



## OPINION COLUMN

# Authorities must work to build Muslims' trust

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The moment I saw my Twitter feed light up with breaking news alerts about a terror bust last Monday, my heart sank. I was worried not because I wanted a potential terror plot to go ahead, but because April had already been a difficult month and the last thing I needed to hear was that there had been another potential terror threat.

First there was the revelation that two young Muslim men from London, Ont., had travelled to Algeria and taken part in an attack on an oil refinery in mid-January. Both were killed. There was the expected barrage of questions, concerns and criticisms regarding our Muslim communities with which the community is still dealing.

The Boston Marathon bombings were particularly difficult. To watch fellow human beings go through such a sudden and terrifying event was heart-wrenching. It reminded me of the many civilian deaths and injuries occurring almost daily in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and many other parts of the world. Except this time, it hit a lot closer to home. I was born in Montreal, have lived in Toronto and have relatives in New York, so Boston is a city with which I can identify.

The "oh no, I hope it's not a Muslim" moment was quickly followed by the announcement the suspects were Muslims. Only a few days had passed since that terrible day and the overall sadness, concern about violent radicalism and fear of backlash hadn't dissipated. The latter was so strong that last Friday, as I prepared to leave home for leading our weekly prayer service, I considered saying proper good-byes to my wife and two young children in case something terrible happened and I never returned.

So news of the alleged terror plot last Monday came at a very challenging time. But as details began to emerge, I realized this one was very different. Muslim leaders were being briefed by the RCMP before the official news conference. Then came the revelation the original tip alerting authorities had come from a Toronto-area imam.

The fact that an alleged plot had been foiled brought great relief. After all, any potential criminal or terrorist activity would affect all Canadians, including me, my family and my community. My parents often take the train and I've had relatives who have taken the Toronto to New York train that was allegedly the target.

Knowing a Muslim leader initiated the original tip highlights the concern shared by Canadian Muslims for the safety and prosperity of our fellow citizens and our country. When I noticed a suspicious character snooping around my neighbour's one night, I called the police. I would do the same if I ever felt there was a risk of any other potential criminal or terrorist activity.

The public involvement of Muslim leaders in this case shows that years of efforts by both the authorities and community leaders to build trust and work as partners have started to pay off.

Yet, I believe there is still a lot of work to do. While their leaders may have built a good working relationship with authorities, a sizeable chunk of the Canadian Muslim public appears to be wary of the partnership. There are a number of reasons for that, but wanting to harbour potential terrorists definitely isn't one of them.

It is hard for a community to accept that some of their own may have been planning deadly attacks, especially at home. But when people are not convicted of the crimes for which they are accused and held in custody, as in the case of some of the Toronto 18, this does nothing to build trust. Seven of the Toronto 18 were not convicted and is one of the main reasons why many Canadian Muslims find it hard to trust authorities.

Delays in bringing cases to trial, almost three years in one ongoing case, adds to the feeling that authorities are not acting in good faith. Fair, open and expedient trials can do much to restore trust.

Then there is the case of Craig Monteilh, the ex-criminal and now ex-FBI informant who let the cat out of the bag on his attempts to infiltrate the Muslim community in Southern California. He pretended to convert to Islam and then posed as a radical in an attempt to expose terrorist sympathizers. Members of the community were so alarmed that they reported him to the FBI, not knowing that

Monteilh was employed by the agency. He has now had a change of heart.

“The way the FBI conducts their operations, it is all about entrapment . . . I know the game, I know the dynamics of it. It’s such a joke, a real joke. There is no real hunt. It’s fixed,” he was quoted as saying in a March 2012 article in The Guardian.

Numerous terrorism busts in the United States have involved sting operations. Trevor Aaronson, author of *The Terror Factory: Inside the FBI’s Manufactured War on Terrorism*, told *The Atlantic* magazine in February that more than 150 men were “caught in sting operations who never had the means and, in some cases, never had the idea for the terrorism plot, and it was the FBI that provided them with everything — the bomb, the transportation, everything they needed to move forward in a terrorism plot that on their own, they never would have been able to do.”

Whether it’s the FBI, CIA, MI5, MI6, CSIS or the RCMP, for many Muslims in the west, they all appear to be the same. Authorities on this side of the border have to work hard to differentiate themselves and address such concerns.

Finally, the passing of Bill S-7, the controversial anti-terror law, has many in the Canadian Muslim community afraid that extraordinary measures, such as forced secret investigative hearings and detentions of up to three days, without charge, may end up being used unnecessarily to target innocent Canadian Muslims.

All of these issues affect how a sizeable portion of the Canadian Muslim public perceives law enforcement and security agencies.

There’s no question that the involvement of the Canadian Muslim community in foiling the alleged Via Rail terror plot is an important step forward. By continuing the dialogue and taking important steps to work with the community (instead of against it), the relationship has the potential to be a lot stronger.

After all, it’s in all our interests to keep Canada safe.

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