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How informer's fears triggered terror raids

CAMERON STEWART THE AUSTRALIAN SEPTEMBER 15, 2012 12:00AM



Australian Federal Police officers conduct a search of a house in the southeast Melbourne suburb of Narre Warren on Wednesday. Picture: Norm Oorloff Source: The Australian

AN ASIO informer who was caught spying on a hardline Muslim group in Melbourne warned the spy agency that it was asking him to do things that could compromise his safety.

The informer, who had infiltrated a radical group at the al-Furqan Islamic Centre in Springvale, told ASIO in July he wanted "a relocation and name change if rumours spread about me" because ASIO was asking him to "rock up at events on my own".

That informer is now believed to be in hiding with police protection after his identity was uncovered by the group late last month, forcing police to conduct sweeping counter-terrorism raids across 12 Melbourne properties this week.

A man alleged to be a member of the group, Adnan Karabegovic, 23, has been charged with allegedly collecting al-Qa'ida magazines, including one that touts the Sydney Opera House as a potential terrorist target.

For at least three months, ASIO used a Melbourne man to infiltrate the group of about 30 hardline Muslims led by a radical Bosnian self-styled sheik called Harun Mehicevic, also known as Abu Talha. But the counter-terror investigation, the largest since Operation Neath in 2009, unravelled suddenly late last month when members of the group obtained the informant's mobile phone containing a string of text messages with his ASIO contact known as "Jay".

The group photographed the text messages and posted them on the al-Furqan Centre's Facebook page two weeks ago, placing the man in immediate danger and leaving ASIO without a contact.

Authorities are believed to have been monitoring the Springvale al-Furqan group for years because of its hardline Salafist interpretation of Islam, its open hostility towards the West and its support for jihadist causes.

The group, whose beliefs are rejected by mainstream Islamic groups, was set up a decade ago by Harun after he became frustrated by the moderate Islam taught at his regular mosque at Noble Park.

It is unclear when ASIO was able to recruit an informer to infiltrate the group, but from that moment the spy agency had unparalleled access to the group's activities.

The published text messages date from late May this year when the informer tells Jay "I have the screen shots on USB", to which Jay replied: "Did it say his real name or where he was from", before asking the informer to "get some" CDs from the al-Furqan centre.

For the next two months, Jay from ASIO and the informer swap text messages every few days, with the informer passing on details of people's whereabouts, their activities and their background.

The informer sometimes gets frustrated with the secretive Jay, chiding him on text saying "u never answer ur fone".

At around this time, the informer writes: "spoke to him on fb (Facebook) and he put up pics and locations." To which Jay responds: "Cool, did he say why he went there."

On one occasion Jay appears to get frustrated with the informer's casual approach. When the informer writes: "Yeh, shouldn't be a prob inshallah (God willing)." Jay replies: "No inshallah! It should be a lecture on Ramadan."

In mid-July, the informer appears to get weary of ASIO's constant requests. On July 13, when Jay asks him to go to al-Furqan on the following Sunday, the informer replies: "I'll do AF cos I got nuffin on but you owe me."

Also on July 13, the informer texts Jay the licence plate of a green Commodore, but four days later, on July 17, when Jay asks the informer to attend a fundraising function for the rebuilding of the Dandenong mosque, the informer expresses concern. He warns ASIO may need to help him start a new life if he is caught. "Bro I'll go but I'm telling u, ur doing a relocation and name change if rumors spread bout me cos I don't know ne1 there and then I just star(t) rockinn up at events. On my own too."

Jay tries to calm him, saying "u prob won't need to go was just checking your availability in case anything popped up", to which the informer replies, "yeh yeh u want me to go, just gimme details wen u hav em."

The following day, the informer tells Jay he will try to befriend a person of interest but says he doesn't want ASIO to therefore doubt his loyalty.

"Just letting you know b4 I c him and become friendly, don't want any backfire from the Canberra guys again."

On July 22, the informer tells Jay that a new person of interest has "just popped out of the woodwork, he is a revert of a few months with a half naked Greek girlfriend he kept from a previous life", to which Jay replies "ha ha lucky him".

At Jay's request, the informer keeps him updated about which members of the group are travelling and, at times, what restaurant or prayer centre they are in. Jay peppers him with questions about CDs used by the group and also about upcoming Islamic functions and who is going to attend.

On August 9, the two men meet at Lygon Court in Carlton for a briefing, but in an omen of what was to come, on August 13 the informer texts Jay apologising for being out of touch, saying "sorry left fone in car".

This potentially dangerous breach did not faze Jay, who continued to use phone text to pass on his requests.

On August 15, Jay asks the informer why a member of the al-Furqan group was asking questions about a police officer. "Did he say why he wanted to know about him," asks Jay.

The informer replies: "(he) said somfin bout a guy who he's been noticing around. He's just paranoid. Lightening doesn't strike twice."

But it seems the group's paranoia was well placed. Within a week of this message, the informer's phone had fallen into the hands of the al-Furqan group.

On or around August 22, at 5am, the group obtained the iPhone and read through more than 60 texts to ASIO's Jay.

ASIO knew almost immediately that the game was up and presumably moved fast to protect its exposed informer.

On August 22, a group member, Yasin Rizvic, posted on Facebook that "by the will of Allah The Almighty The Best of Plotters, we expose a spy amongst us -- working for ASIO, one of his Facebook names is (name delated) . . . so if you have him as a friend delete him."

Two days later, the al-Furqan website posted a rambling hour-long sermon from Harun, who spoke bitterly about the spy in their midst. He took aim at ASIO, the West and the US, making it clear that any Muslim who co-operated with intelligence agencies had betrayed their religion.

On August 26, photos of the texts sent between Jay and the informer were posted on the al-Furqan centre's Facebook page.

For the next 10 days, police and intelligence forces debated how they should respond to this extraordinary outing of an ASIO informer. Harun, the group's spiritual leader, was in Bosnia, but the decision was ultimately made that they should swoop sooner rather than later. On Wednesday, Australian Federal Police and Victoria Police launched raids of properties across Melbourne, catching the al-Furqan group by surprise. As police were breaking through the door of the centre on Wednesday morning, its Facebook page was promising that Abu Talha (Harun) "Tonight will be giving a live talk from Bosnia".

Instead of giving his sermon, Harun learned his centre and his home had been raided that day.

Victoria's third major counter-terrorism operation in eight years had been triggered, but in the most unusual of circumstances.

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