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Journey to Jihad: America's First Mexican Immigrant Terrorist Suspect

OPINION By | Fox News



Law enforcement and FBI agents during a raid at the home of 21-year-old Miguel Alejandro Santana Vidriales of Upland, Calif, on Friday, Nov. 16, 2012. (AP2012)

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Los Angeles – The arrest of Miguel Alejandro Santana Vidriales, a 21-year-old man from Mexico City accused of conspiring to join Al Qaeda, marks the first time in America's modern history that a Mexican immigrant faces charges of terrorism against the United States, a case whose timing could not be worse or better for immigration reform.

Last Monday, FBI agents swarmed down upon Santana's apartment in Upland, Calif., a small community east of Los Angeles, and took the self-described Al Qaeda sleeper-agent-in-training into custody as part of a federal sweep that also netted three others terrorist suspects. They are identified as Soheil Omar Kabir, 34, who was born in Afghanistan, became a naturalized U.S. citizen and served in the U.S. Air Force in 2000-2001. Kabir was honorably discharged and lived in Pomona, Calif. Also arrested was Ralph Kenneth DeLeon, 23, born in the Philippines and a legal U.S. resident now living in Ontario, Calif. The fourth suspect is Arifeen David Gojali, 21, born in the U.S. and according to the FBI lived in Riverside, Calif.

Santana's arrest is particularly significant because of his path into the United States during his alleged journey to jihad, which he concealed for more than two years while living here as a resident awaiting citizenship. Federal investigators now reveal he entered the country legally in 2010 near San Diego clearing customs without difficulty despite his pre-entry violent terrorist training activities in Mexico, which only now are coming to light.

In a chilling 77-page report, the FBI alleges Santana confided in an individual posing as a friend who was actually working as a paid undercover federal informant. According to the report, he told the informant that for the two years prior to his entry through San Ysidro, Calif., he had trained in Mexico and learned to fix and shoot a lot of different kinds of guns. "I was practicing with explosives learning how to build and use them," he said, and added he was thinking of learning how to be a sniper as well.

The Mexican immigrant later told the informant that he wanted to join the Taliban in Afghanistan to fight, "...the British, the Army and the Marines" and go against military bases that "could be ambushed from every direction". Santana bragged he would load a truck with C4 explosives and, "Just drive into like the baddest military base." He concluded, "The more I think about it the more it excites me."

The ability of Santana, 19 years old at the time, to enter the United States unnoticed even by the Department of Homeland Security will likely fuel the argument of the harshest critics of immigration reform who insist the Obama Administration must first protect the country from terrorist threats by individuals coming in along our southern border.

Conversely, supporters of a comprehensive revamping of the nation's immigration policies believe that Santana's ability to "hide in plain sight" proves the need for a change is more imperative than ever. They argue U.S. officials need to have enhanced information about immigrants residing within our borders awaiting legalization, to better help differentiate between those who are law-abiding and others who are intent on doing harm to Americans.

Depending on the public outcry, the name of Miguel Alejandro Santana Vidriales may well be remembered for being the catalyst that delays or accelerates an historic reform to our immigration laws impacting more than 12 million undocumented men, women and children living in the United States.

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