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In Conversation with Mubin Shaikh:

From Salafi Jihadist to Undercover Agent inside the “Toronto 18” Terrorist Group

Interview by Stefano Bonino

This interview with former undercover agent Mubin Shaikh can help academics and security practitioners understand the key role played and the challenges faced by covert human intelligence sources within domestic terrorist groups. The interview highlights the identity crisis, the personal factors, and the allure of jihadi militancy that initially drove Mubin Shaikh to join a Salafi jihadist group. It investigates Shaikh's process of disengagement from the Salafi jihadist belief system and his rediscovery of a moderate, inclusive, and benevolent form of Islam. It explores his work as an undercover agent for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and the Integrated National Security Enforcement Team responsible for disrupting domestic terrorist groups. The “Toronto 18” terrorist cell, the key role played by undercover agents in preventing terrorist action, and the challenges posed by entrapment are also discussed.

About Mubin Shaikh

Mubin Shaikh was born in Toronto, Canada, on 29 September 1975. He was raised in a conservative family, but he experienced a very Western life, serving in the Royal Canadian Army Cadets, attending public school, and drinking alcohol. An identity crisis led Shaikh to join the Tablighi Jamaat, an orthodox revivalist Sunni Islam movement, and later to travel to India and Pakistan. In Quetta, Pakistan, 19-year-old Shaikh met the Taliban – an encounter that changed his life. He quickly adopted the jihadist belief system. Back in Canada, Shaikh joined a Salafi jihadist group, recruited others to the jihadi cause, and carried out militant activities. The attacks on the United States in 2001 proved to be another turning point in his life. Shaikh reconsidered his worldview and decided to enhance his understanding of religion in Syria. He spent two years (2002-2004) in the country, studying Arabic, Islamic theology, and Sufi spirituality. During this period, Shaikh underwent a theological reprogramming and a cognitive reframing that led him to abandon the jihadist cause. In 2004, he started working as an undercover agent for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), collecting intelligence within jihadist groups. The details of these activities remain classified for reasons of national security. In late 2005, Shaikh moved to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and the Integrated National Security Enforcement Team (INSET) in order to penetrate the “Toronto 18” group, an al-Qaeda-inspired homegrown terrorist cell. Shaikh's undercover work helped authorities to prevent the 2006 Ontario terrorism plot, a series of planned attacks against the Canadian Parliament, the CSIS, the Canadian Broadcasting Centre, and former Prime Minister Stephen Harper. After members of the “Toronto 18” group were arrested in June that same year, Shaikh revealed himself to the public as the undercover agent inside the group. In 2010, a total of eleven members of the “Toronto 18” group were found guilty of participating in the terrorism plot. In the same year, Shaikh obtained a Masters of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism at Macquarie University, Australia. Today, Shaikh is an internationally renowned subject expert on terrorism and radicalization. He has advised numerous Western security-related bodies, including: U.S. Department of State, U.S. Special Operations Command, UN Center for Counter Terrorism, NATO, Interpol, Europol, FBI, and many others.

Stefano Bonino (SB): *Can you please tell me about the identity crisis that led you to embrace a more orthodox form of Islam?*

Mubin Shaikh (MS): My first stage of identity construction takes place when I was in Canada. This includes the cultural and religious aspects of my identity that was formed in the Koranic school. As I was growing up, I used to go with my father to the weekly sessions of the Tablighi Jamaat at the Farouq Mosque. Those

sessions started forming the background of my experience. When I turned 18, I went to India and Pakistan with the Tablighi Jamaat. A key reason why I even felt it necessary to go is because I had a house party, got caught by my relatives, and was ashamed and guilty for that. The experience put in my head the idea that the only way to fix myself was to become religious. A reason why I became religious through the Tablighi Jamaat is that it was the only experience that I had in my background. It is the group with which I grew up as a kid. It is basic psychology. A person goes back to his formative years and that is what I was exposed to. At that time, I had no strong exposure to Salafism or anything similar. I was first introduced to Salafism and started hearing people speaking about it when I was 14 or 15. But it was still very new to me and happened later on in my formative years, so I was not enlaced to it right away. The experience with the Tablighi Jamaat was in the early periods of my life and I laced onto it more readily. So I went to India and Pakistan – I went to Quetta, in Pakistan, at the border with Afghanistan. In Quetta, I had my first dealings with the Taliban.

SB: *How exactly did you end up meeting the Taliban?*

MS: My encounter with the Taliban was a chance. One of the things that the Tablighi Jamaat does is *jaulah*. It entails walking around the local area, talking to people and spreading the Tablighi Jamaat's message. It was an afternoon. I was in a remote area. I was walking and I walked up to Taliban. It was a chance encounter. I did not know anything about the politics of the region before I had gone there. Even while growing up in my home, I never heard any political conversation, for example issues around Pakistan, India, or Kashmir. Before going there, I had no idea who the Taliban were. I met them prior to their rise to power in Afghanistan in 1995. When I met them, they did not say: 'we are Taliban.' They were just normal people to me. When I went to talk to them about the Tablighi Jamaat's doctrine, they immediately responded with their own doctrine. I realized that these people were not average people, particularly when I saw their rifles. Then, they told me about their worldview: jihad is at the center of it. That really caught my attention. In the Tablighi Jamaat, we talked about *khuruj fi sabilillah*, which means going about in the path of God. In the Quran, this refers to going out to fight in the way of God or it could mean anything that you could do for God, for example suffering for the sake of God for good reasons. If you are in the mosque and you worship and encourage other people to worship, you are also in the path of God. For these people, *khuruj fi sabilillah* is jihad. This is what it means for them. That was the occasion when I was first introduced to this concept. This is at the core of their worldview. This is why they are called jihadists because jihad, as they see it, is the core element of their identity. Their identity revolves around participation in the jihad, acceptance of the jihad and so on. I could see that the local guy who was with me was very uncomfortable. The Taliban asked at what mosque we were staying and, afterwards, they came to visit us. There, we had more conversations. But the initial meeting was enough to attract me to their worldview.

SB: *Why do you think that you were so fascinated by the Taliban?*

MS: Imagine a young kid who comes from the West, has an identity crisis, has military experience, has a lot of energy and so on. A kid with an identity crisis, who feels shame and guilt and has some military background [*details below*], shows up in a remote area in Pakistan, close to Afghanistan, and suddenly meets these people who were, to me, the embodiment of everything that I was seeking: militant, religious, and accepted by the people. There you go. This is what really struck me. We tend to cling on to ideas that resonate with our own personal experiences. For me, the proverbial stars had aligned. I had gone all the way there after a personal and psychological turmoil and, then, found myself standing in front of these people, who were exactly who I was supposed to be.

SB: *What happened when you returned to Canada after that experience?*

MS: When I returned back to Canada in September 1995, there was a short period when I tried to figure out whether I wanted to remain in the Tablighi Jamaat or not. In the same period, I came across Salafism again. I had a new incarnation. I wanted to hear them out. Once the door had opened with the Taliban, I had a

cognitive opening which made me more receptive to the Salafi experience, one for which I was not so ready for earlier on. I had to experience the Tablighi Jamaat before embracing Salafism.

SB: *Did you see your experience with the Tablighi Jamaat as a natural step toward embracing the Salafi doctrine?*

MS: I know the 'conveyor belt' theory according to which groups such as the Tablighi Jamaat open the doors to violent extremism. I think that this is only partially true. It really depends on one's background, previous position, and perspective. Let's say that a person already comes from an austere and hyper-conservative life, and then he goes into the Tablighi Jamaat, which is apolitical but largely separationist in worldview and conservative in theology. He must also be politically minded to embrace violence. The problem is that, with so many geopolitical grievances mentioned by various communities, it is easier for some people to embrace that narrative. From that line, the trajectory toward violent extremism is easier. On the other hand, if this person did not come from such a background and was just conservative, one trajectory is that he would simply remain conservative without embracing violent extremism. Some people just remain in the Tablighi Jamaat. Millions of Muslims are in the Tablighi Jamaat but do not become terrorists: look at India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. So, the Tablighi Jamaat is not, for the most part, a conveyor belt to violent extremism. But in some cases, depending on the person's experiences, it could very well be. For me, it was, although not because I came from a hyper-conservative lifestyle. My parents were conservative but I grew up in a very Western society. The identity conflict that I grew up with in my pre-pubesence period is what made me go beyond the Tablighi Jamaat. Around age 19, I wanted something more. I went through that period and started to listen more to the Salafis. This is where the trajectory was steeper. I was not very interested in learning the nuances of the theology. I was more interested in the militant identity. The militant identity was there due to a series of reasons. There was a sense of power, in a world where Muslims feel that they are powerless. There was a sense of pride, in a world where Muslims feel humiliation.

SB: *Did theology play no role at all?*

MS: Theology became a cover. I was more interested in the persona, the costume, and the appearance. The identity was at the core, while the theology was at the surface. I was in a new group of more violent peers. I had grown up learning martial arts and had studied it for many years. I had spent time in the Royal Canadian Army Cadets. The identity of militancy had actually been introduced to me outside of religion, as a sort of 'extra-curricular activity' between the ages of 13 and 19. In many ways, my inclination towards militancy did not come from religion but from the Army Cadets. I had made my body and mind used to violence. The Army Cadets and martial arts had taught me that there must be a just cause for violence. That had already been programmed inside me. Only after those experiences, I needed the Taliban. And after the Taliban, I needed the Salafi jihadists. This new identity offered me the ability to show some of my physical skills, even though I never really used them. One of the things that the Salafi jihadists exposed me to was the idea of just violence or violence in the name of God. It was the idea of violence against anyone who prevents you from fighting jihad or bringing people into jihad. In the Salafi jihadist worldview, it is legitimate to act violently. This is what I started to convince myself – that to use violence is fine because it is for a good reason. The good reason was that various governments were trying to stop jihad, and we had to fight against that. In 1996, there was the Russian invasion of Chechnya, so the Chechnya War was our call to the jihadi cause. In 1998, there was Bin Laden's *fatwa* [to kill Americans and Jews because of American support for Israel and the stationing of troops in the Arabian Peninsula] so we started to discuss that in our group. The argument started to form and the enemy became everyone. Until 1998, these were the conversations and identity crises that were occurring.

SB: *What sort of activities were you doing after returning to Canada?*

MS: I returned to Canada as a jihadist and felt a sense of belonging because now I was talking about religion. Around me, I saw very religiously literate people, even though they were not. We were doing a lot of peer grouping. We spent a lot of time together reading or discussing theology, politics, and so on, in small groups at somebody's house or in a mosque. There were also smaller groups of people to whom I was closer. We used to go around together and comment on society. This is extremely common in Salafi groups. They look down on people. So we would go, let's say, to the mall and comment on people. For example, we would say 'look at the prostitutes here', referring to white women. We used to look down on them and comment on how bad their lives and lifestyles were. We used to say how good it was that we were Salafi and we were following the true path. We used to see Muslims and criticize them as 'fake Muslims.' We really looked down on other Muslims too. We could even bring it down to the individual level. In a Salafi group, I looked down on members of non-Muslim society, then on members of Muslim society, and then on members of my own family. I used to argue with members of my own family about theology, how wrong they were about it, how it is apostasy to believe this, how it is heresy to believe that and so on.

SB: *Is there a trajectory from being a member of a highly conservative and separationist group that looks down on society to becoming a person who embraces truly extremist views?*

MS: It is a fine line. For some people there is a linear progressive journey. But it is not always a progressive one for everyone. Just because somebody is conservative, it does not mean that he is extremist. But all it takes are a few cognitive steps. A conservative believes that he must abide by a course of conduct. But the conservative who turns *takfiri* believes that everyone should abide by his course of conduct and, if people do not, they are not good enough Muslims. The next step is *takfir*, so one thinks: 'you are not following this way; you are not a real Muslim.' This is the most extreme position. These are really just two steps. They are two cognitive steps.

SB: *And then I presume that some people will become ideologues and inspirers, while others will carry out operations on the ground?*

MS: Yes, people will find their place. They will find their role. I was mostly an ideologue. It is in my personality. I speak well and I am fairly well educated. By the time that I was in this group, I had gone to school, learnt, studied, and had an intellectual approach. But I could also fight.

SB: *How did you disengage from the Salafi jihadist worldview?*

MS: In 1998, I got married and that was a major cognitive opening. It reminded me that I needed to have a life and I could not just preach all the time. I had previously thought: 'why should I go to study at a *kafir* university?' So I had not obtained any university qualification. But, at that point, I started thinking: 'what kind of life do I have? What kind of job am I going to get if I have no university qualification?' I soon started realizing that one needs qualifications. This is just the reality of the world in which we are living. After I got married I went on a trip to Jerusalem. It was another spiritual opening. It made me think. I had a very positive experience in Jerusalem. It was pre-9/11. I am not an Arab and I did not see the Palestinian conflict as a grievance. I visited Jerusalem unbiased. I had a positive spiritual experience and I thought that maybe I should open up a bit more to the world. These were just ideas at that time. Then, the 9/11 attacks happened. They were the real push for me to think that I really needed to study religion. It was inconceivable to me that people in my group really believed that the attacks were okay. I had learnt violence from martial arts but I could not accept that it was legitimate to fly planes into buildings. I could not get it into my narrative, no matter how much I believed that jihad against the enemy and fighting enemy soldiers and police was justified. I could not understand 9/11.

SB: *Did you draw a line between violence against institutional targets and violence against civilians?*

MS: At that time, for me, targeting institutions was fine. But civilians were a big question. You cannot do that. This is something that was well defined even in the early jihadist mindset. It is only later on, after Bin Laden's *fatwa*, that this approach changed.

SB: *You mentioned in other occasions that you had initially celebrated 9/11. Is it true?*

MS: That is right. I celebrated it. When the first plane hit, I celebrated it. But when the second plane hit, I realized that it was done on purpose. That is the fine line. For somebody who is within that worldview, it is an ongoing process. Later, when I went to see my friends, they were very happy. It was a terrorist attack and they were happy with it. There was something in me that kept saying: 'it is not right, it is not right.' I felt that I needed to study Islam properly. I soon decided that I needed to go somewhere to study and it took me a few months to find the right place. I went to Syria in April 2002 and stayed there for about two years. One of the reasons why I ended up in Syria was because I wanted to be there when the great jihad happened. I thank God that it did not happen when I was there. I thank God that I returned before everything went downhill. The idea of righteous jihad was still in my mind.

SB: *Do you think that, with hindsight, you would have later joined the Islamic State?*

MS: I do not think so. When I was there in 2003, the Iraq War started. The Syrian government was facilitating the travel of religiously minded youngsters to go and fight in Iraq. I was invited to Iraq but I did not go. I had just spent a year in Syria and I was interested in studying religion.

SB: *How was your experience in Syria?*

MS: Spending time in Syria opened my mind: I was exposed to the correct knowledge and spirituality of Islam. I had a theological reprogramming and reframing. Spending time with a Sufi scholar was the most influential experience that I had at the time. He went through every verse of the Quran that the jihadists use and taught me how to interpret those verses. This was an opportunity to have formal Islamic training. The formal training helped me to reinterpret and revisit the way I had previously thought. Exposure to spirituality was also crucial. This is something that you will not find in 99.99% of Salafis, if I can make such a claim. 99.99% of Salafis have no spirituality in the heart. This is why they become very private. This is why they are prone to experiencing a 'Salafi burnout' and some of them disengage from Islam. There is a spectrum among those who leave Salafism: some become moderates, other become Sufi and the more extreme ones leave religion. I can understand why some people, especially converts, go through this latter process. I have seen converts who originate from a non-religious background, then are introduced to this religious ideology due to peer grouping and jump into it 110%. Later, they realize that it is an incorrect ideology and just leave religion completely. To me, Sufism provided an alternative identity. When you realize that the life that you were leading is a complete lie, how do you deal with it? It is spiritual magic, psychologically, to realize that you were wrong the whole time. What do you do with this feeling? I was lucky that, during the time that I spent in Syria, I gained new knowledge and I was given a new narrative. Spirituality gave me a new perspective that I had not experienced before: the idea of love, the idea of positivity, the idea of looking at people with mercy and so on. These are all ideas that I was not accustomed to. These ideas reframe your paradigm. It is a cognitive reframing: basically, you change the parameters that you use to look at the world. I had a very positive experience with religion and spirituality. But there was also the reality that the Muslim world was not the utopia that I had thought it would be. Syria was a real police state. Bashar al-Assad was in power and many people told me how bad he was. I was being discriminated against because I wore a big beard and a robe and looked like a Taliban. People started calling me Taliban in Syria. I was being called Taliban more in Syria than in Canada! Syrian schools discriminated against me. They were very secular and could not imagine someone like me with a full beard and a full robe in their schools. It was the American school that ended up hiring me because they saw that I was Canadian, had an English accent, and realized

that I could teach Arab students. So I thought: 'the Americans are not so bad!' I realized that I had more freedom as a Muslim in the West than I had as a Muslim in the East. I got fed up and decided to go back home. In 2003, a couple of British students went and blew up themselves in Tel Aviv. That incident also put pressure on me and later made me want to return back home.

SB: *How did you end up working with the CSIS after returning to Canada?*

MS: In late March 2004, shortly after returning to Canada, the first Canadian was arrested on terror charges: his name was Momin Khawaja. Khawaja used to sit besides me at the Koran school when I was a kid. I knew his family. I decided to contact the CSIS. I opened the phone book, called them and said: 'there must be a mistake. This kid is a good kid and he comes from a good family.' I could not believe that he had been arrested on terror charges. The CSIS told me that it was true: Momin Khawaja was in court and the matter was out of their hands. But the fact that I had called about him prompted the CSIS to want to have a conversation with me. Within a couple of hours of making the phone call I was in a donut shop near my house, having a conversation with a CSIS officer. I explained to him my life story. He ended the conversation by saying: 'why don't you work for us? Why don't you tell us who you think is a good guy and who you think is a bad guy?'

SB: *Were you recruited straight away?*

MS: Yes, straight away. I became what is called in the spycraft terminology a 'walk-in.' A walk-in is someone who comes on his own accord and puts forward his skills. This is very important because a lot of disinformation was published about my role in both the CSIS and the case. Some people say that I worked for government because I had been caught as an extremist and the CSIS had told me: 'you'd better work for us.' This is not true. I voluntarily started working for them. I had no charges, I was not in trouble and I had not broken the law. I worked for them as an undercover agent for two years. I was tested, put on a lie detector test, and vetted. I was sent to work with people with whom I had no prior history. I was a higher category operative. There were two contexts for my operations: one was direct, on-the-ground infiltration and the other one was online activity. The direct, on-the-ground infiltration entails typical infiltration operations: inserting yourself into a human network. In my case, I was tasked with infiltrating particular groups and particular individuals. I cannot mention their names but they were within the Islamist context. It was not bikers or mafia groups. I was given files at meetings with my intelligence handler. He would show me the individuals that were under investigation and would ask me to tell them whatever I could find about them. They would not tell me what they had on those people because I was supposed to be independent, unbiased, and objective. I was not given any information about their activities. I was supposed to go undercover and find those activities on my own.

SB: *Did you simply receive a list of names and were tasked with finding out whatever you could on these people?*

MS: Yes, I was told: 'here is the person, tell me what you think about him.' I was supposed to use my skills and find out whether that person was a threat to the security of Canadians. In late 2005, I was given a list, was shown a number of pictures of young individuals, and was asked to find out what they were up to. Later, they became publicly known as the members of the "Toronto 18" group. There was an event that was taking place at a community center at a banquet hall. It was an event about Muslims who were imprisoned and how we have a duty to help them. So I went to this event, sat at the table, and ate by myself. Someone came across the room and sat beside me. He had a scarf covering his face. He removed the scarf to uncover his face and at that point I discovered that he was Zakaria Amara, one of the people with whom I was supposed to make contact. In an amazing stroke of luck, he came and sat right beside me. He told me that he was waiting for his friend. I thought: 'ok, I hope that his friends are all people on the list.' Later on, the rest of his friends arrived and sat at the table. We were all together at the table. After the event, we went outside and there was a conversation about jihad and the fact that we should do jihad. This is where the actual infiltration occurred.

There were a number of instances when I was able to use my knowledge and personality to make them feel like I was somebody whom they could trust. More importantly, they felt that they could trust me enough to invite me to a training camp that they had planned to have in an area just outside of the city of Toronto. Some people say that I entrapped them but these are excuses.

SB: *Why do you think that these are excuses?*

MS: When you are dealing with people who are committing criminal offences and who hide information from their closest friends and family, the only way you can obtain the necessary evidence is through covert collection means. If I am an undercover agent within the group, I am going to do the exact same things that the members of that group are going to do. These people had already decided both to have the camp and the location of this camp. They had also already invited all the people to the camp. These things had all been done before the night that I met them. It is impossible that there was any entrapment involved. One of the problems of people who subscribe to the entrapment position is that they assume that the mere presence of an undercover agent constitutes entrapment. They use the term entrapment as a lazy excuse to dismiss charges that are brought against someone. Anyway, I informed my intelligence handler that these people were having a training camp to do a series of activities. Then, I went to train them.

SB: *Were you still working with the CSIS at this point?*

MS: Here is where the investigation split. In the Canadian context, the CSIS collect information. Once they receive information that an individual or more individuals are about to commit a criminal offence, the investigation moves over to the federal police, the RCMP, and the INSET. I travelled over to the RCMP. From then onwards, I was collecting evidence and began to offer 'source debriefing notes.' Any day that I was operational, I would go to a safe house, meet up with the police officers and do the debriefing that would form part of the source debriefing report. Essentially, I created the evidence that would then become part of the reports. The source debriefing reports became the bulk of the evidence that would later be used in court. I worked with the police for about six months, until June 2006, when I was taken out of town and taken to a safe house, while in Toronto the members of the cell were being arrested on terror charges.

SB: *How did you feel about having prevented a major terrorist attack?*

MS: I started realizing that I was involved in something much greater than myself. I realized that my own views about Islam or how the police should go about dealing with these people were irrelevant. This is when my identity issues started developing again. I started asking myself: 'what is the Muslim community going to think when this becomes public?' At the very beginning of the trial, I had to decide whether I wanted to work with the police or not. If I had wanted to work with the police, then my identity would have become public and I would have had to spend time—I did not know long—in court giving testimony in a public setting. This made me very nervous. I did not know what the community would think. No one could anticipate the stress that this trial would put on me. It was the biggest terrorism case in Canada, so there was a lot of focus and media coverage. And there, I found myself at the center of it. In July 2006, a month after the arrests, I gave a public interview on TV saying that I was the undercover agent involved in the case. I did it to put everything on the table. I did not want to hide anything. I wanted to be open and upfront about who I was and what I had done. However, this triggered a huge backlash in the community. The Muslim community thought that I had entrapped the young kids. Again, entrapment is a lazy excuse that is used by people who wish to deflect responsibility. It is an excuse. People started saying: 'this is an example of the government inventing terror plots and then prosecuting people to justify national security budget.' These are common arguments that are used in many national security cases in the West. Entrapment is used as a defense. It is very common. But it is just an excuse. There is a huge misunderstanding about the role of undercover agents. They are not there to actively entrap people.

SB: *So what should an undercover agent do to entrap someone?*

MS: Entrapment is when you make people do something that they would not normally do. Take drug offences as an example. If I were an undercover agent, I would approach somebody on a street corner and would tell him: 'go to that drug house over there and buy me some drugs.' If that person were a drug user, a drug buyer or a drug seller, he would go and buy the drugs. If he were not, he would say: 'sorry, I do not do drugs and this is not something that I do.' Then, I would say to him: 'you'd better do it, or else I will tell the police or beat you up' or use some kind of force. This is real entrapment.

SB: *What about the context of actual or potential terrorist groups?*

MS: Imagine an undercover agent who goes around the community and starts finding people whom he thinks might be jihadist. The agent goes to a random person in a mosque and says: 'hey, I am with al-Qaeda and I think we should attack the police station down the road.' If that person is a jihadi, he will respond: 'that is a good idea, let's do it.' He might also say: 'I do not have a gun.' So the undercover agent can respond: 'I can get you the gun.' This is not entrapment. This is someone who wants to do these activities anyway.[1] If you talk to someone whom you think is an al-Qaeda member, you get *caught* – you are not *set up*. You are caught. I tried to invite two people to the training camp and they said: 'no, we do not do this stuff. We are just here to study and we do not want to do any training or shooting.' This told me that those people were not violently minded so I left them alone. Pushing them to join the camp, when they did not want to or had no intention to, would be entrapment.

SB: *Were you told whom to recruit by your handlers?*

MS: My handlers told me to try and recruit certain people and see how they responded. It was also a way to verify or reject claims that others had made. I do not know why they would tell me to go to some particular people. Maybe they had other informants who were not so reliable.

SB: *What happened in the end with the accusation of entrapment?*

MS: The accusation that, by taking members of the "Toronto 18" to the camp and training them on how to use guns, the government was essentially training these people on how to use the guns is false. The defense argued that I was the bad guy who had put these bad ideas in their head. I was part of the group and the group leader told me: 'we are going to have a training camp and part of that training is going to be target practice. I want you to train these people on how to shoot a gun.' What I am going to say to him: 'no, that is illegal!' Obviously, I am not going to blow my cover, so I have to do what the leader tells me to do. When I gave the first interview in July 2006, there were claims that it had been my fault and that there was no truth in the offences. I spent the next four years attending courts. Between 2006 and 2010, I gave testimony in five legal hearings at the Ontario Superior Court of Justice. All of the evidence started to emerge. The public realized that there was a lot of evidence on these people. These people were being watched since at least March 2005 and possibly even earlier. It has been demonstrated that, by the time that I became involved, their activities had been well underway.

SB: *How much operational independence did you have while working undercover?*

MS: When I was working with the CSIS, I was given a lot of operational latitude. I was expressly prohibited from committing criminal offences outside of the investigation. Undercover work with the CSIS was not a police investigation, so I was not in a criminal context. But I was allowed to do whatever the members of the cell did. I was allowed to mirror and imitate them. When I moved over to the police, I was given immunity from being incriminated for participating in a terrorist group, which is normally a criminal offence. So, I was allowed to break the law. What I mean here is that I was in a terrorist organization, I was participating

in terrorist activities and training, but it was being done on behalf of the police. Committing crime does not mean that I could go and stab somebody or rob a store. I could not do those things, of course!

SB: *Were you given very specific instructions as to what activities you were supposed to do while working undercover?*

MS: The instructions were not too specific. They were general instructions to find out what these people were up to. This entails socializing with them and spending my time with them. When working with the CSIS, it was about collecting information. When working with the police, it was about collecting evidence.

SB: *What are the main challenges of undercover activities?*

MS: The psychological stability of undercover agents is important. The trouble is that authorities dealing with serious criminals are not going to use a boy scout as an undercover agent. They often need to use people who are unsavory – they have a bad attitude, they have a bad background, they are not always good people and they could be motivated by money, revenge, or ideology. They need to look at all these things together. One of the downsides is that, when dealing with criminal elements, there is often cooperation with other criminal elements. This causes problems in court. When authorities have somebody who, let's say, became an informant because he was already in the group, the group was under investigation, and he came forward to the police saying 'I want these people to be arrested', authorities do not know his motivations. He might do it because he feels that what his friends are doing is not good. He might do it because someone took away his girlfriend. He might do it because someone disrespected him and he now wants to take revenge on him. There are many reasons. When authorities put him on a stand in a court, it is going to be a problem, because it shows that his motivations are suspect. In my case, it was very different. I came forward because I felt that I had a duty as a Muslim. I did not tell the authorities: 'I know these people and they are terrorists, let's investigate them.' I did not say: 'I want to be a spy, give me hundreds of thousands of dollars, otherwise I am not going to work with you.' I never did any of these things. This is what surprised many people. A reason why I was so good at my undercover job is that I just did it for religious reasons. It was my duty as a Muslim and as a Canadian. I just wanted to help. I was being paid \$1,000 a month to work with the CSIS. That is nothing. It is a very low amount of money but I never told them: 'give me more money.' Even when I moved over to the police, it was police officers who flagged up the issue of money. This is why the judge said that I had been motivated by a sense of duty and a sense of service. But it is different when authorities are dealing with the vast majority of informants who come from less respected backgrounds. Using somebody, whom authorities know is not the best kind of person, is a real challenge. They know that they are going to have problems with that person. There are going to be psychological and emotional issues. But undercover agents remain essential to criminal investigations: they are used in drug cases, organized crime, prostitution, child sexual abuse and so on.

SB: *What about informants or agents who feel 'used-and-discarded' by authorities?*

MS: Sometimes in the national security apparatus, an informant or an agent – somebody who is working undercover – does not understand that he has a shelf life. He has a very specific utilitarian purpose. Handlers are not his friends and he is not an expert. He has a very specific utilitarian role to gather intelligence. At some point, they have to end the relationship. This is the context in which a lot of people feel that they were used or disrespected. I did go through a period in which I felt that the police only wanted me for my evidence and did not care about me or about my safety. They care about their case. At the beginning I thought: 'why are they doing this to me? Why are they treating me like this?' I had another identity crisis. But then I studied the topic and realized the reasons. Studying the topic academically helped me to make sense of my personal situation at the time.

SB: *How was your experience as a key witness in the trial?*

MS: I had an identity conflict during those years in court, because I became the bad guy for the Muslim community. There is no way I could anticipate the level of scrutiny and stress. One day I was a good person: I was praised, considered knowledgeable and dispensed religion. Suddenly, I became the person who was making Muslims look bad. I was distraught because I could not understand why the community made me be the bad guy. But I understood it later. I understood that this community was under siege and they were already too much under a microscope. So they felt that that anybody who brings even more attention to the community contributes to the siege. It is a false association. But the reality is that what they thought about me and what I thought about myself began to change. I became very depressed, I doubted myself. I questioned the faith: 'If Islam teaches against terrorism, why is the community against me?' This is what happened in July 2006 after the TV interview and lasted for about eight months. What happened is that the more often I went to court, the more I realized that I was doing very well. The judge declared me a truthful and honest witness. Some of the accused people continued to lie even when we were waiting for the trial. They pretended that they did not know why they had been charged with terror offences. The problem is that there is all sort of evidence. There are video and audio intercepts. Cameras were watching them. Their phones were tapped. They were recorded while talking about their plans. Zakaria Amara was making a bomb detonator – a detonating cell phone. One of his supporters said that it was a school project! But this is fairly easy to verify. You just call the school and ask: 'hey, do you teach your kids to make bomb detonators?' They lied and thought that people were stupid. What happened in the end is that I reached back to my religious supporters. They came to me and told me: 'we know that you are right. Do not worry about it. Just stick to it. Have faith in God and things will be fine.' Then some members of the terrorist cell began pleading guilty. They realized that the evidence was being upheld. Some other members were found guilty. In 2010, I was freed of my legal obligations.

SB: *Were you being opposed by a large section of the Muslim community?*

MS: It was a minority within the community. But because a lot of Muslims feel that they are under siege, they are suspicious of government. I think that the majority was suspicious of the government's claims but a vocal minority was really against me. Now the majority of Muslims is not against me but there remain some people who are opposed to me because I am associated with the national security apparatus.

SB: *How did the community backlash affect your family? I know that your father is very involved in the Muslim community in Toronto.*

MS: My father has been very involved in the Muslim community since the 1970s. Of course, he did not know that I was working for government and I could not tell him. But his credibility was so good that, even if his son had done something bad, it would not affect him. There were a couple of people who told him: 'what your son did was not good.' But that was it. No one did anything to him, stopped working with him or boycotted him. In fact, it was easier for me to reintegrate into the community because they recognized that my father had a strong credibility. However, because everything that I had said ended up being true, people in the community realized that there was something going on with those people. This also made it easier for people to get over it. Now, it is much better. People do not boycott me. They do not say that they were wrong but it is fine. I do understand it; it is difficult for them to do it. I think that I was able to reintegrate back into the community in a positive way, also because I was proven truthful. What changed is also that there were domestic terrorism cases popping up and suspects were being arrested. I was always in the media in Canada and in the US. People like the way that I speak. I am not anti-Muslim. I am very pro-Muslim but I am very anti-terrorism. Having an academic approach to the topic helps too. When people hear or see me on TV, they think: 'I like the ways this person speaks. He is not bad after all.'

SB: *Tell me about your more recent public involvement as a terrorism expert – how did it happen and how did it affect your life?*

MS: When the court made a decision and I was freed of my obligations in 2010, I became a public figure. I started giving talks to academic conferences and connecting with known academics, being hosted on TV and so on. I became known internationally as an expert on the topic. In 2011 I was awarded a Masters in Policing, Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism from Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. I had realized that I was contributing to something greater than myself and obtaining a degree was a way to make sense of the place I found myself in. I also decided that I needed a new identity. So, I took off my robe and cut off my giant beard. I became what I would call ‘a normal looking Muslim.’ I joined people back on Earth because I had been living on a cloud in the sky as a heavy ideologue. I had been living in the past of the first generation of Islam, as many people still do today. It is a past. It is a romanticized past. It is no wonder that some of these people do not function well in modern society, because they try to replicate a society that existed 1,400 years ago. It was not even meant to be that way. This is the claim made by the Salafis, who want to live like the Prophet did. But the reality is that you cannot do it. You need to live according to the ways society is in your time, not in the past. A lot of these people have no future because they live in the past. Taking off my robe and cutting off my beard was a way to retire my old identity and come forward with a new identity. But it was still very Islamic. The ideas that I had remained the same but it did not help when I still looked like a Salafi. It is not really a new identity, but a new uniform in a new wardrobe. This is what kept me still very Muslim. I had more and more training in religion. I got an education. I had a newly found sense of purpose. I was someone with experience, a good grasp of religion and an education, so I thought: ‘what I could do to move things forward?’ I became public, I started attending academic conferences and people realized that I am a primary source. A lot of academics were writing about other people and here I am: I am the ‘other people.’ Let me add to the academic discussion. Let me learn from the academics who study the topic.

SB: *I was surprised to read that you ended up in a US watch-list in 2011. Can you tell me more about it?*

MS: That was a mistake! Intelligence agencies keep their own lists of people and what happened is that, when the case was over, the CSIS did not update their list. On that list were the members of the “Toronto 18” under investigation, including myself. This is because, if there is a spy who is able to access the CSIS’s records and can see that my name is not there, it will be obvious that I am an undercover agent. So their list had to have my name on it. But they must have forgotten or must have not paid attention, and they submitted that list to the Americans saying: ‘these are the “Toronto 18” terrorists: make sure that they do not enter the country.’ I was sitting in the same spot where I am sitting now, when Neil Macdonald, a Canadian news personality, phoned me up and said: ‘hey, you are on a U.S. watch list.’ I did not tell him at the time that I had been at the CSIS’s headquarters teaching a new group of intelligence officers one week before that phone call. I knew that it was a mistake. By that time, I had already made contact with the U.S. Department of State, independently from the Canadian government. I was helping them with counter messaging and other activities. The Department of State contacted me and told me not to worry and that I would be removed from the list. Three months later, I wanted to see if I was off the list, so I drove down to the border. I was arrested and detained at the border. The FBI came. They knew me and thought: ‘what is going on?’ I was not allowed to enter the U.S. but, eventually, I received a call from my contact at the Department of State saying that I was taken off the list. Since then, I have traveled to the U.S. regularly. I am going to see the FBI in Florida soon. Recently, I was in Germany, in Washington DC, at the President Jimmy Carter Center and in many other places. I never get stopped.

SB: *Tell me more about your recent work with governments, law enforcement agencies, and other security-related organizations.*

MS: I am an expert consultant for the United Nations Center for Counter Terrorism. I have helped U.S. Special Operations Command, the Canadian Special Operation Forces, and many other agencies. I

am extremely involved, much more than I ever was in other times in my life. But, to clarify: I am an independent subject matter expert. I am not a spy. I am not a soldier. I am not a law enforcement agent. I am an independent expert who knows the topic of terrorism. When my court duties were over and I started speaking at conferences, I also started going online: I went on Facebook, I went on Twitter, and I started to argue with extremists. I used my own identity. I was open about my identity. When ISIS started to rise, I was online debating these people and trying to talk them out of it. Throughout 2013 and 2014, I debated with people who had gone to Iraq and Syria. Some of those people ended up being killed. I was deeply involved in the conversations that were happening on Facebook and Twitter. I gathered a lot of screenshots from my interaction with these people: the arguments that I was using and the counter-arguments that they were using, the role of women, the role of social media and so on. When all these agencies started knowing more about these extremist groups, I had a lot of data. I had PowerPoint presentations showing ISIS's ideology, grievance narratives, and so on. This increased my credibility because, already back in 2014 and 2015, I was able to show people: 'this is ISIS.' Here we are in 2016 and, now, everybody is talking about countering violent extremism, countering terrorism, countering messages, and so on. I was already ahead of the curve. I was already doing all of those things in real life. Now, my involvement with police, academics, NGOs, and so on, is a result of my activities after my time as an undercover agent. That is why I was approached by the United Nations and other international agencies.

SB: *Mubin, thank you very much for this interview.*

About the interviewer: **Stefano Bonino** is Lecturer in Criminology at Northumbria University and Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

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Interviewer's Note

This interview formed part of a Northumbria University approved project entitled: 'Disrupting Terrorist Groups: An Agent's Perspective.' The telephone interview with Mubin Shaikh was conducted in March 2016.

The interviewer and author of this text, Stefano Bonino, was not in a position to establish contact with the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and the Integrated National Security Enforcement Team to verify the claims made in this interview. However, the book *Undercover Jihadi: Inside the Toronto 18 – Al Qaeda Inspired, Homegrown Terrorism in the West*, which Mubin Shaikh co-authored with Anne Speckhard for Advances Press in 2014, and many public revelations, which emerged from the "Toronto 18" trial, provide evidence for several of Shaikh's claims. Readers wishing to explore some episodes referred to in this interview in more detail are advised to consult the book.

Note

[1] For a quick and basic explanation of 'entrapment', see: <http://www.lectlaw.com/def/e024.htm>