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# For Muslim immigrant, no ordinary phone call

Tim Townsend St. Louis Post-Dispatch | Sep. 28, 2010

**BALLWIN, Mo. --** Adil Imdad had just finished installing a hardwood floor in his new house when his cell phone rang.

Imdad, 41, an environmental engineer and devout Muslim from Pakistan, had moved to the United States as a teenager and became a citizen in 1986. He hoped the new house would be the base for his daughters? typical American suburban childhood.

Imdad initially planned to let the Sept. 21 call go to voice mail, but he saw the 618 area code, and thought, ?that?s long distance, I should probably answer.? So he did.

?I?m going to burn a copy of the Quran,? an angry, intense voice said. ?Watch the news. It?ll be on all three channels. You will hear about it.?

Imdad put down his electric screwdriver and sat on the couch. The caller sounded serious.

Imdad had no idea the 12-minute conversation he was about to have would turn another American family?s existence upside down.

Six hours after the phone call ended, the FBI, Secret Service and police would show up at the home of Roman Conaway in Fairview Heights, Mo., and trigger an eight-hour standoff complete with hostages, suicide belt mock-ups and threats against the president.

As Imdad sat with the phone pressed to his ear, he leaned on counseling work at a federal prison where, in 2004, he received the Volunteer of the Year award from the prison?s religious services department.

?Sir, who are you?? Imdad asked. ?Who are you trying to call??

Conaway gave Imdad his name, and said he had found Imdad?s cell phone number on the website for a St. Louis mosque where Imdad is the chairman of the mosque?s management committee.

?How can I help you?? Imdad asked.

?I just want to tell someone what I?m about to do,? Conaway responded.

?Roman, why do you want to burn someone else?s holy book?? Imdad asked.

Imdad said Conaway told him he hoped to start a war between Muslims and Christians. Conaway told him that he was against the war in Afghanistan, and blamed former President George W. Bush for starting it.

Conaway, 50, told Imdad he wanted to spark ?an apocalypse,? and would do so by killing President Obama.

?I told him that as a Muslim, I would never want to hurt him,? Imdad said. ?I said that I had nothing against him or his faith. I asked him if he believed Jesus would really want him to desecrate another person?s holy book.?

Imdad pleaded with Conaway not to hurt his family or himself. As they began to discuss faith, Conaway seemed to calm down.

After the two men hung up, Imdad was unsure if Conaway had been serious about either the Quran or Obama. Yet in recent weeks, he knew the global reaction to threats of Quran burning had proved deadly in India, Afghanistan and Indonesia.

Imdad decided to e-mail the FBI, fearing the consequences of Conaway?s actions both at home and abroad.

It wasn?t something Imdad took lightly. Over the past eight years, he has had a rocky relationship with the bureau. He said FBI agents had harassed him dozens of times in the past.

But, Imdad said, over the frightening last six months ?the FBI has been very helpful to the Muslim community here.?

Imdad e-mailed the FBI just after noon, about 30 minutes after hanging up with Conaway. An agent called Imdad about an hour later, he said, to talk more about the conversation. Meanwhile, Conaway updated his Facebook page, claiming he would burn a Quran at 3 p.m.

According to an FBI affidavit, three agents arrived at Conaway?s house around 6 p.m. Conaway soon emerged with his wife and son, and ?displayed a wide mesh support belt? with ?inert putty-like material designed and formed to replicate blocks of C-4 explosive? affixed to the belt.

Conaway told the agents a detonator was also wired to two 55-gallon drums full of combustible chemicals in the front yard and another in the rear. After an evacuation of the neighborhood, Conaway allowed his son and wife to leave the house, and surrendered about 2:10 a.m.

He was arrested and charged in federal court with making false threats to detonate an explosive device and threatening the president, charges that carry a potential penalty of five years in prison.

Sitting in their living room in a haze of cigarette smoke, Mary Conaway, 47, and her son Jason, 24, apologized for the state of their home, which they said had been ransacked by the FBI; agents had found a Quran on a Weber grill in the yard, resting on a bed of kindling.

Mary Conaway said the events had very little to do with religion. Her husband, she said, had snapped after a court hearing where his daughter had filed a protection order to bar her father from contacting his grandchildren?a family custody battle that?s been brewing for months.

?My husband believes that Muslims are good people,? his wife said. ?Like any other people, there are the good and the bad.?

Mary Conaway said her husband was brought up as a Baptist. He reads the Bible every night, she said. He prays every night. ?He believes in God, but he?s curious about every religion,? she said.

Yet it?s unlikely anyone besides Conaway himself could describe why the family dispute resulted in a threat to burn a Quran.

His wife said her husband never mentioned Obama until the FBI showed up, and that he felt betrayed by Imdad

when the agents appeared in their front yard.

?On that phone call, he thought he had found someone he could confide in and talk to,? she said.

Yet even knowing Conaway?s feelings, Imdad is resolute.

?I had to act. I didn?t want him to hurt himself or anyone else,? he said. ?In another time, maybe he would have asked me to come over and I would have gone to his house and had tea and talked and maybe we?d be friends.?

[Tim Townsend writes for *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in St. Louis, Mo.]

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