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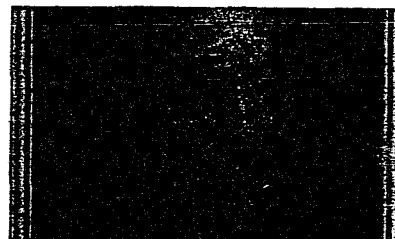
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## The Story of Gamal Abdel-Hafiz: Former Agent in the FBI's International Terrorism Squad

BY MARLENA TELVICK

During his seven years as an FBI special agent, Gamal Abdel-Hafiz rose to the second highest level an agent can obtain. Hailed for his work on several major terrorism cases, including the June 1996 Al-Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia, the 1998 bombings of the U.S. embassies in East Africa, and the 2002 "Lackawanna Six" case, he was then fired abruptly. Here's a look at the complex allegations that cost him his job.

On Sept. 11, 2002, exactly one year after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, Gamal Abdel-Hafiz, who says he was then the FBI's only practicing Muslim agent, was on a plane to the Persian Gulf nation of Bahrain to interview an American citizen held by local police. The CIA had arranged for 21-year-old Mukhtar al-Bakri's detention, but under U.S. law they were not allowed to interrogate an American citizen.



Initially, Abdel-Hafiz's assignment was to get the young American to confess to having attended an Al Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan. Using e-mails provided to him by the Bahrainis that were downloaded from the suspect's account, by midnight on the first day of interviewing al-Bakri, Abdel-Hafiz had a confession. This interrogation would lead to the arrests of five other men from Lackawanna, N.Y., who had traveled with al-Bakri, and who, along with him, were charged with providing "material support and resources" to Al Qaeda by attending a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan.

Once he had obtained the confession, FBI headquarters asked Abdel-Hafiz to conduct further questioning about any knowledge al-Bakri might have of a pending terrorist strike. An ominous sounding e-mail sent by al-Bakri while he was traveling in Saudi Arabia that summer had been interpreted by the counterterrorism community back in the U.S. as code for an attack. Through his subsequent interrogation, Abdel-Hafiz was able to determine that al-Bakri was not involved in, nor had any knowledge of any plans by Al Qaeda to attack America either overseas or at home.

The agents who supervised the Lackawanna investigation, including Buffalo, NY Field Office Special Agent in Charge Peter Ahearn, told FRONTLINE that Abdel-Hafiz "broke the case."

But just eight months later, after Agent Abdel-Hafiz had been lauded by his

supervisors and the FBI in Buffalo for his work, he was abruptly fired. For the FBI the firing represents another public embarrassment as it tries to re-orient its culture and priorities. It also ended a seven-year career of a special agent who had not only earned commendations and monetary awards, but who possessed the culture and language skills that are in desperate demand in the agency's top priority war on terror.

Officially, the FBI says Abdel-Hafiz was terminated for failing to disclose on his employment application an insurance lawsuit in which he was involved. Abdel-Hafiz says he was driven out of the FBI after fellow agents – one of whom he accuses of religious discrimination – spoke to ABC News and Bill O'Reilly of Fox News and accused him of having impeded a terrorism investigation, a charge which he denies. Although the FBI won't comment on the results of its internal investigation, sources within the bureau say its internal investigation did not substantiate the allegations that Abdel-Hafiz jeopardized a terrorism investigation.



## THE CASE BEHIND THE ALLEGATIONS

Born in Cairo, Egypt, Gamal Abdel-Hafiz spent two years in the Egyptian military after studying to be an Arabic/English interpreter at Al-Azhar University. He moved to New York in 1984 and obtained U.S. citizenship in 1990.

- #4 Abdel-Hafiz was first hired by the FBI in 1994 to translate video and audiotapes introduced as evidence in the trial of Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman, the blind cleric indicted in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. He testified extensively at that trial and was encouraged by special agents in the FBI's New York office to join the bureau. In 1996, Abdel-Hafiz says he became the first immigrant Muslim ever to wear an FBI badge. After graduating from the FBI academy, he began work in the Dallas field office's international terrorism squad.
- #5 In April 1999, Abdel-Hafiz became involved in an investigation launched by the FBI's Chicago field office code-named Vulgar Betrayal. Special Agent Robert Wright and his partner John Vincent suspected a large-scale international money-laundering ring was channeling funds through Muslim charitable organizations to terrorist organizations, principally Hamas. As part of their investigation, the agents were investigating an Egyptian citizen named Soliman Biheiri, president of a New Jersey Islamic banking firm called BMI, Inc. (Bait ul-Mal, Inc.). On Feb. 25, 1999, the FBI served Biheiri with a federal grand jury subpoena to appear in Chicago.
- #6 Coincidentally, one of BMI's accountants was friendly with Agent Abdel-Hafiz. They had once lived in the same Brooklyn, NY building and the man had been listed on the agent's FBI application as a reference. The accountant told Abdel-Hafiz that he was worried that funds from BMI had made their way to Africa and helped fund the bombings of two U.S. embassies.
- #7 When BMI President Biheiri learned of the accountant's connection to Abdel-Hafiz, he asked the man to arrange a meeting so that he could discuss his case with the Muslim FBI agent. Abdel-Hafiz checked in with Agents Wright and Vincent to see if he should take the meeting.

Robert Wright later wrote in a signed affidavit, "SA Abdel-Hafiz asked if I desired him to speak with the president (Soliman Biheiri). I advised him that I desired him to

have the meeting, to wear a wire."

Abdel-Hafiz offered to record the meeting openly or to file an official report afterward, but said he was not willing to bring a hidden microphone to the meeting.

The assistant U.S. attorney assigned to the case, Mark Flessner, pressed Abdel-Hafiz to explain why he refused to wear the wire. "He said his decision was based on religious reasons saying, 'A Muslim doesn't record another Muslim,'" Flessner recalled. Special Agent Wright signed an affidavit on March 21, 2000 swearing that this was the exact quote. Former Special Agent John Vincent concurs.

#3 But Gamal Abdel-Hafiz says the remark can only be understood in the proper context. "I told them that my family's and my safety would be at risk if this happened," he says. "They asked me who would put it at risk. I replied that members and supporters of these groups could easily target me and my family, both here in the United States and in Egypt, because they would consider the consensual monitoring under these circumstances a betrayal. When SA Wright asked me why would they consider it a betrayal, I responded that in their view 'a Muslim wouldn't record another Muslim'. I also added that I have received two death threats in the past from these groups."

#4 "They took the words out of context and created a lie," he says.

Abdel-Hafiz's fears are supported in letters he wrote at the time. It certainly was no secret that he was a special agent with the FBI: Abdel-Hafiz had publicly represented the bureau on numerous occasions involving outreach to the Muslim community.

His fear, he says, was based on his experiences in the 1995 Sheik Rahman trial. Prosecutors had informed him of a threat to his life. Agent Hafiz says his reaction was fear that his now ex-wife was in danger as well. At the time FBI officials said they didn't have the budget to protect his wife. "I had to threaten to resign in order for them to move her," Abdel-Hafiz recalled. "That's why I didn't trust the FBI to protect me."

#7 Mark Flessner, the former prosecutor involved in the Vulgar Betrayal investigation, says Agent Abdel-Hafiz's decision was suspicious. "It's hard to emphasize how odd it was for an FBI agent to refuse to cooperate with an investigation when he had been approached by a grand jury subject. It was surreal. I've never heard it happening in the history of the FBI."

#8 Flessner says the FBI ultimately decided not to pursue Vulgar Betrayal, and claims Agent Abdel-Hafiz's refusal to wear a wire played a big part. "It was huge at the time. Having Soliman Biheiri approach Agent Abdel-Hafiz was one the biggest breaks we had at the time. His refusal to wear a wire had a significant negative impact on our case." Biheiri was indicted in August 2003 on immigration charges. In the same indictment, the government alleges that BMI made or conducted financial transactions with persons who were or are now "Specially Designated Global Terrorists" by President Bush's Executive Order 13224.

Danny Defenbaugh, now retired, was Abdel-Hafiz's ultimate superior as the Special Agent in Charge of the Dallas Field Office. He defends Abdel-Hafiz, saying, "A very small number of agents wear wires and they are usually undercover. Agent Abdel-Hafiz, because of his extensive outreach to the Muslim community in Texas and

elsewhere on behalf of the FBI was definitely not undercover."

Defenbaugh says he did not feel the request to have Abdel-Hafiz wear a wire was justified. "I never gave him a direct order to wear a wire, so there's no insubordination or dereliction of duty," he says. "To me, it's sour grapes with Agent Wright. He made a number of very disparaging racial statements about Gamal to staff in my bureau. I told Gamal to file a racial discrimination complaint and that if he didn't, I would."

In fact, on July 6, 1999, Agent Abdel-Hafiz did file a religious discrimination complaint accusing Agent Wright of making derogatory comments to fellow agents. On Sept. 8, 2000, Abdel-Hafiz contacted the FBI's EEO office informing them that he had still not received any communications on the status of his complaint against Wright. In the letter, Abdel-Hafiz writes, "The rumors and the consequences of the actions taken by the Chicago agent have taken its toll on my health and my family. I feel the impact and reap the poison fruits of rumors every day. The Chicago agent attacked my integrity and my trustworthiness and I have full intention and the will to restore both."

According to Abdel-Hafiz, his EEO case against Agent Wright has been waiting to have a judge in Washington, D.C. assigned to hear it since February 2002, and that even though he is no longer in the FBI, he expects to see his case tried.

*Dr. Vincent*  
#4 While Agent Vincent, who is no longer with the FBI, never went beyond questioning Agent Abdel-Hafiz's loyalty to the bureau, he says, "It looks suspicious. We're all in danger. If Agent Abdel-Hafiz relished his position as liaison between the Muslim community and the FBI as it seemed and was scared of retribution, he shouldn't be in the FBI. When you're dealing with a Muslim, his first allegiance is to his religion. His second allegiance is to his religion. Later down the line comes his family and his job. I think Gamal was being true to his religion."

FRONTLINE was unable to interview Agent Robert Wright who according to his lawyer David Schippers, has been forbidden by the FBI to talk to the media about this case.

## MUSLIMS AND THE FBI

With an estimated 7,000,000 Muslims living in the U.S., Abdel-Hafiz says the Muslim community is "grossly underrepresented within the FBI."

Despite the FBI's affirmative action successes over the years, "There are only a handful of Muslims in the FBI," he says. "It creates a great disconnect between the FBI and the Muslim and Arab community in the United States." He says some agents in the FBI's counterterrorism unit have a sensitivity to the Muslim community, but "I wouldn't say all of them." He adds that it is a cultural problem: "Some of the agents feel like they don't have to study these people to work this matter."

The FBI will not comment specifically on the current number of Muslims working for the FBI. According to spokesman Paul Bresson, "The FBI does not maintain a catalog of people's religious persuasions. Our Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) requirements are only to track people by race: White, Black, Hispanic, American



Indian and Asian."

Abdel-Hafiz recalls that while he was training at the FBI academy, then-director Louis Freeh asked to meet with him. "He came on a tour with my class, and I met him and he thanked me for the work that I did for the trial in New York," says Abdel-Hafiz. He remembers that the director thanked him for deciding to become an agent. "He told me that the FBI wouldn't be able to counter terrorism effectively without having more Muslim and Arab agents. He gave the example of the Asian and Latino crimes in the United States. He said that because we have more Asian and Latino Agents we now are able to better combat crimes within these two communities in the United States."

When he started at the Dallas field office, Abdel-Hafiz recalls an "old timer" saying, "Wow, Abdel-Hafiz is usually a name you see on the target list, not the agent list."

Abdel-Hafiz also says some Muslims are afraid of being involved with the government because people will shy away from them. When Abdel-Hafiz joined the FBI, he says he was shunned by the Muslim community. "A lot of people just stayed away from me, a lot of people were warned not to talk to me within the community."

**#4** Abdel-Hafiz criticizes the FBI for failing to figure out what's needed in order to recruit sources from the Muslim community. He says the community outreach program that the Dallas FBI Field Office developed with the Arab and Muslim community was a good example of how it can work, but that when some people in the New York office wanted to start something similar, there was resistance from the higher-ups. Abdel-Hafiz explains, "In Dallas, we started an open dialogue -- which had never been done -- between the Muslim and Arab community and the Dallas FBI division. We met with imams at mosques, with leading members of the community. It was highly effective in clarifying the misconceptions both sides had of the other." He says, "Some people within the FBI, they felt like, we don't need to understand this culture, we don't need to understand these people, all we need to do is, when they violate the law, we'll put them in jail."

**#5** And Abdel-Hafiz says getting people inside the community to reveal who is sending money to terrorists and who is sympathetic with anti-American causes is difficult. "People don't trust that their identity will always be kept hidden," he says. "There is some history with law enforcement sometimes exposing the identities of informants - it can cause them a great deal of danger, and security concerns, for them, and for their families".

Gamal Abdel-Hafiz charges that the FBI's internal efforts to educate agents on Muslim and Arabic culture are piecemeal at best. "How often do they hold a training conference, or a training class for agents to understand Arab culture, the Muslim religion, on how to fight fundamentalist groups?" he asks. "It's not often. And when they do, there's a handful of agents who attend, and half of them are reassigned to something else a few months later. It's not one-day training, it should be long-term training, to be taken seriously, and to have people who are committed to understanding the culture. That's not happening today."

Repeated calls to the FBI regarding their Muslim sensitivity training programs were not returned.

However, it is known that the bureau has taken steps to address one potential factor

that may have hindered its relationship with the Muslim community: language skills. Citing "a critical need to hire specialized professional support employees to help the agency continue meeting the challenge of global terrorism and homeland security," the FBI has held job fairs at Headquarters in Washington and has made public hiring appeals to attract agents with Arabic and Middle Eastern language skills. A June 18, 2003, General Accounting Office evaluation shows that there has been some progress: "In the priority languages identified to support the FBI's new priorities, 195 contract linguists and 44 language specialists were hired between October 2002 and March 2003."

## THE ALLEGATIONS RESURFACE

After the controversial 1999 Chicago case, Special Agent Gamal Abdel-Hafiz continued to climb the ladder at the FBI, and in October 2000, he was sent to the FBI's Saudi Arabia office on temporary duty. The day he arrived, the U.S.S. Cole was bombed in nearby Yemen, and he quickly became involved in that investigation. On February 2001, Director Louis Freeh appointed Abdel-Hafiz to be the Assistant Legal Attaché in Riyadh with a GS 14 ranking, the second highest level an agent can attain. He was still at the post on Sept. 11, 2002, when he received the urgent call to go to Bahrain to interview the Lackawanna suspect.

Later that year, however, the Chicago controversy re-emerged and with it other troubles. Special Agents Robert Wright and John Vincent went public about Abdel-Hafiz's behavior during the Vulgar Betrayal case and then allegations surfaced involving a second dispute in which Abdel-Hafiz was accused of having refused to secretly record a fellow Muslim a year earlier. Thirty-four-year FBI veteran Barry Carmody, who worked on counterintelligence in Tampa, Fla. alleged that in 1998, Agent Abdel-Hafiz had refused to record a telephone conversation with Sami Al-Arian, a suspect in an investigation of the Palestinian militant group Islamic Jihad.

*Barry Carmody*

Abdel-Hafiz said he first heard about Agent Carmody's complaint in a media report. He says he never refused to record Al-Arian and had, in fact, tried to contact him on behalf of the bureau. Later, when he encountered the suspect by chance at a conference, he wasn't prepared to be wired. He didn't have the equipment or the approval from his superiors, so he wrote up a 302 official report form instead.

Sami Al-Arian was indicted by the Justice Department in February 2003 for providing material support to Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

When reached by FRONTLINE, Barry Carmody was reluctant to discuss the case -- the trial is scheduled for 2004 in Tampa. "I won't do or say anything to jeopardize that trial," he says. Carmody says he knew Agent Wright from an earlier case, and had told him that "there's a man aboard who shouldn't be there," referring to Abdel-Hafiz. When asked if he filed written complaints against Abdel-Hafiz, Carmody says he had "advised" the FBI of his concerns.

The story surrounding Abdel-Hafiz's alleged refusals to twice record Muslim suspects began to get more and more coverage in the news media. ABC News aired an interview with Agent Wright and former Agent Vincent in December 2002, and the Fox News program "The O'Reilly Factor" devoted significant airtime to the story in early 2003.

Internet chat groups picked up the story and messages began appearing with subject lines like, "Muslim FBI Agent Shows Allegiance to Allah, Not America," and "Muslim FBI Agent Turns Against USA."

**#2** The FBI suspended Abdel-Hafiz in February 2003. The bureau's reasons, however, did not involve the public charges by Wright and Vincent. According to an April 2003 report in the Dallas Morning News, Bertie Abdel-Hafiz, Gamal's ex-wife, who was bitter about their 1996 divorce and his subsequent remarriage, told the FBI that in November 1989 her husband had faked a break-in at their Roanoke, Tex. home in order to collect \$25,000 in insurance benefits. Bertie Abdel-Hafiz's charges prompted the bureau to initiate a criminal inquiry.

Abdel-Hafiz says his ex-wife's allegations are "false, baseless and fabricated." "I would never have had the backbone to apply for a job with the FBI if I had anything to do with such a despicable crime," says Abdel-Hafiz.

In the course of its investigation, the FBI learned that Abdel-Hafiz had failed to mention a lawsuit filed against the insurance carrier on his FBI application, as required. The application form clearly stated that those "willfully withholding information or making false statements" on the application would be liable for dismissal from the FBI.

"In July 2002, I was directed by FBI headquarters to travel to Washington," Abdel-Hafiz says. "There they presented me with papers of criminal inquiry against me."

When asked why he didn't include the lawsuit on his FBI application Abdel-Hafiz says, "The question on the FBI application asks if you have ever been a party in a court action. My understanding of that question was a court action is where you physically go to court. I was not even aware that our attorney filed a lawsuit in court." He says that in the course of his career at the FBI he had been polygraphed twice and asked if he had ever provided false information in order to gain employment at the FBI. Both times he answered "no" and both times he passed.

But later, as part of the FBI Office of Professional Responsibility's investigation, in Jan. 22, 2003 Abdel-Hafiz's negative responses to a polygraph test asking whether he instructed his wife to file a false police report of a home burglary were determined to be "indicative of deception."

Abdel-Hafiz says that against regulations, the polygrapher "probed" him before administering the polygraph. "He asked me if I had studied how to beat the polygraph, brought up veiled accusations and told me I should just come clean with the truth because they had a lot of information on me, and put a huge folder before me. They made me agitated and to feel guilty even before they started the test."

At a meeting at FBI headquarters in February 2003, Abdel-Hafiz was handed a letter advising him of the FBI's intention to dismiss him. They collected his credentials and badge and suspended his clearance. When he returned to the U.S. Embassy in Saudi Arabia, Abdel-Hafiz found that the embassy's security officer had sent a memo to all the guards with his and his wife's pictures, advising them that neither was to be allowed into the embassy. He says, "Then the rumors started that I had been fired for spying on the U.S. government."

Abdel-Hafiz was terminated on May 27, 2003 for "lack of candor" and "gross

misconduct" for failure to disclose the insurance lawsuit on his employment application. He says that if the FBI's Inspection Division at headquarters denies his pending appeal that he was wrongly terminated, he will have no choice but to file a lawsuit against the bureau for wrongful dismissal based on discrimination. He argues that he had seen many instances in the FBI where questionable matters were dismissed after agents were given an opportunity to explain them.

Even one of his most ardent detractors, former Special Agent John Vincent agrees, "Firing someone over an insurance claim is a little heavy-handed. There's a lot of leeway on the application. If the FBI wanted to keep Agent Abdel-Hafiz after his ex-wife revealed the insurance case to them, they could have. There must be more to his firing than the insurance issue. If they didn't want to [get] rid of him, they wouldn't have."

**#3** "The punishment that my family and I are receiving from the FBI is not a punishment appropriate for failure to disclose a lawsuit on a job application; it is a punishment more suitable for treason," says Abdel-Hafiz.

Read FRONTLINE's interview with [Gamal Abdel-Hafiz](#).

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