

“WE WERE WATCHED”

NARRATOR Asad Dandia**FOR LESSON***After 9/11:
The Political
Is Personal*

STRONG While you're at Brooklyn College, this is when the person who later came out as an informant first contacted you, right?

DANDIA Yes.

STRONG So tell me about that experience, getting to know him, what he was like.

DANDIA So I was contacted I think around March, early March 2012. So it's almost been six years. And it was through Facebook, social media once again, our good friend. And so he messaged me — I don't particularly remember exactly what he said, but something along the lines of that he's looking to, you know, participate in our community. He's looking to do good work. You know, he wanted to get involved with folks. And he was based out in Jackson Heights and Queens. So it was kind of far from Brighton Beach. But I said, "Yeah. Sure. You're more than welcome to our local mosque."

And so he stayed with us for quite some time. He would come to all of our events.

At the time, you know, the, the conflict in Syria started to take on more violent proportions. And we were raising money for refugees at the time. So we were selling wristbands. And I gave him — I think I gave him like ten to 20 wristbands. And they were five dollars each. They're like those Livestrong wristbands. And he came back pretty quickly with the funds telling me that he sold them all. And I'm like, "All right. Wow. You know a lot — you must know a lot of people if you're able to sell, you know, ten to 20 wristbands for five bucks each" to, you know, what I imagine were mostly undergrads. He wasn't a college student at the time.

RUN TIME **8:31**

So he was with us for, for most of our events. He would come to every lecture that we attended, every workshop, every training. Usually would show up late. Later we found out why. But eventually, in October, time — sometime early October, he confessed publicly on Facebook to being an informant for the NYPD. That’s when things sort of blew up. Yeah.

STRONG Why was he late?

DANDIA So he would come late to events so that he could get a glimpse of the attendance sheet and take photos of everybody’s — names, and emails, and numbers of everyone who came to the event so he could send it off to his handler.

STRONG Holy cow.

DANDIA Yeah. So he came deliberately late just so he could — and we thought, we just thought it was a commuting issue, but there was a method to the craziness. Yeah.

STRONG So what did you think about him as a person?

DANDIA I thought he was a troubled person seeking a better life. So he, you know, he — from what I knew of his past, you know, he got kicked out of school. He got into some fights. His family’s originally from Bangladesh. So he, he grew up in a Muslim family. You know, he, he had a history of drug use, drug abuse. You know, I assumed he may have had, you know, a mental illness, which was later confirmed for me.

So I just really thought he was, you know, sort of socially off, trying to figure himself out, a little confused, existentially confused. And so I kind of let that go and I — some of my friends would come up to me and say, “What’s up with this guy? Why is he so weird? Why is he so awkward?” Close to the end — when I say

close to the end, I mean close to before he confessed — folks came up to me saying that they believed he was a spy or an informant. And I shrugged it off. I was like, “No. That can’t be. He’s just a confused kid.” Of course, they were later vindicated after he confessed and I, I felt like the dumb, the dumb guy for being like, assuming the best and, you know, whatnot. I was, I was sort of like the nice guy and I still kind of am. You know, making excuses for people all the time. But that’s what I thought of him.

You know, when he would meet folks immediately, when I would introduce him to new friends, he’d be like, “Can I get your number?” Like right away, you know. Boy or girl, right? It wouldn’t matter. He’d be like, “Can I get your number?” And essentially the reason why he wanted the number is so he could send it off back to his handler, his police handler. And folks found that kind of awkward. You don’t usually ask people for their numbers the moment you meet them. But again, I just attributed it to, like, a social deficiency. And so that’s what I thought for most of the time while he was with us.

STRONG Wow. Tell me about reading his Facebook post. What did it say and what did it make you think?

DANDIA I still have it saved. You know, for the memory. He wrote something about the NYPD using him as part of a, what he called a Ponzi scheme. And he recalled that when he was working as an informant and going to different lectures and events, he saw other people who were informants there. In other words, there were more than one of him and he saw those people. And he assumed that they were sent to spy on him, and he was sent to spy on them.

And he thought that the NYPD was duping him, right? And he finally got sick of it and so he confessed. But at the same time, he wasn’t really a friend of us either.

He wasn't doing it out of benevolence toward the community that he was spying on either. He sort of, he sort of wrote about us as if we were like, you know, gullible people for believing in religion. So he was very like anti-religion and, and whatnot. And so he was kind of against us and the police in a way. And for him, I think this was just a way of expressing that. Of course, again, mental health issues, a lot of problems. These are usually the, the people and the profile that's often targeted by the police, the type of person that they would want to hire as an informant.

So we later learned that he was caught on drug possession charges or something like that. And they told him either you face a certain number of years in jail or you spy for us. Originally they wanted him to spy on a narcotics group, but he said he'd — [laughter] he said he didn't want to spy on his own people. So he spied on Muslims instead, which is funny because he grew up Muslim. And so that was what he wrote in his confession.

STRONG Wow.

DANDIA Yeah.

STRONG So I, I believe the AP story about NYPD surveillance came out in 2011, so —

DANDIA Yes. Correct.

STRONG — just a little bit before.

DANDIA Yes. So the AP story that came out in 2011, that was more of like a general report about, like, the fact that there is surveillance activity, and like some 15,000 plainclothes officers in the tristate area, including outside of what, what's their jurisdiction, meaning in New Jersey. And so this was about a year later.

STRONG So when people were suspicious of this, it was because people in the community sort of already knew that this was happening.

DANDIA Exactly. Exactly. Yeah.

STRONG Were there any suspicions of surveillance before that story broke, or was it all after?

DANDIA Yes, there were. Again, I – as I mentioned, friends approached me believing that he was an informant before he confessed himself.

STRONG Oh, I mean before the AP story came out.

DANDIA Oh, before the AP story came out? I always like to think that there’s sort of like an implicit – I think back then at least we would always used to have this implicit – implicitly understood that we are being spied on. There was sort of like this assumed thing. We wouldn’t always verbalize it, but it was kind of assumed and you would be able to tell by the way people were talking, especially when political issues came up, particularly about like the Middle East and South Asia.

And you know, there were times when people would be very tense. Or people would say, “Let’s not talk about this. You know, maybe it’s – this is not the time and place.” So there were definitely – it was sort of like an assumed thing that we are being spied on. This is a post-9/11 world now, Patriot Act, you know, all of these sorts of infringements on, you know, on our rights are taking place. We just don’t have – just because we don’t have confirmation doesn’t mean it’s not happening. And so it was kind of assumed. Yeah.

STRONG What did that kind of caution lead to in the community? What kind of changes did you see?

DANDIA A lot of community members — for example, I remember in Hunter College — I wasn't a student there, but I remember like in, in front of the MSA [Muslim Student Association], the prayer room door there was a sign that said, “Please, no political discussions in the prayer room.” And you know, if you know Muslims and Arabs, that, that's like 75 percent of our conversation. So it's like, what, what are we going to talk about? The rest is about marriage. And so, yeah. And so it was very chilling because we didn't know who to trust and who to speak to, whether the guy praying next to me is an informant or a friend. And that really deteriorates the social cohesion of a community.

BIO Asad Dandia was born in 1992 in Brooklyn and raised in Brighton Beach. While attending Brooklyn College as an undergraduate, he co-founded the nonprofit charity Muslims Giving Back. Over the course of the next several years, he became involved with a number of other activist and religious organizations, including Make the Road New York and the Center for Spiritual Life at New York University. In 2013, Dandia joined the *Raza v. City of New York* class-action lawsuit that successfully sued the New York City Police Department for its prejudicial surveillance of Muslim communities, including Muslims Giving Back.

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