

Local Muslim's treatment in U.S. custody is suspicious

By Asma Mobin-Uddin

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While in federal custody for seven months, Nuradin Abdi changed from a normal person to a damaged human being for whom the court ordered a psychiatric evaluation. Taken into custody on an immigration charge at the end of November 2003 in Columbus, Abdi later was accused of plotting to blow up an Ohio shopping mall in an indictment unsealed on June 14. Abdi's mental state in court and the manner in which the accusations against him were made public raise troubling questions.

Those who knew Abdi before he was taken into custody describe him as a friendly community member who was helpful to others around him. After seeing him in court in June, they were shocked at how different he was and described him twitching, laughing inappropriately, banging his head against the table, making noises, speaking to himself and staring strangely into space.

As a physician, I am extremely concerned that his behaviors might indicate mental and possibly physical abuse during his detention, and that his mental injuries may be permanent.

In America, we used to believe that people were innocent until proven guilty, that everyone deserved due process, and that people should be found guilty in a court of law before they are punished.

We considered the use of torture unacceptable in civilized society. Has the war on terror changed our nation's values? In light of the abuses committed at the Abu Ghraib prison, such questions are inevitable.

As an American-born Muslim who has lived in Ohio for the past 30 years, I abhor and condemn terrorism in all its forms. The safety and prosperity of my family and community are of great importance to me. If Abdi is guilty of plotting a terrorist attack, he must be brought to justice.

But the Justice Department has wrongly accused Muslims in America of terrorism before. In September 2003, Army Capt. James Yee, a Muslim chaplain at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, was arrested and accused of espionage, mutiny, sedition and aiding the enemy. He spent 76 days in solitary confinement. Eventually, all charges against him were dropped and his record was cleared.

On May 6, Oregon lawyer Brandon Mayfield, a convert to Islam, was arrested after the FBI said it had matched his fingerprints to those on items used in the Madrid bombing. Detained for two weeks, Mayfield was released after Spanish authorities determined the fingerprint match was incorrect.

The media frenzy accompanying these arrests destroyed the personal reputations of innocent Americans and irreparably damaged the public perception of America's Muslim community. When these Muslims were exonerated, the clearing of their names received minimal media coverage.

The timing and methods used by our government to disseminate information about Abdi's case raise disturbing questions. After detaining him for almost seven months, why did Attorney General John Ashcroft suddenly announce the accusations against Abdi to the national media on June 14?

During that week, the media were covering the 9/11 commission's findings that there was no link between Iraq and al-Qaida and that the government was not prepared for the 9/11 attacks. As the administration's justifications for war continued

to unravel, a group of 26 respected former U.S. diplomats and military leaders openly criticized the Bush administration's foreign policies. In the midst of all the criticism of Bush's leadership, breaking news announced that our government had saved America's heartland from terrorism. Frontpage headlines reported Ashcroft's announcement the first day of Sen. John Kerry's presidential campaign stop in Columbus.

Perhaps the administration assumes that fear and suspicion will keep the public from questioning its methods or credibility. If so, the administration officials underestimate the commitment that we in America's heartland have to the values our nation has always held dear: justice, fairness, decency, compassion and a belief that people are innocent until proven guilty. If we give up our values in times of fear, we ourselves will destroy what we cherish about America.

Nuradin Abdi's apparent mental deterioration might be a result of the process this administration has adopted and implemented, even right here in Ohio, to obtain information and indictments in the war on terrorism. Even if he is found innocent, his mother, wife and the rest of his family may have lost forever the Abdi they knew and loved. His third child, due within a month, may never know the person his father used to be.

The treatment Abdi received in jail must be investigated. At the same time, fair, open trials, based on evidence and due process rather than secrecy or sensationalism, are owed to all suspects. Let the administration and the world know that in America's heartland, we hold fast to America's values.

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