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2008-12-01 Home Front: Culture Wars

Sacramento FBI chief rebuilds trust with Muslim leaders

For months, Sacramento's top FBI agent kept a Muslim prayer rug in his office. It was for Imam Mohamed Abdul Azeez, religious leader of the SALAM Islamic Center in Sacramento, who attended a citizens' academy with Drew Parenti at the FBI office.

Parenti hasn't converted to Islam. He's been trying to convert Muslim leaders who might be suspicious of his agency after 9/11 and the Lodi terrorism case. And, after years of distrust, Azeez and other local Muslims believe they have found a friend in Parenti. The local FBI chief has visited several of the area's 14 mosques, ready to answer tough questions. He also has recruited an Egyptian Muslim agent who is known to the community and worships regularly at SALAM (Sacramento Area League of Associated Muslims) and other local mosques.

Local FBI agents and Muslim American leaders now come together "through friendship and partnership, not eavesdropping," Azeez said. "It's not us against them, and by working together, it's having a profound effect on preventing another 9/11. Prevention's not about phone-tapping and visiting people at 3 a.m., it's about being friends with the community.

"He's the guy with the gun," Azeez said. "If he puts a smile on his face and approaches you humbly, you're going to open up right away." Now, the imam and the FBI agent plan to travel around California and the nation, to show other communities how to build similar partnerships.

Azeez believes the Lodi investigation -- which ended in 2006 with the conviction of one man of supporting terrorism -- would play out much differently today. The new partnership between the FBI and area Muslims could prevent attempts to radicalize Muslim youths, Azeez said. "Someone familiar with law enforcement told me if we'd had an Arab or Muslim agent on the force, this whole Lodi thing would not have happened," Azeez said.

Farouk Fakira, a leader at south Sacramento's Masjid Annur -- which invited Parenti to the mosque's open house Nov. 22 -- agrees. Parenti "is very approachable, very decent," Fakira said. "If Drew was around, the Lodi thing wouldn't have happened because Drew would have known better."

Parenti, who inherited the Lodi case, "makes no apologies whatsoever for the case in terms of the way it was conducted or prosecuted." But he did say relationships now in place might prevent the "petri dish" of radical Islam from spawning hatred.

Parenti, 48, became Sacramento Special Agent In Charge on June 19, 2005 -- 11 days after two Pakistani American Muslims from Lodi, Umer Hayat and his son Hamid, were arrested on suspicion of terrorism.

In 2006, Hamid Hayat was convicted of providing material support to terrorists by undergoing firearms training in Pakistan and returning to America prepared for jihad. Hayat, a 25-year-old cherry picker with a seventh-grade education, was

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 23:47 Hammerhead
 23:45 Sherry
 23:34 Hammerhead
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 23:11 OldSpook
 23:08 JosephMendiola
 23:06 JosephMendiola
 23:01 JosephMendiola
 22:58 JosephMendiola
 22:58 thibaud
 22:55 Some guy
 22:52 JosephMendiola
 22:49 KBK
 22:48 crosspatch
 22:39 JosephMendiola
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convicted based on confessions he made during a 10-hour FBI interrogation without a lawyer present.

Hayat had been befriended by Naseem Khan, a Pakistani American Muslim from Oregon working undercover for the FBI. In phone conversations disclosed during trial, Khan goaded Hayat into attending a terrorist training camp and encouraged his interest in violent Islamic fundamentalism. Hayat -- sentenced to 24 years -- admitted relishing the murder of Jewish journalist Daniel Pearl. No evidence placed Hayat at a terrorist camp other than his conflicting statements to the FBI.


Parenti, a graduate of California State University, San Diego, with a degree in Spanish, is a 24-year FBI veteran. He once supervised the anti-drug trafficking program in Mexico City.

Two months after he arrived in Sacramento, Parenti recalled, he was intrigued by a newspaper headline, "New-Wave Imams," featuring Azeez, who had just become imam at SALAM. "I realized I did not know much about Islam," he said. He reached out to Azeez, an Egyptian American Muslim who wrote his University of Chicago master's thesis on the roots of suicide bombers


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