

Evaluating the Terrorist Threat Posed by African-American Muslim Groups

By Christopher Heffelfinger

THE FBI INTRODUCTION to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) file on Clarence Smith—aka Clarence 13X—reads only, “Smith was the leader of the ‘Five Percenters,’ a notorious Harlem street gang. He was shot to death in 1969.”¹ Yet, as a lyrical sample from Lord Jamar (a prominent Five Percenter and hip-hop artist) reads in his *Greatest Story Never Told*, “Allah [Clarence Smith] was assassinated in 1969, that case was never solved. His movement survived him, today it’s known as the Nation of Gods and Earths.”² The Five Percenters are just one facet of indigenous Muslim evolution in the United States; others, like Jama`at al-Fuqara’, retain ties to Pakistan and are ideological affiliates of militant Salafist groups such as al-Qa`ida. This article will examine trends among three predominantly African-American Islamic movements, at least one of which should be considered a domestic terrorism concern for the United States. It also serves to provide counter-terrorism professionals with knowledge enabling them to differentiate terrorist threats from more benign religious groups.

The Five Percent Nation

Clarence 13X was initially a member of the Nation of Islam (NOI) and attended its Temple Number Seven in Harlem, where Malcolm X preached from 1960 to 1963.³ One rumor claims that he left the NOI because he questioned the divinity of Wallace Fard, the founder of the NOI who claimed to bring divine inspiration to Elijah Muhammad. Clarence 13X split with the NOI in 1963.⁴ He adopted the name “Allah” and set to the streets of Harlem to educate fellow black Americans on the Supreme Mathematics, the Supreme Alphabet and the tenets of his movement, which

claimed that 85% of men are easily misled, 10% understand some truth but use it for their own benefit, and five percent are enlightened divine beings.⁵ Under Clarence 13X, or Allah, the Five Percenters (also called the Five Percent Nation) established a headquarters in Harlem—the Allah School in Mecca—in 1966.⁶ Today, the movement includes Busta Rhymes, members of Wu Tang Clan, Jus Allah and many other high-profile hip-hop artists.

The FOIA FBI file on Clarence Smith reveals some of the details pertaining to their concern over his activities:

...letterhead memorandums to the Bureau dated 6/2/65, 6/9/65 and 7/9/65, all captioned “DISTURBANCE BY GROUP CALLED ‘FIVE PERCENTERS,’ HARLEM, NEW YORK CITY, 5/31/65; RACIAL MATTERS,” which contained subject under the name CLARENCE 13X SMITH aka “Allah,” and which further reflected that subject was the recognized leader of the “Five Percenters.”

It is noted that records of the Bureau of Special Services, (BSS), New York City Police Department, (NYCPD), reflects subject’s true name as CLARENCE SMITH JOWERS and as CLARENCE SMITH JOWARS, however, for uniformity, subject’s true last name will be carried as JOWARS until such time as investigation determines the true spelling of subject’s last name.

CLARENCE SMITH JOWARS, aka Clarence 13X, a Negro male, born 2/21/28 in Virginia, city not known, NYCPD # B 612230, resided in Apartment 5E, 21 West 112th St., NYC, from August, 1954, through January, 1964. Subject has Social Security Number 228-28-0034. Subject served in the US Army under the name CLARENCE SMITH JOWARS or CLARENCE SMITH from 10/29/52, through

10/29/54, and had Army Serial Number 51207085. Subject had the rank of Private First Class, served in Korea, and was last assigned to Company “F,” 39th Infantry, Ft. Dix, New Jersey.⁷

The final assignment is peculiar, for coincidence if no other reason. Ft. Dix was the site of the foiled plot by six young Muslim men arrested in 2007 for planning to essentially embark on a shooting spree within the base and kill as many U.S. servicemen as possible.⁸ The case is still awaiting trial. Ft. Dix is significant to African-American history, as in 1969 “there were rebellions at the military prisons of Fort Dix, Fort Jackson, three times at Fort Riley, Camp Pendleton, and others. At Fort Dix, one of the prisoner demands was: ‘Free Huey P. Newton, the New York Panther 21, the Presidio 27, and all political prisoners!’”⁹

Toward the end of Clarence Smith’s FBI File, it reads:

On 11/16/65, [REDACTED] BSS, NYCPD, advised SA that on 11/16/65, subject [...] appeared in New York State Supreme Court, NYC, and was found “unable to understand the charges against him.” Subject was remanded to the custody of the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene for an indefinite confinement.¹⁰

He was assassinated in 1969 in a case that remains unsolved. Curiously, the latter pages of Clarence Smith’s FBI file read: “Subject is a Negro male, born 2/21/28 or 2/22/28, at Danville, Virginia.”¹¹ At one of Jama`at al-Fuqara’s (Community of the Impoverished, JF) compounds, called “Red House,”¹² 24 members of the

1 FBI File #100-444636, available at <http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/smith.htm>.

2 One site that includes the lyrics from the *Greatest Story Never Told* is www.lyricstime.com/lord-jamar-greatest-story-never-told-lyrics.html.

3 Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 101-103.

4 Ibid.

5 Mattias Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), p. 225.

6 Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Five Percenters* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2007).

7 FBI File #100-444636, available at <http://foia.fbi.gov/smith/smith1.pdf>.

8 See Troy Graham, “Man who Supplied Guns in Alleged Fort Dix Terror Plot Sentenced to 20 Months,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 1, 2008.

9 “Black GIs, Rebellion and the Fall of the Flag,” *Revolutionary Worker* #994, February 14, 1999.

10 FBI File #100-444636.

11 Ibid.

12 Ironically, Red House shares the name of the parliament of Trinidad and Tobago. The building was stormed by Jamaat al-Muslimin, an Afro-Caribbean Islamit movement, in July 1990. The group took hostages, including the prime minister, and announced that they

compound were convicted of firearms violations.¹³ Red House sits about 66 miles from Danville, VA, Clarence Smith's birthplace. The locations of JF's compounds often appear laden with symbolism, but it is not yet known if the proximity of this compound to Danville has any larger significance.

What relevance do the Five Percenters have to terrorism? There is no material link between the Five Percent Nation (nor fringe groups like the Seas of David) and terrorism, but they are

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on a graduating spectrum in terms of radicalization. To the extreme of the Five Percent Nation is the highly militant Jama'at al-Fuqara' that strongly rejects the tenets of the Nation of Gods and Earths,¹⁴ and instead adheres to a Salafist Islam akin to that of al-Qa'ida. Members may move toward the more militant and austere Islam of JF if they feel the Five Percenters are ineffective at effecting societal change, or if they can be convinced that their doctrine is blasphemous per Salafist norms.

Jama'at al-Fuqara'

The Salafist Jama'at al-Fuqara' is a much more potentially threatening group. It could have as many as 30 compounds in the United States and Canada, with affiliates in the Caribbean. At these compounds, members engage in tactical training exercises and weapons training, and explosives caches have been uncovered in at least one instance. Islamberg, in Hancock, NY, is considered to be JF's headquarters.

had overthrown the government. See Ken I. Boodhoo, "Islamic Fundamentalism in the Caribbean," LACC Publications Occasional Papers Series, Florida International University, Dialogue #135, 1992.

¹³ Paul L. Williams, "Springtime in Islamberg: Radical Muslim Paramilitary Compound Flourishes in Upper New York State," Canada Free Press, May 11, 2007.

¹⁴ The Nation of Gods and Earths is the current name of the Five Percenters movement.

Paul Williams, who did extensive study on the group, states,

Though primarily based in Lahore, Pakistan, Jamaat ul-Fuqra has operational headquarters in New York and openly recruits through various social service organizations in the U.S., including the prison system. Members live in hamaats or compounds, such as Islamberg, where they agree to abide by the laws of Jamaat ul-Fuqra, which are considered to be above local, state and federal authority.¹⁵

Although JF is estimated to be 95% African-American, it is not purely an Afro-nationalist movement in the United States. Its ties to overseas militant Salafist trends clearly run much deeper. Sometime in the late 1990s, Jama'at al-Fuqara' changed its name to the "Muslims of America" and still operates as such.

It is possible there is some resonance in ideas between followers of the Five Percent Nation and followers of Jama'at al-Fuqara'. George Johnson, Jr., a retired serviceman, security analyst and African-American, said,

I have never personally known an admitted member of Al-Furqara'. However, some of my Black Muslim friends and relatives who belong to various other Afro-centric and mainstream Islamic sects (NOI, Ansar Allah, 5 per centers, Bilalians, etc.) express some of the same doctrines and beliefs and are sympathetic to Al-Fuqara's ideas.¹⁶

Yet, JF's ideology is drastically different than that of NOI, the Five Percenters, or Seas of David. It was founded by a Pakistani cleric, Shaykh Mubarak `Ali Gilani, in Brooklyn in 1980, when he first visited the United States.¹⁷ Shaykh Gilani's guiding principle is to "purify" the Islamic umma through violence.

¹⁵ Williams, "Springtime in Islamberg: Radical Muslim Paramilitary Compound Flourishes in Upper New York State."

¹⁶ Personal interview, George Johnson, September 14, 2007.

¹⁷ For more information, see the South Asia Terrorism Portal file on Jama'at al-Fuqara', located at www.satp.org.

One retired intelligence official with expertise on militant Islam explained in September 2007,

At one point they ran private security firms in NYC and in Karachi, Pakistan. Their spiritual leader was Pir Sayed Gilani who lives in Pakistan, and arranged training for U.S. Fuqra members in the Pakistan camps of the Kashmiri insurgents; some American Fuqra members actually fought in Kashmir against Indian forces. Intelligence shows that Gilani is connected to Pakistan's ISI and al-Qaeda; the WSJ's Daniel Pearl was on his way to interview Gilani when he was kidnapped.¹⁸

A number of JF members have fought overseas, including in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Kashmir, Bosnia and Lebanon. Others in the highly secretive group were affiliated with the Kifah Refugee Center, also known as the Brooklyn Jihad Office.¹⁹ One member, Clement Rodney Hampton-El, an African-American Muslim convert, was convicted of plotting to blow up New York City landmarks in 1993. He provided weapons training to fellow members at the Brooklyn Jihad Office, including El Sayyid Nosair who used that training to assassinate Rabbi Meir Kahane in New York in 1990. According to Hampton-El's testimony, he had a meeting at the Saudi Embassy in December 1992 where Jamaican-born, Muslim scholar Bilal Phillips gave him the names of U.S. servicemen ready to finish their tours of duty. He was to recruit the men as volunteer mujahidin and paramilitary trainers for an Osama bin Ladin-sponsored insurgency in Bosnia.²⁰

Bilal Phillips provides more material linkages between these African-American Muslims (typically converts) and militant Salafism. Phillips' biography on his website reads, "Bilal, who had read Malcolm X's autobiography, visited one of the

¹⁸ Personal interview, unnamed retired intelligence official, September 2007.

¹⁹ "United States: The Jamaat al-Fuqra Threat," Stratfor.com, June 3, 2005.

²⁰ J.M. Berger, "Al Qaeda Recruited Gulf War Vets in 1992, Effort Linked To Saudi Gov't," Intelwire.com, January 6, 2004.

temples of the Black Muslims. Though impressed by their organization and the fact that their women dressed modestly, he found their ideology useless.²¹ He seems to have turned toward a much more austere form of Islam. There is still much more to be unraveled pertaining to Bilal Phillips and his connections to Salafist clerics in Saudi Arabia and around the Islamic world.

Seas of David/Liberty City Seven

A more recent manifestation of non-Salafist militancy is the case of the Seas of David, or Liberty City Seven. On April 16, a jury was hung in the case against the “Liberty City Seven,” who were charged with planning an attack on Chicago’s Sears Tower following a 2006 FBI raid on their warehouse and

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temple in Liberty City, a poor suburb of Miami.²² This was the second trial against the group; the first ended in acquittal for one man while the jury was deadlocked over counts against the other six.

The group had no firearms, no explosives and no links to a terrorist group when they were arrested. Its leader reportedly roamed the neighborhood in a bathrobe, toting a wooden walking stick.²³ The Liberty City Seven subscribed to teachings that blended Christianity and Islam; the Seas of David, the obscure organized group of which the seven were members, developed teachings partially derived from those of the Moorish Science Temple of America, according

to Narseal Batiste, the group’s alleged leader.²⁴

Where They Are Today

Critical for intelligence and law enforcement officials is the ability to distinguish non-violent, pietistic or spiritualist movements from Salafist-inspired ones that advocate or practice militancy. Today, the Five Percent Nation is largely leaderless, with various teachers propagating the beliefs of Clarence 13X and poses no serious terrorist threat, although gang activity and criminality is a concern. The Seas of David will, in all likelihood, dissipate and pose no further threat. Such movements, however, may serve at times as a gateway to more conservative—sometimes militant—Salafist groups, such as Jama`at al-Fuqara’. The Jama`at al-Fuqara’/Muslims of America deserves a more comprehensive treatment, as the group is clearly one of the most glaring domestic terrorism concerns for the United States.

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21 For more information on Bilal Phillips, see his official website at www.bilalphilips.com.

22 Justin Rood and Vic Walter, “Second Terror Mistrial Hurts Bush Administration, Critics Say Hung Jury Leads to Second Mistrial in ‘Liberty City Seven’ Case,” ABC News, April 16, 2008.

23 Ibid.

24 “Indictment: Suspects Wanted to ‘Kill All the Devils We Can,’” CNN, June 24, 2006.