.

At a news conference after the arrests, Weis saluted the unidentified Circuit City store clerk in Mount Laurel, N.J., as the "unsung hero" of the case. "That's why we're here today, because of the courage and heroism of that individual," Weis said.

Authorities were alerted in January 2006 after the clerk said he saw a video that the men allegedly wanted copied onto a DVD. An FBI affidavit says the video shows the six men and four others shooting assault weapons "in a militia-like style while calling for jihad" and yelling extremist slogans in Arabic.

Another man has said that he notified the Pennsylvania Game Commission of suspicious behavior by the men at a shooting range, and others may have done so as well.

But according to some neighbors, acquaintances and law enforcement officials, many other suspicious signs went unreported, such as the alleged acquisition of illegal firearms and the surveillance of several military bases.

Federal authorities say they have disrupted "homegrown terrorist" plots in recent years in Lodi, Calif.; San Diego; Los Angeles; Houston; Dallas; Toledo, Ohio; Miami; northern Virginia; and New Jersey. Few if any of the arrests resulted from a private citizen reporting suspicious activity, according to interviews with authorities and court records of their prosecutions.

Bureau officials said they are disappointed that more people don't come forward with tips. "In some ways, it's human nature," Weis said. "A lot of times people think that someone else will report it. But now, with the changing times, you can't take that chance."

The FBI has spent millions of dollars cultivating a wide range of paid informants, particularly in Muslim communities.

"We've got to put eyes and ears on the street," said the senior FBI counter-terrorism official. He said he could not disclose the number of paid informants being used by the FBI in domestic counter-terrorism cases, but he said the bureau had blanketed cities and small towns alike with them in recent years. "It's very fair to say that we have significant numbers of people who are working with us," the official said.

The bureau has been accused in some cases of not vetting its paid informants, or of allowing them to pressure some suspects into committing illegal acts or even entrapping them.

In one highly publicized case, the FBI paid an informant \$230,000 to infiltrate a suspected terrorist cell in Lodi, only to learn that many of his claims about the Pakistani immigrants arrested in the case were unfounded.

FBI officials used two confidential informants in the Ft. Dix case; the main one allegedly is a former Egyptian military officer. The FBI affidavit filed in the case indicates the main informant was intimately involved in many aspects of the alleged plot, including going on at least two surveillance missions. At one point, the affidavit says, the informant had grown so trusted that one suspect asked him to lead the plot.

Rocco C. Cipparone, Shnewer's court-appointed lawyer and a former federal prosecutor, said he suspected the informant might have crossed the line from "legal normal prodding" of the suspects into entrapment.

Cipparone said informants could be the most valuable weapon against domestic terrorism. "But it also comes with a lot of risks ... and unless there is absolute careful monitoring, and even sometimes then, there can be a host of problems," Cipparone said. "Informants can be crafty, they can be creative, and informants can dupe law enforcement officers as well."

The senior FBI official said the bureau acknowledged problems with some informants and their motivations, and said it did its best to exercise quality control.

Weis said the FBI and federal prosecutors in the Ft. Dix case worked closely with the informants to make sure they were behaving appropriately.

"This was clearly a case where the cooperating witness was very good, very capable and above all, was able to be extremely credible to these individuals, to be able to insinuate himself into their thinking and their environment," said Michael Drewniak, a spokesman for U.S. Atty. Christopher J. Christie in New Jersey. "These individuals, well before our cooperating witness became involved, had the propensity and desire to carry out an attack on America."

josh.meyer@latimes.com
