



Troubling Roots. How did Islamic radicalism grow in Guyana?

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One of the most disturbing aspects of the JFK terror plot is its Caribbean roots.

The four men named in the case don't come from the Middle East or any other majority-Muslim area. Rather, they are products of Muslim minorities in the Caribbean: one lived in Trinidad, an island off the coast of Venezuela that was the alleged center for their planning; three are from Guyana, on the mainland nearby.

Guyana and Trinidad each have around a million people. By official estimates, Trinidad's Muslim population is 6 percent; Guyana's, 10 percent. Both are poor, unstable societies outside the mainstream of countries with Muslim minorities. The

whole region is known for strange combinations of radical politics and radical religion--most famously, the Rastafarians.

Early media reports have concentrated on the links of JFK suspects Abdul Kadir and Kareem Ibrahim with Jamaat al-Muslimeen--an eccentric Sunni cult that launched a bloody 1990 attempt to overthrow Trinidad's government.

But Kadir, 55, and Ibrahim, 56, are Shia Muslims--and thus members of a tiny minority within a minority. (Muslims in Guyana and Trinidad are overwhelmingly Sunnis, with ethnic backgrounds in India and east Africa.) This is apparently the first case of Shia Muslims plotting a U.S. terror attack.

When he was arrested in Trinidad last Friday, Kadir was boarding a plane for Venezuela, en route to a religious conference in Iran. Ibrahim is also a Shia cleric, serving as imam in a Trinidad mosque.

Born Michael Seaforth, Kadir became Muslim in the early '70s. He went to Iran for intensive study in theology and returned as a cleric. (He later sent his son Salim and daughter Sauda to the Iranian religious center of Qom for theological training.) But he also developed political interests, having won election to Guyana's parliament as a member of the leftist People's National Congress/Reform, and has a background as a theorist of the party's socialist ideology.

Until we know more, it will be hard to know exactly what to make of all this. But the larger picture is clear, and disturbing.

People in isolated, economically marginal Muslim communities are especially susceptible to radicalization. These nations have few facilities for Muslim religious education; even secular schools are short on modern equipment. Most Muslim clerics serving the Caribbean communities are either untrained or go for schooling in Saudi Arabia, the global center of Sunni Muslim fundamentalism.

Guyanese-born imam Khaleel Mohammed, a professor of religion at San Diego State University, points out that when Guyanese Muslims come to North America, they "find an imam of Arab origin . . . What he

knows, or presumes he knows . . . comes from some medieval Muslim interpreter. So he comes to the mosque and tells Muslim youth this is what the Christians believe and this is what the Jews believe and it's all distorted."

Meanwhile, back in their homelands, association with Saudi fundamentalists or Iranian extremists can not only make a Trinidadian or Guyanese a bigger figure; it can provide a financial power base.

Radical Islam has a long reach and deep pockets. Scheming for mass atrocities continues, in the American homeland as well as abroad. No Muslim community is too small or out-of-the-way. The Fort Dix case involved Albanian Muslims from Macedonia, who had emigrated to America decades ago.

There is only one solution, with two sides: Governments under attack must maintain strict vigilance, and moderate Muslims--both Sunni and Shia--must actively police their mosques, denouncing and excluding the preachers of terror.

Some moderates are doing just that. Agha Jafri, the secretary-general of the New Jersey-based American Muslim Congress, the oldest Shia organization in the United States, had this to say about the alleged involvement of Shia Muslims in the JFK case: "We categorically and vehemently condemn this evil plotting, which is criminal and abhorrent, threatening America as well as the security of all Muslims around the world."