

Agent's troubles propel

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gold chandeliers.

Bertie Abdel-Hafiz still struggled to cope with the 1996 divorce that cost her the husband she said she idolized. She was alone and unemployed while her ex had a great new job in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, with a new Muslim wife and young family.

One day early last year, FBI investigators knocked on the door of Ms. Abdel-Hafiz's North Richland Hills home. They wanted to ask a few questions as part of a five-year background update on Agent Abdel-Hafiz, a review that became standard for all agents after the FBI's embarrassments over agent-turned-spy Robert Hanssen.

Propelled by the pain that had been festering since he walked out, Ms. Abdel-Hafiz began talking. "I thought about how he had used me all of these years, and I got mad," she said. "I decided I wouldn't lie for him any longer."

She told investigators that in 1989 — when he was still dreaming of the FBI — her husband faked a break-in at their Roanoke home. He later collected \$15,000 in insurance benefits and lied repeatedly in sworn statements to cover up the crimes, she said.

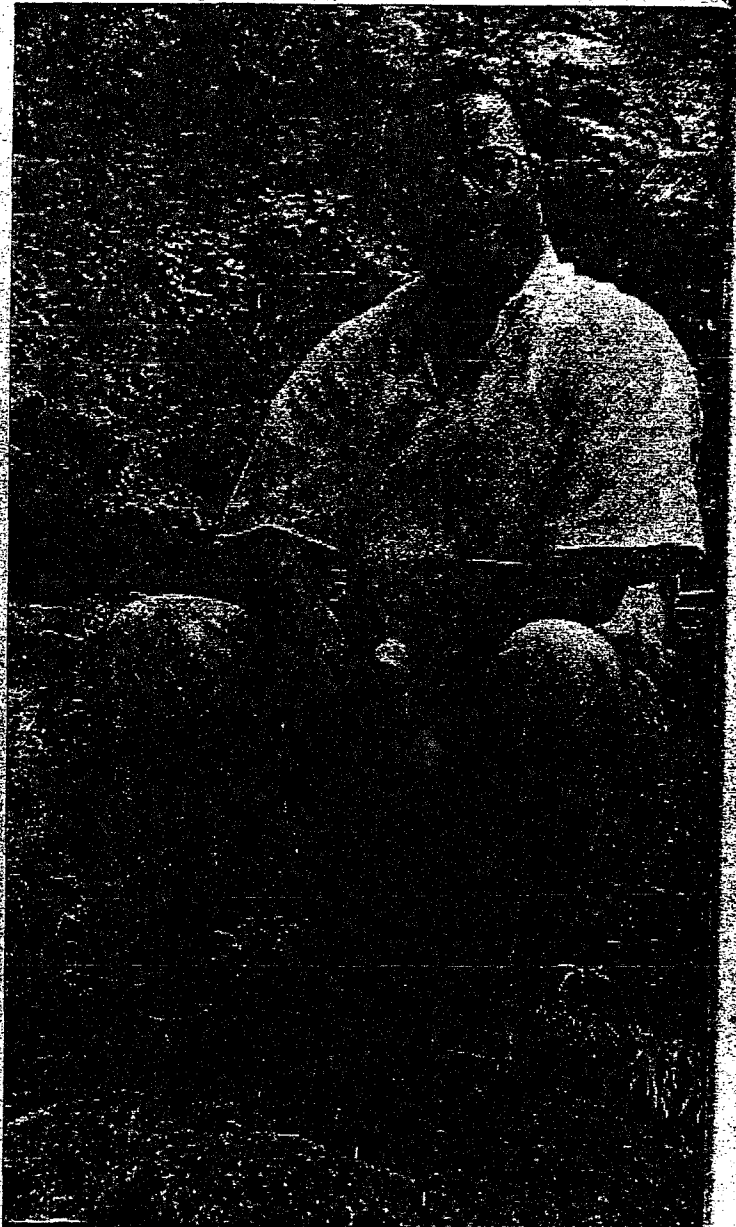
The FBI declined to comment about Agent Abdel-Hafiz other than to say he is under review by its professional conduct office. The agent, who has been assigned to the Dallas FBI office during his suspension and is required to stay in touch with officials there, could not be reached for comment.

A close friend, Mohamed Elmougy, said Agent Abdel-Hafiz told him that the investigation was triggered by his former wife's allegations — which he denied.

Mr. Elmougy, chairman of the Dallas-Fort Worth chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, accused the FBI of a bigoted attempt to ruin a good agent.

"It does send a very negative message," he said. "You have the first [Muslim] FBI agent who's been very successful, and overnight he's gone from being praised for his work to being no good anymore."

Driven to succeed



Gamal Abdel-Hafiz, who once managed 7-Eleven stores in Fort Worth, achieved his dream of becoming an FBI agent.

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Agent Abdel-Hafiz also worked a liaison to the North Texas Muslim community. His former boss Danny Defenbaugh, said he helped make the Dallas office's relations with local Muslims the envy of the FBI.

The agent made no secret of his religion — he prayed regularly in the office — but juggling the obligations of his faith and his job was a burden, Detective Storey said.

"There's many that liked him. There's many that hated him, depending on which side of the fence you were on," the detective said.

Camal Abdel-Hafiz came to America from Egypt to find a better life. Arriving in New York around 1980, he hoped to find work as a translator but ended up busing tables and delivering sandwiches, his ex-wife said. His deliveries often took him past the FBI office in Lower Manhattan, and he began to fantasize about becoming an agent.

"He thought that it would be prestigious," Ms. Abdel-Hafiz said.

It would take more than a decade for the future agent to accomplish his goal. During that time, he spent two years in the Egyptian Army and nine years working at service stations and convenience stores in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

He met Bertie Ann Martin in 1984, and they married the following year. She was a divorced, 42-year-old mother of two and a Christian. He was a 26-year-old Muslim immigrant without a permanent work permit.

Their marriage allowed Agent Abdel-Hafiz to become a permanent U.S. resident and, in 1990, obtain his citizenship, his former wife said.

Ms. Abdel-Hafiz said she adored her sensitive, handsome spouse, and he doted on her. "I always felt like a princess walking next to my king," she said.

Her husband worked hard and was well-regarded by his bosses, she said, but his attempts to start a business or get into law school failed. Money was a driving force in her husband's life, she said, and he loved to spend.

In November 1989, the Abdel-Hafizes reported a break-in at their home in southern Denton County and the theft of about \$22,000 in property. The biggest losses were five gold-plated chandeliers newly purchased in Cairo, Ms. Abdel-Hafiz said.

Her husband decided to fake a break-in, Ms. Abdel-Hafiz said, to recoup some of the premiums they had paid on their homeowners insurance policy.

Their insurer refused to pay the claim, however, and in 1991, the Abdel-Hafizes filed suit. In one motion, attorneys for American National Property and Casualty Co. called the break-in "a staged theft" and accused the couple of fabricating receipts.

The case was settled in November 1994 — the year after Agent Abdel-Hafiz was hired by the FBI to work as a translator in its New

York office, who represented the Abdel-Hafizes, said there was never any evidence that they were involved in fraud. He said Ms. Abdel-Hafiz's allegations "smacked of sour grapes."

"I'd say the United States is blessed to have him serve," Mr. Anderson said of Agent Abdel-Hafiz. "He is an A-1 fellow as far as I know."

Mr. Anderson and a Dallas attorney for American National said federal authorities have contacted them over the last several months about the case.

'I trusted him every day'

The FBI routinely searches court filings as part of its background check of prospective employees. The application form asks job candidates if they have ever been involved in a lawsuit. Not answering truthfully can mean criminal prosecution.

Ms. Abdel-Hafiz said the bureau conducted a lengthy background check before hiring her husband. Because the FBI isn't talking, it is not known whether the bureau overlooked the insurance lawsuit or did not consider it important.

As a translator, the future agent was involved in highly sensitive cases. The most high-profile was the case of Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman and nine militant Muslim followers who were accused of plotting a terrorist war on New York City.

As recently as December, the FBI hailed Agent Abdel-Hafiz's contribution to the successful prosecutions and the bravery he showed by testifying despite death threats.

He entered the FBI Academy immediately after the Abdel-Rahman trial ended in 1995. His former wife said he was touted at graduation as the first Muslim FBI agent.

"He was proud to be one of them," Ms. Abdel-Hafiz said.

It was the new agent's request that he be assigned to work on foreign counterterrorism cases in the Dallas field office.

A Dallas police detective who worked alongside Agent Abdel-Hafiz on a terrorism task force described him as diligent and dedicated. "I trusted him every day and had reason to do so," said Detective Charles Storey.

His work also brought him into contact with the FBI director. "Louis Freeh was really high on Gamal," Detective Storey said. "They were on a first-name basis."

Secret recordings

Sometimes, it was another FBI agent who was expressing disdain.

In 1999, Agent Robert Wright of the Chicago FBI office complained to his superiors that Agent Abdel-Hafiz had hindered his investigation of terrorist fund raising by refusing to make secret tape recordings of a grand jury witness.

The Dallas agent had notified the Chicago office that a friend asked him to talk with the president of an Islamic banking firm about Agent Wright's investigation.

The banking company was under FBI scrutiny because its investors included a top political leader of Hamas, a Palestinian militant group, and three people close to Osama bin Laden, the leader of the terrorist group al-Qaeda.

Agent Wright has said he asked Agent Abdel-Hafiz to record a conversation with the banking executive, but the agent refused to do so. In an affidavit prepared later, Agent Wright quoted his colleague as saying, "A Muslim does not record another Muslim."

The conversation with the banking executive never occurred. Less than a year later, Agent Wright has said, FBI officials ordered him to end his investigation because it might interfere with intelligence gathering.

The bureau has barred Agent Wright from giving interviews, an attorney said. But Agent Wright, former partner and a former federal prosecutor who oversaw the Chicago investigation have supported his statements about Agent Abdel-Hafiz.

Mr. Defenbaugh, who retired from the FBI in 2001, said he was the one who decided to refuse the tape-recording request. One of his concerns was the risk to Agent Abdel-Hafiz's effectiveness if other Muslims knew he had made secret recordings.

"At that time, he was the only Muslim agent in the entire FBI," Mr. Defenbaugh said. "There was no reason to compromise Gamal in that situation."

Agent Abdel-Hafiz filed a religious discrimination complaint accusing Agent Wright of derogatory comments. Agent Wright has denied the allegations.

In February 2001, almost two years after the taping dispute, Agent Abdel-Hafiz was promoted to assistant legal attaché to the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh.

The disagreement remained an internal matter until May, when a law firm representing the

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ed by ex-wife's story

actions revealed portions of his affidavit at a Washington, D.C., news conference.

Another FBI agent also alleged last year that Agent Abdel-Hafiz had refused in 1998 to record a Muslim suspect in a separate investigation of Islamic Jihad, an-

other Palestinian militant group. The agent in charge of the investigation into Sami Al-Arian, a University of South Florida professor, said he complained to the FBI, but no disciplinary action was taken.

Mr. Al-Arian and seven associates were indicted in February on

federal charges of running Islamic Jihad in America.

Staff writer Michelle Mittelstadt in Washington contributed to this report.

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