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TAKING *MISSILES* FROM STRANGERS

One wannabe heads to prison. Another waits his turn. Should we be relieved?



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Prompted by the horrors of 9/11, the FBI's approach to domestic Jihadists turned decidedly proactive. Undercover agents began staging elaborate "reverse stings," offering advice, moral support and even make-believe bombs to gullible would-be terrorists. That strategy proved quite successful. So much so, that we prognosticated nearly a decade ago that wannabes would soon cease "[taking bombs from strangers](#)."

Well, we're still waiting. In the meantime, Georgia resident Hasher Jallal Taheb, 23, upped the game by – yes! – accepting a missile (actually, an AT-4 anti-tank weapon, which fires a small rocket.) [He's been locked up](#) since January 16, 2019, the fateful day when he and the stoolie who lured him into the FBI's web met up with undercover agents driving a semi. Taheb was there to trade in his car for a load that included everything from rifles to the tank killer. Instead, once he said and did enough to meet the requirements of [18 U.S.C. Section 844 \(f\)](#), "attempting to destroy, by fire or an explosive, a building owned by or leased to the United States," badges flashed. Game over!

[Taheb pled guilty](#) a few days ago. His intentions had certainly been grandiose. For one thing, that "building" he wished to blow up was...The White House! Given its setback and such, it's why he wanted a missile. Taheb had also blabbed about other worthy targets, including the Statue of Liberty, the Washington Monument, and the Lincoln Memorial. And as if to torment your writer, he had even set his sights on a synagogue!

According to the [FBI affidavit](#), Taheb first came to its attention in March 2018 when a citizen tipped agents about a local youth who was looking to sell his truck "to fund a trip to Islamic State territory" and join the Jihad. Taheb was soon contacted by an FBI

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informer, who in turn brought in an undercover agent. Taheb's new "buds" promptly agreed to participate – natch, under his command – in an elaborate scheme to destroy the West Wing of the White House. Only problem is, Taheb, who had authored a 40-page long "justification for creating and leading his group to conduct violent attacks," had never as much as fired a gun (but he did say he "could learn easily"). No problem! His recruits eagerly offered to get everything necessary, from guns and explosives to, of course, the "missile."

There's a lot more in the affidavit. Its content and tone left your writer, whose Federal career included a considerable amount of (non-terrorist) undercover work, with very mixed feelings. Taheb, a high-school grad with an \$8.15 an hour gig at a car wash, was living with his mom. He had no criminal record and was not affiliated with any radical groups. Lacking a passport, he couldn't travel overseas. While his vision was definitely nasty and he talked a big game, he really seemed a prime candidate for being led by the nose by wily operators.

That, indeed, is exactly what his Federal public defenders thought. Here's [an extract from their motion](#) to have him confined at home pending trial:

He is not a danger to the community...He does not have the ability to do any of this. This grandiose plan, this fantastical plan, could not be farther from reality...the government took somebody who was talking and expanded him...[agents] ingratiated themselves into Mr. Taheb's life to lead him down that path.

On the one hand, the U.S. Magistrate agreed that the would-be terrorist seemed hopelessly naïve. But perhaps that added to the risk: "He's extremely gullible and susceptible to fantastical plans which make him a danger...Or he's a mastermind of what could have been a very devastating situation." So Taheb went to jail.

Taheb's sentencing is set for June. Pandemic or not, now that he's (proudly?) admitted guilt he's likely to draw a very, very long term. Why do we think so? Consider what happened to his virtual clone only last month. On March 4, Robert Lorenzo Hester Jr., another convert to Islam, [got twenty years with no parole](#) after pleading guilty to attempting to provide material support to ISIS, a Federally-designated terrorist organization, in violation of [18 U.S.C. 2339B](#).

According to the [FBI's affidavit](#), the 28-year old Missouri resident drew their attention through his posts on social media that extolled ISIS and endorsed violence

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against the U.S. When contacted online by FBI undercover agents, the one-time Army soldier (he had washed out in less than a year) offered to help attack a military base. He also identified other potential targets, including “oil production”, “federal places,” “government officials” and, of course, “Wall Street.”

Hester soon met up with his new buds. In contrast to Taheb, whose scheme they joined, the wily Feds welcomed Hester into *their* plot, which was (of course) inherently make-believe. And since an “attempt” requires more than talk, the agents asked their eager recruit to help out in a tangible way. He enthusiastically agreed. Hester was shown various items to be used in the attack, including three machine guns, two handguns and two pipes for the “bombs.” At the undercover’s request he obtained various items including boxes of roofing nails, which he was told would be placed in the bombs to maximize casualties.

To be sure, giving terrorists nails and such is a bad thing. And unlike Taheb, Hester had displayed a violent side. He had recently pled guilty in local court to a felony after smashing in a store window, then threatening employees with a bag that contained a handgun. (Hester had been arguing with his wife.) He otherwise seemed a non-entity. One could easily conclude, as did a writer for *The Intercept*, that yet another “terrorist” had been led by the nose:

News reports breathlessly echoed the government’s depiction of Hester as a foiled would-be terrorist. But the only contact Hester had with ISIS was with the two undercover agents who suggested to him that they had connections with the group. The agents, who were in contact with him for five months, provided him with money and rides home from work as he dealt with the personal fallout of an unrelated arrest stemming from an altercation at a local grocery store.

Hester’s susceptibility to the agents’ blandishments [was echoed by the Federal public defender](#), who argued that the accused had been feeling “emotionally betrayed by the Army” and struggling “to handle the humiliation he received in his home community for ‘flunking out’ of the military”:

Throughout all of his struggles, Robert Hester desperately wanted to feel accepted and to do something that would make someone proud of him. In an effort to fit in, he searched online to learn how to be a good, new Muslim. Robert Hester quickly ran into targeted propaganda that was aimed directly at young, disaffected men like himself.

Well, he’s now got two decades in which to turn himself around.

Prior posts about FBI counterterror casework (see “Related Posts,” below) have discussed a number of Taheb/Hester-like stings. If our tone in those pieces seems somewhat skeptical, it hardly approaches the tenor of [The Intercept’s conclusion](#) “that the FBI isn’t always nabbing would-be terrorists so much as setting up mentally ill or economically desperate people to commit crimes they could never have accomplished on their own.” That point of view seems consistent with the findings of [a report by Human Rights Watch](#) that severely criticized the FBI’s pursuit of “particularly vulnerable individuals” through investigations where “the government—often acting through informants—is actively involved in developing the plot, persuading and sometimes pressuring the target to participate, and providing the resources to carry it out.”

Still, Taheb and Hester aside, a real threat *does* exist. [Thirteen domestic mass murders](#) have been attributed to Islamic extremism since 9/11. Perhaps the most notorious was the Orlando nightclub massacre of 2016 in which [Omar Mateen](#) shot and killed forty-nine patrons and wounded several dozen others. Curiously, it turns out that [Mateen’s father was once an FBI terrorism informant](#) and agents had considered using his son as well.

One can understand why terrorism leads aren’t ignored. Still, the enthusiastic pursuit of wannabees suggests that there may be other reasons at hand. Such as productivity. As America’s lead counterterror agency, the heat’s been on for the FBI to show results. Here’s a brief clip from former Director Mueller’s [extensive 2006 exposition](#) about the Bureau’s goals:

After the September 11 attacks on America, the FBI priorities shifted dramatically. Our top priority became the prevention of another terrorist attack. Today, our top three priorities—counterterrorism, counterintelligence, and cyber security—are all national-security related. To that end, we have made a number of changes in the Bureau, both in structure and in the way we do business.

Unlike their colleagues who investigate bank robbers and fraudsters, FBI agents working terrorism lack a built-in fountain of casework. So should they come across a promising character such as Taheb or Hester – well, why not? To be sure, demonstrating that someone took a “substantial step towards actually committing the crime,” [what “attempt” really means](#), may require that agents devise elaborate scripts that capitalize on targets’ naiveté. We’re certain that not every terror suspect has fallen for such a ruse, but alas, the FBI hasn’t yet published a list of failures to conscript.

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Turning one's nose up at wannabes may be difficult for another reason. Civil commitment "is by tradition a state purview, with little role for the president or federal government." As your writer knows from past experience, trying to maneuver a Federal criminal "client" into the state mental health system can be an exercise in frustration. Even if a Fed is convinced that a target is mentally ill, there may be realistically no place to begin outside the criminal process.

That's not to say, of course, that one couldn't create a Federal/State interface for this purpose. Nothing prohibits the FBI and local police from collaboratively funneling characters such as Taheb or Hester through the same tedious channels that cops occasionally use for out-and-out psychos. Whether that could prove effective is hard to say. To be sure, it would produce neither criminal casework nor headlines.

Your writer and his colleagues took pride in their ability to intercept existing plots. They met undercover with machinegun peddlers and scoured the streets for characters who hawked guns to criminals. They didn't write and perform elaborate scripts to get naïve, twisted wannabes such as Taheb and Hester to do the right (meaning, wrong) thing. Doing so goes against the grain of the undercover craft. And even if it doesn't amount to illegal entrapment, it feels morally wrong.