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FBI Witness Testifies in Trial of Yemeni Cleric

Lawyers for Accused Al Qaeda Supporter Say Informant Is Deceitful, Seeking Money

By Michelle Garcia
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NEW YORK, Feb. 17 -- Attorneys for a Yemeni cleric accused of supporting al Qaeda and the Islamic Resistance Movement, known as Hamas, sought to undercut a key FBI informant in the case Thursday, suggesting he helped law enforcement agents set up a sting because he faced large debts and hoped to reap a windfall for his services.

Lawyers for the cleric, Sheik Mohammed Ali Hassan Moayad, called Mohamed Alanssi to the stand as a hostile witness and portrayed him as a deceitful informant who faced as much as \$30,000 in debt.

Alanssi, 53, had been the government's star witness until he set himself on fire outside the White House last November to protest his treatment by the FBI.

He approached the FBI in November 2001 and coordinated a federal sting operation that resulted in the arrest of Moayad and co-defendant Mohammed Mohsen Yahya Zayed. Alanssi lured the pair to Germany, serving as an intermediary between them and an undercover agent posing as a wealthy American eager to donate money to terrorist causes.

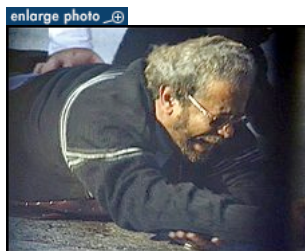
Alanssi, who acknowledged that he faced the debt, said he felt compelled to approach the FBI with information. "It was my duty to cooperate with the American government against the terrorists I know," he said.

But Moayad attorney Howard Jacobs said: "And you also saw an opportunity to make a lot of money."

Alanssi replied: "My right is to make money to support my family, my right is to get American citizenship, and my right is to bring my family here."

Alanssi's plans never came to fruition. The FBI paid him \$100,000, the U.S. residency papers did not come through and when his cooperation with authorities became known, family

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Mohamed Alanssi had been the government's star witness until he set himself on fire outside the White House to protest his treatment by the FBI. (AP)

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members in Yemen grew angry with him, he told The Washington Post last year. He became despondent and set himself on fire outside the White House, suffering burns over a third of his body. His lawyer said he has recovered.

Alanssi testified Thursday that he lied to The Post when he said that FBI agents had promised him \$5 million in exchange for his help. But The Post reported on Nov. 21 that Alanssi said the FBI had laughed when he mentioned that sum.

Federal prosecutors charge that Moayad and Zayed agreed to funnel millions of dollars from a Brooklyn mosque to al Qaeda and Hamas. Moayad could face 60 years in prison and Zayed could be sentenced to 30 years if they are convicted on all charges.

Prosecutors dropped Alanssi from their witness list after he set himself ablaze and are relying on videotapes and taped conversations they say took place during the four-day meeting between the defendants and the undercover agent.

Moayad, who once claimed to be the spiritual adviser to Osama bin Laden in the 1980s, later broke with the al Qaeda leader, according to testimony by FBI agent Brian Murphy earlier in the trial.

Alanssi testified Thursday that Moayad had boasted of hand-delivering \$20 million to bin Laden over several years before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Defense attorneys questioned whether Alanssi, who requested an interpreter Thursday, could competently speak and understand English. They said in their opening statements that he misinterpreted the conversations between the Yemeni men and the undercover agent, effectively carrying on two separate conversations and duping the Yemeni men into agreeing to channel money to al Qaeda and Hamas.

Defense attorneys argued that Alanssi manipulated the pair into believing that they might receive \$250,000 for their soup kitchen in Yemen.

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