

# Is the Buffalo, NY terrorist cell for real?

**ON FRIDAY, SEPT. 13,** America got its made-for-television bust of a real al-Qaeda cell right in the American heartland, in Buffalo, New York. News of the Buffalo raid quickly dominated international media, since it was the first-ever bust of any al-Qaeda terrorists on American soil and the first major U.S. terrorism arrest since the September 2001 attacks.

On Saturday Sept. 14, the FBI held a highly choreographed press conference in Buffalo to celebrate the arrests of the five local al-Qaeda suspects. The room was small and hot, with 14 television cameras and about 40 journalists crowded with 18 government officials into a 25-foot wide space. All the visual cues were strategically in place, with maps of both Afghanistan and the Lackawanna neighborhood where the five suspects lived posted near the podium. An array of four clocks on the wall gave the time in Baghdad, Buffalo, London and Anchorage.

New York Gov. George Pataki, who appeared earlier at a similar media event in Washington, was the first to speak. While the timing of the arrests was good for the Bush administration, they were also crucial for George Pataki, who had earlier in the week suffered a major setback in his campaign for reelection.

FBI Special Agent in charge of the investigation, Peter Ahearn, when questioned about the timing of the arrests, answered that while there was no specific event triggering the arrests, they went ahead with the arrests when they did, since they were ready and able to file charges after four to eight months of investigations.

Pataki, who had no role in the investigation, grabbed the limelight, explaining how the five suspects "trained at al-Qaeda camps" and heard Osama bin Laden speak. In an apparent effort to continue to ride on his post-9/11 popularity, Pataki laced his repertoire with "war on terrorism" jargon, while calling for additional border security (despite the

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fact that all five of the Lackawanna suspects are American citizens).

### **No terrorist threat**

Empty as Pataki's rhetoric sounded, he basically presented the entire case against the five suspects. Special Agent Ahearn, standing in front of the cameras with the taller Pataki visibly towering behind him, reported that no weapons were found and that there was no evidence that the suspects were supporting or planning any specific terrorist actions. The entire case against the five Americans consists of the fact that they allegedly, while on a pilgrimage to study Islam in Pakistan, took a side trip into Taliban Afghanistan and visited what later became known in the American media as the "al-Farooq terrorist training camp." The trip allegedly took place before the Sept. 11 attacks and the onset of "the war on terrorism," at a time when it was legal to travel to Afghanistan, when the U.S. was funding Taliban drug eradication efforts and when U.S. oil companies were still hoping to cut a deal with the Taliban to build a trans-Afghanistan pipeline. While the five are charged with "Providing Material Support or Resources to Designated Terrorist Organizations," Ahearn could not be specific as to what sort of resources the men were providing or if there was any further evidence that would be forthcoming. He did, however, leave the door open to more charges, explaining that the investigation was still in progress. This statement, however, only serves to fuel speculation about the political timing of the arrests, since otherwise they seem premature.

Security was unusually lax at the press conference, despite the fact that the governor and a host of other politicians were meeting to verbally attack al-Qaeda on live television. Reporters were able to bypass metal detectors as they rushed into the building carrying equipment. Despite announcing the presence of a terror cell in Buffalo, the FBI didn't really appear to sense any real local threat.

### **Hip hop terrorists?**

On the surface, the five Lackawanna men don't fit any existing profile of a terrorist. Four are native-born Americans and graduates of Lackawanna High School, where one of them, according to *The Buffalo News*, was voted by his graduating class as the "friendliest" senior. The fifth is a naturalized American citizen. Four have wives; three of them are fathers. One is the son of a former autoworker and U.A.W. member. One is a student at a local community college. They are all registered voters enrolled in the Democratic Party. At least one, says the *News*, is an avid Bills football fan. They come from a small, depressed, post-industrial city whose economy and geography was dominated by the now bankrupt Bethlehem Steel Corporation. They hung with a crew of hip young Yemeni-

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Americans whose hip-hop style of dress was clearly more influenced by MTV than by Islamic law.

So far, the evidence against the men is circumstantial. If allegations are true, they were clearly in the wrong place at the wrong time. At this point, however, there is no indication as to why they might have been at the al-Farooq facility, or what type of facility they initially might have thought the camp to be. The FBI has not yet presented any evidence, argument or charges that would indicate the Lackawanna men constituted a "terrorist cell" as alleged by the Justice Department and countless newspaper headlines.

The FBI's press release, while crediting the 17 law enforcement agencies involved in the investigation and giving the names and addresses of the suspects and a list of the properties that they searched, offers no incriminating information other than alleging the men visited the al-Farooq camp, and, "While present, Usama [sic] bin Laden spoke to all camp participants including the five for whom arrest warrants have been issued."

This, it appears, was their crime — hearing Osama bin Laden speak. This earned a Sunday headline in the *Buffalo News* proclaiming, "Lackawanna Men Present as Bin Laden Urged Terror."

The same paper previously reported that, "The suspects are believed to have had contact with those involved in the September 11 attacks on the United States." This presumably refers to their alleged presence al-Farooq when bin Laden spoke, but implies a much more sinister connection than the current charges indicate.

### **Scant evidence**

If this scant evidence remains as the basis for these terrorism charges, various Americans now may be exposed to similar charges, based on where they might have traveled and whom they might have heard speak. Labor and church activists, for example, who traveled to Sandinista-controlled Nicaragua or FMLN controlled areas of El Salvador in the 1980s, could be charged with similar crimes, especially if they spent money (providing support) while traveling. Similarly, church and community delegations visiting Cuba could find themselves facing similar charges, especially if they took in one of Fidel Castro's epic speeches. Of course, these are not terrorist organizations or nations, but in the eyes of the State Department they were, and in the case of Cuba, they are, supporters of terrorism, true or not.

Speculation about the political nature of the Lackawanna arrests was further fueled by the fact that the Buffalo Police Department, the largest law enforcement organization in the region, and one whose union has ties to the local Democratic Party, was not involved in the investigation, although at least one suspect was arrested in Buffalo.

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The FBI's Buffalo press conference itself seemed more like a Republican Party function than a federal law enforcement event, as a host of elected Republican officials, such as Congressman Tom Reynolds, who represents a district to the north of Buffalo, jockeyed for photo-ops. The Buffalo area is overwhelmingly Democratic, with not a single Republican elected to office in Buffalo's city government, yet no prominent local elected Democrats appeared at the press conference.

Still, it's premature to dismiss these arrests as being politically motivated. While the timing is suspect and while politicians seem to be exploiting the media attention, the case is still open. These five Lackawanna men might be exactly what they are charged with being — an al-Qaeda cell. The evidence available to us, however, certainly does not indicate this beyond a shadow of a doubt. Luckily, they will have their day in court. They could just as easily have been assigned to indefinite detention without trial, and we would never have had the chance to examine the flimsy evidence against them.

### **Fueling xenophobia**

The arrests are fueling xenophobic attacks against Western New York's Arab and Muslim community, with Buffalo City Council member Charley Fisher III having told supporters that a new mosque is actually a Buffalo-based paramilitary terrorist training camp. Followers of Fisher have urged a boycott of Arab-American owned businesses, which they claim are funding al-Qaeda. Fisher, formerly dismissed as a crank by his council peers after alleging al-Qaeda ties to local Arab-American run businesses, has suddenly, in the eyes of many of his constituents, been vindicated.

Buffalonians are also upset that news of the "Buffalo Cell" will only serve to further tarnish the rust belt city's embattled image. The city is already unfairly stereotyped in the media as a snow-blown cultural abyss. Adding al-Qaeda to the mix certainly won't help civic boosters repair the city's image. It will be particularly unfair to Buffalonians if this latest blemish on the city's name turns out, in the end, to be nothing more than political theater. ●