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The Saudi Marathon Man

**By Amy Davidson Sorkin**

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A twenty-year-old man who had been watching the Boston Marathon had his body torn into by the force of a bomb. He wasn't alone; a hundred and seventy-six people were injured and three were killed. But he was the only one who, while in the hospital being treated for his wounds, had his apartment searched in "a startling show of force," as his fellow-tenants described it to the Boston Herald, with a "phalanx" of officers and agents and two K9 units. He was the one whose belongings were carried out in paper bags as his neighbors watched; whose roommate, also a student, was questioned for five hours ("I was scared") before coming out to say that he didn't think his friend was someone who'd plant a bomb—that he was a nice guy who liked sports. "Let me go to school, dude," the roommate said later in the day, covering his face with his hands and almost crying, as a Fox News producer followed him and asked him, again and again, if he was sure he hadn't been living with a killer.

Why the search, the interrogation, the dogs, the bomb squad, and the injured man's name tweeted out, attached to the word

“suspect”? After the bombs went off, people were running in every direction—so was the young man. Many, like him, were wounded; many of them were saved by the unflinching kindness of strangers, who carried them or stopped the bleeding with their own hands and improvised tourniquets. “Exhausted runners who kept running to the nearest hospital to give blood,” President Obama said. “They helped one another, consoled one another,” Carmen Ortiz, the U.S. Attorney for Massachusetts, said. In the midst of that, according to a CBS News report, a bystander saw the young man running, badly hurt, rushed to him, and then “tackled him,” bringing him down. People thought he looked suspicious.

What made them suspect him? He was running—so was everyone. The police reportedly thought he smelled like explosives; his wounds might have suggested why. He said something about thinking there would be a second bomb—as there was, and often is, to target responders. If that was the reason he gave for running, it was a sensible one. He asked if anyone was dead—a question people were screaming. And he was from Saudi Arabia, which is around where the logic stops. Was it just the way he looked, or did he, in the chaos, maybe call for God with a name that someone found strange?

What happened next didn’t take long. “Investigators have a suspect—a Saudi Arabian national—in the horrific Boston Marathon bombings, *The Post* has learned.” That’s the New York Post, which went on to cite Fox News. The “Saudi suspect”—still faceless—suddenly gave anxieties a form. He was said to be in custody; or maybe his hospital bed was being guarded. The Boston police, who weren’t saying much of anything, disputed the report—sort of.

“Honestly, I don’t know where they’re getting their information from, but it didn’t come from us,” a police spokesman told TPM. But were they talking to someone? Maybe. “Person of interest” became a phrase of both avoidance and insinuation. On the Atlas Shrugs Web site, there was a note that his name in Arabic meant “sword.” At an evening press conference, Ed Davis, the police commissioner, said that no suspect was in custody. But that was about when the dogs were in the apartment building in Revere—an inquiry that was seized on by some as, if not an indictment, at least a vindication of their suspicions.

“There must be enough evidence to keep him there,” Andrew Napolitano said on “Fox and Friends”—“there” being the hospital. “They must be learning information which is of a suspicious nature,” Steve Doocy interjected. “If he was clearly innocent, would they have been able to search his house?” Napolitano thought that a judge would take any reason at a moment like this, but there had to be “something”—maybe he appeared “deceitful.” As Mediaite pointed out, Megyn Kelly put a slight break on it (as she has been known to do) by asking if there might have been some “racial profiling,” but then, after a round of speculation about his visa (Napolitano: “Was he a real student, or was that a front?”), she asked, “What’s the story on his ability to lawyer up?”

By Tuesday afternoon, the fever had broken. Report after report said that he was a witness, not a suspect. “He was just at the wrong place at the wrong time,” a “U.S. official” told CNN. (So were a lot of people at the marathon.) Even Fox News reported that he’d been “ruled out.” At a press conference, Governor Deval Patrick spoke,

not so obliquely, about being careful not to treat “categories of people in uncharitable ways.”

We don’t know yet who did this. “The range of suspects and motives remains wide open,” Richard Deslauriers of the F.B.I. said early Tuesday evening. In a minute, with a claim of responsibility, our expectations could be scrambled. The bombing could, for all we know, be the work of a Saudi man—or an American or an Icelandic or a person from any nation you can think of. It still won’t mean that this Saudi man can be treated the way he was, or that people who love him might have had to find out that a bomb had hit him when his name popped up on the Web as a suspect in custody. It is at these moments that we need to be most careful, not least.

It might be comforting to think of this as a blip, an aberration, something that will be forgotten tomorrow—if not by this young man. There are people at Guanátanmo who have also been cleared by our own government, and are still there. A new report on the legacy of torture after 9/11, released Tuesday, is a well-timed admonition. The F.B.I. said that they would “go to the ends of the earth” to get the Boston perpetrators. One wants them to be able to go with their heads held high.

“If you want to know who we are, what America is, how we respond to evil—that’s it. Selflessly. Compassionately. Unafraid,” President Obama said. That was mostly true on Monday; a terrible day, when an eight-year-old boy was killed, his sister maimed, two others dead, and many more in critical condition. And yet, when there was so much to fear that we were so brave about, there was panic about a wounded man barely out of his teens who needed help. We get so

close to all that Obama described. What's missing? Is it humility?

Read more of our coverage of the Boston Marathon explosions.

Photograph, from April 16th, by Emmanuel Dunand/AFP/Getty.



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