


Folio: The lost boys of Winnipeg

"We have no idea why he left. No one knows."



Miawand Yar was an engineering student of Afghan descent who underwent a dramatic personality change after being charged with selling crack. He grew his beard, changed his dress and devoted himself to study.

CSIS agents poured into Winnipeg in 2007, pursuing any leads among Muslim students, prompting some to complain to community leaders.



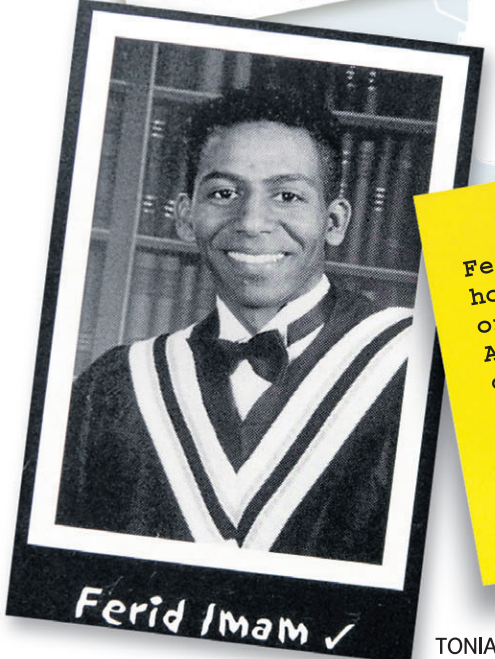
Two of the very best on DCI's soccer squad' - Vito L. and Ferid I. are the kind of players that everyone dreams about.

The three men left Canada in early 2007 and were spotted in Peshawar, Pakistan. The trail then led to Waziristan on the border with Afghanistan.

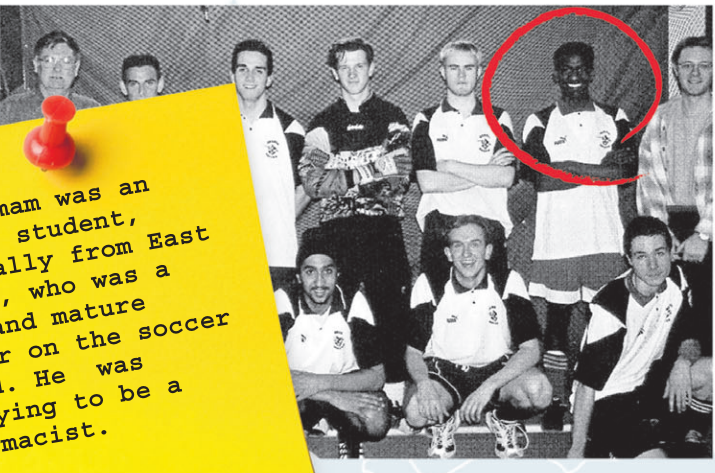


President Obama and former President Bush were given secret briefings on the men's journey to Pakistan. FBI agents travelled to Abu Dhabi to interview Muhannad al-Farekh's father.

Miawand Yar's brother received a letter in which he asked that someone pay off his student loan, a condition which, according to some, would allow him entrance to heaven.




Ferid Imam was an honours student, originally from East Africa, who was a calm and mature leader on the soccer field. He was studying to be a pharmacist.



Ferid Imam was a valued member of his high school soccer team.

Family members haven't heard from them in more than two years. The last communication was a brief phone call to Mr. al-Farekh's father.



The three belonged to the Muslim Students Association at the University of Manitoba and made the pilgrimage to Mecca together in late 2006.



The three made the pilgrimage to Mecca

Muhannad al-Farekh was born in Texas and educated in Jordan

TONIA COWAN AND DAVID PRATT / THE GLOBE AND MAIL PHOTOS: REUTERS, GETTY IMAGES

Nearly four years ago three young Muslims from the Prairie city travelled to Pakistan and promptly disappeared, sparking one of Canada's biggest national security investigations since 9/11

Greg McArthur and **Patrick White** Winnipeg
Joe Friesen and **Christie Blatchford** Toronto
Marten Youssef Vancouver
and **Colin Freeze** Ottawa

They were three Muslim boys, from different parts of the world, with very different personalities.

Ferid Imam was an honours student from East Africa, an aspiring pharmacist and, according to his high-school soccer coach, "a dream player." Muhannad al-Farekh hopped from Texas to the United Arab Emirates to Jordan to the Prairies. Miawand Yar, an ethnic Afghani born in Pakistan, was a schoolyard bully who was arrested for selling crack on his 20th birthday.

But in early 2007, instead of finishing their degrees at the University of Manitoba, the three friends boarded a plane bound for Pakistan via Europe. Their mysterious departure has sparked one of Canada's most expensive and elaborate national security investigations since 9/11. Their flight has prompted CSIS agents to fan out around Winnipeg and the RCMP counterterrorism unit to pull in officers from across the country. The Federal Bureau of Investigation has dispatched agents to the Middle East as part of their hunt, and the young men have been the subject of secret briefings to U.S. presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Sources said they were next spotted in Peshawar – the gateway to the lawless tribal area bordering Afghanistan that is suspected of sheltering senior

members of al-Qaeda. Next, there was a sighting in the mountainous region of Waziristan, a magnet for insurgents and missile strikes from unmanned U.S. drones.

The Globe and Mail learned the identities of the missing students not from law enforcement officials but from members of Winnipeg's Muslim community. Whispers about missing students came up when reporters started making inquiries about Hiva Alizadeh, the former Winnipegger who was charged in August with plotting to detonate bombs at unspecified sites in Canada. Those close to the missing students say they were not associates of Mr. Alizadeh, and national security sources say the two cases are not related.

None of them has been charged with a terrorism-related offence, but national security officials say the case may be an example of how unpredictable the radicalization process can be – it can take root in any part of the country, and latch on to a variety of personalities.

The Prophet and the Hajj

Ferid Imam came to Winnipeg when he was just seven years old. An East-African Muslim, he started school as an ESL student, but quickly integrated into a group of friends that included Chinese immigrants, Sikhs and what one of

his family members described as white Canadians.

His wide toothy smile could be misleading; he didn't tolerate foolish behaviour, and was self-disciplined. He never missed any of his five daily prayers, a relative says, but also never made a public display of his faith.

On the soccer pitch at Dakota Collegiate Institute, he was a rare combination of skill and maturity. A teammate, Michael Dempster, recalled the scolding he received from Ferid after he took a swing at an opposing player and received a four-game suspension.

"He pulled me aside and said 'Mike, at the end of the day did this really matter? Was it that big a deal? It wasn't cool – there are better ways to go about it,'" Mr. Dempster said.

When the team fell behind on the scoreboard, Ferid was always there to "pick up the pieces," said Kevin Szajkowski, his coach at the time.

"He was outstanding in the way that he seemed like an old soul. He was older than his years," the coach said.

About 12 kilometres away, in Winnipeg's rough-and-tumble north end, Miawand Yar could be found in the schoolyard shaking down classmates for their lunch money.

Born in Pakistan to parents who fled their native Afghanistan after the Soviet invasion, the Yars came

to Manitoba when Miawand was eight years old. He moved on from one junior school after he beat up two smaller students. In high school, he was unmotivated. "Most of the time he was just a couch potato playing his [video] games," said one family member.

His studies in mechanical engineering at the University of Manitoba were disrupted on Aug. 13, 2003, when Miawand and several associates were accused of setting crack to an undercover police officer in a parking lot.

One of the arresting officers, Constable Sean Cassidy, later testified in a Winnipeg courtroom about how Miawand's bag was stuffed so tightly with money and crack that it "almost exploded open" when he unzipped it.

The charges against him were later stayed by the Crown attorney's office as the investigation spread out from the accused dealers on the street to the larger players in a suspected illegal drug syndicate.

His fortuitous legal turn coincided with some major life changes. He stopped going to the bars and ditched his old friends, including some characters who had been charged with, among other crimes, illegal possession of firearms and sexual assault.

He gravitated to Ferid, as well as Muhannad al-Farekh, a Texas-born business student who grew up in the UAE and was educated

in Jordan. Miawand grew out his beard. His clothes changed from a hip-hop street style to more formal attire. On his head, he wore a white kufi.

"He was a completely changed man. In a good way, though. He was very humble," said Rhodelle Magnayon, a computer engineering student. "He had his nose to the books, things like that. I thought, all the best to him. It could only look up from there."

The trio volunteered, at least on paper, with the university's Muslim Students Association – though other volunteers said Miawand and Muhannad did very little work. Ferid helped with the association's annual conference, which featured a talk by a passionate and popular speaker, a British convert to Islam named Abdur Raheem Green.

If Ferid was once reserved about putting his faith on display, he shed that at university. On Feb. 23, 2006, in a posting on Mr. Green's website, he lashed out at Muslims and non-Muslims who were making light of the satirical cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad published in a Danish newspaper.

"I think to use the word 'controversy' in describing the situation that started in Denmark is misleading," he wrote. "I believe there is nothing controversy about it, they attacked our Prophet [peace be upon him], who is Islam by himself. Thus, I like to

think of this as a 'crisis' rather than a controversy."

In December, 2006 – a few months before their disappearance – the three friends took part in the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia and Islam's holiest site, Mecca. Miawand's family was upset that, upon his return, he didn't visit to tell them about his experience.

They had no idea he was planning another trip that would cut off contact for nearly four years and counting.

A letter and a call

The letter that arrived in the mail was addressed to Miawand's brother. It was short on specifics, but in it the 24-year-old made a strange request: Please pay my student loans.

To some, this might have been a positive sign and an indication that he wanted to return. But, as any religious scholar would know, an Islamic dictum states that, in order to get to heaven, one needs to be free of debt.

His family turned to the police and filed a missing-persons report, but it was clear from the outset that this wasn't going to be solved by posting their pictures on community bulletin boards. Authorities had subjected all three families to extensive interviews. In Abu Dhabi, Muhannad's father, Mahmoud al-Farekh, not only gave statements to the RCMP

and the FBI, but to the security service of the United Arab Emirates. When his son reached out to him with a brief phone call two years ago, his father passed the information on to police. The elder al-Farekh would not disclose to The Globe what they discussed.

Initial glimmers of hope that they might be on some impulsive youthful foray have been gradually snuffed out; family members and friends say they haven't heard anything else from them.

"You ask yourself – why didn't he give us a call or let us know where he is? That makes it unbelievable," said one of Ferid Imam's relatives, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "We have no idea why he left. No one knows."

Reached at his home in Abu Dhabi, Mahmoud al-Farekh said: "Did he go because he wanted to spread Islam or because he wanted to fight? I don't know. I don't know if I will ever know."

Although such disappearances are not a pervasive or widespread trend in Islamic communities in the West, there are similar, isolated cases of young men vanishing in other North American cities, such as Minneapolis. Several Toronto Somali parents have faced questions from CSIS after their sons disappeared.

In Winnipeg, the fallout has not been confined to family members.

Six University of Manitoba students, complaining of stress, turned to a Muslim leader for counselling after they received repeated visits from CSIS agents. Shahina Siddiqui, the executive director of the Islamic Social Services Association, said she tried to calm them and inform them of their rights while also reminding them that the authorities need to investigate.

"I see both sides of it. I see the side of CSIS and the RCMP, and I see the side of the community," Ms. Siddiqui said.

The RCMP declined comment. CSIS said it won't comment on any investigation, but stressed it must probe cases involving potential acts of terrorism.

Members of the Muslim community said the missing students have left everyone in a place that is equally frustrating for both questioner and respondent; friends and family must endure inquiries that they simply can't answer. One Muslim student who was questioned by CSIS said he and his friends were eager to help at first, but found the agency's inquiries to be unceasing. "That's the most we can give," he said with a sigh of exasperation.

One of Ferid's relatives said he's at a loss to explain how or why the young man changed. "You don't see radicalization in a person," he said. "Everything they do is in their head."

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