



A film by Lyric R. Cabral and David Felix Sutcliffe

(T)ERROR is the first film to infiltrate a covert counterterrorism sting, with filmmakers documenting the action in real time as it unfolds on the ground. Viewers get an unfettered glimpse of the government's counterterrorism tactics and the murky justifications behind them through the perspective of a 63-year-old Black revolutionary turned FBI informant.

84 minutes

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SYNOPSIS

(T)ERROR is the first documentary to place filmmakers on the ground during an active FBI counterterrorism sting operation. Through the perspective of "Shariff," a 63-year-old Black revolutionary turned informant, viewers get an unfettered glimpse of the government's counterterrorism tactics and the murky justifications behind them.

The film begins in an undisclosed location in eastern United States. Shariff (whose legal name is Saeed Torres) works as a cook in a middle school cafeteria, but is struggling to make ends meet. When the FBI calls, inviting him to work on a terrorism investigation in Pittsburgh, Shariff reluctantly leaves his young son behind, for what he hopes will be his last case, and a chance to make several hundred thousand dollars.

Upon arrival in Pittsburgh, Shariff informs the filmmakers that the FBI has ordered him to befriend a white Muslim convert named Khalifah Al-Akili, and assess his interest in attending a terrorist training camp abroad. As his investigation of Khalifah unfolds, a parallel examination of Shariff begins as well. Uncovering a complex web of greed, betrayal and regret, *(T)ERROR* reveals the origins and evolution of Shariff's complicated past.

Ultimately, we return to Harlem, Shariff's birthplace, where we learn of his role in imprisoning Tarik Shah, a renowned jazz bassist who, in 2007, received a 15-year sentence for pledging to train Al Qaeda mujahideen in hand-to-hand combat. Shariff explains that it was Shah's case that forced him to flee New York City and resulted in his excommunication from his friends, family, and community. "At the trial, everyone from the mosque came," Shariff says. "Because they couldn't believe it. They had to see it with their own eyes."

Meanwhile, Shariff finds himself under increasing pressure from the FBI to produce results in the Al-Akili case. Midway through film, a dramatic discovery upends the investigation, and raises serious questions about the ethics, and effectiveness of the FBI's tactics. Taut, stark, and controversial, *(T)ERROR* illuminates the fragile relationships between individual and surveillance state in modern America, and asks: Who is watching the watchers?

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

Lyric R. Cabral (Director, Producer)

I have an extremely personal connection to *(T)ERROR*, as I have known the main character, "Shariff," for over a decade. Outside of law enforcement personnel, I am one of few people who have maintained contact with Shariff over the span of several FBI counterterrorism assignments. Starting in 2003, while I was a young journalism student, Shariff was my neighbor. We lived in a 3-story Harlem brownstone and, for several years, we engaged in diurnal conversations about current events, politics, and his former involvement with the Black Panther Party for Self Defense.

Later, court records revealed that his garden apartment was an FBI "safe house," wired with audio and video surveillance, to record interactions between Shariff and Tarik Shah, a suspected terrorist. Shah, who I met on several occasions, was arrested on May 28, 2005 and, within days, the FBI swiftly relocated Shariff to South Carolina. On the morning that he fled New York City, Shariff called me and, speaking frantically, made a cryptic request. "I'm going to be living in South Carolina for a minute, laying low. But if anybody asks about me, don't give them any information and try to find out who they are." I pressed Shariff for more details, wondering what had motivated his relocation. "Come see me soon. I have a lot to tell you."

In the summer of 2007, I traveled to South Carolina where Shariff disclosed that he had been working as an FBI terrorist informant since 1991. I was appalled by the revelation, and yet attracted to the tremendous potential of his narrative. Seemingly, Shariff is not a protagonist but an anti-hero, whom many viewers may even consider a villain. Initially, I questioned his motivations and whether I, as a filmmaker, should even document his story. I left South Carolina, feeling a mixture of revulsion and excitement. And for the next ten years, I would call Shariff once a month, just to ask him how he is, and where he is...

David Felix Sutcliffe (Director, Producer)

Lyric and I first met while teaching film to teenagers at an afterschool program in Harlem, back in 2005. While teaching at the program, one of our students, a 16-year-old Muslim girl named Adama Bah, was arrested by the FBI after they accused her of being a "potential" suicide bomber. This event had a profound impact on both Lyric and I, and sparked a growing interest and awareness in our government's broader counterterrorism efforts. I ultimately ended up making *Adama*, an hour-long film about Adama and her family for PBS.

While working on *Adama*, I noticed that the vast majority of the terrorist plots "discovered" by the government were, in fact, created by paid FBI informants, working at the direction of their superiors at the Bureau. In these cases, informants spent months, sometimes years, developing and nurturing relationships with targets, and encouraging them to participate in terrorist activities.

On a political level, I found these cases incredibly problematic. However, I was fascinated by the idea of these informants, individuals who cultivated friendships with targets, only to then betray them. And then, in the fall of 2011, Lyric casually inquired if I had any plans for a future project. I happened to mention that I had been fantasizing about making an informant documentary, but figured it was an impossible idea. How would you even find an informant? And why would they ever let themselves be filmed?

Lyric subsequently informed me of her relationship with Shariff. Astonished, I immediately suggested that she get in touch with him, and see if he would be interested in participating in a film. When she contacted Shariff to explore the idea, he said that he was "working," but that he was interested, and that we should come to his home to discuss the idea further...

FILMMAKERS' BIOS



Lyric R. Cabral is a New York-based filmmaker and photojournalist who documents stories seldom seen in mainstream media. In support of her verité work, Cabral has received artist grants from BBC Storyville, the Tribeca Film Institute, the Sundance Institute, the Independent Television Service, NYSCA, the International Documentary Association, and the W. Eugene Smith Memorial Fund. Cabral recently completed *(T)ERROR*, her first feature length documentary, co-directed with David Felix Sutcliffe, which premiered at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, where it won a Special Jury Prize for Break Out First Feature. Cabral, along with co-director Sutcliffe, was honored by the Tribeca Film Institute with the 2013 Creative Promise Award. *(T)ERROR* was also a recipient of the 2013 Garrett Scott Documentary Development Grant, awarded by the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival. In 2013, Cabral was named by *Filmmaker Magazine* as one of the “25 New Faces of Independent Film.” Her photography has been recently published through Aperture

Foundation, National Geographic Channel UK, the Nation, and the Village Voice, and is currently on exhibition with "Gordon Parks: The Making of an Argument.”



David Felix Sutcliffe is an independent documentary filmmaker whose work explores issues of national security and civil liberties in the post-9/11 era. In 2013, he was included in *Filmmaker Magazine's* annual list of "25 New Faces of Independent Film." His 2011 film, *Adama*, was broadcast on PBS, and featured the story of a 16-year-old Muslim girl growing up in Harlem who was arrested by the FBI on suspicion of being a “potential suicide bomber.” His follow-up film, *(T)ERROR*, co-directed with acclaimed photojournalist Lyric R. Cabral, marks the first time that filmmakers have had access to an active FBI informant in a domestic counterterrorism investigation. *(T)ERROR* debuted at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival where it won a Special Jury Prize for Break Out First Feature. Along with *(T)ERROR* co-director Cabral, Sutcliffe was honored by the Tribeca Film Institute with the 2013 Creative Promise Award. In 2014, he was selected as a fellow for the Sundance Institute's Edit and Story Lab, as well as their Creative Producing Lab. His work as a filmmaker has been funded by the BBC, the NEA, the Tribeca Film Institute, the

Sundance Institute, and the Independent Television Service.

PRESS

"It's the sort of movie around which congressional investigations...should be built"

- [Salt Lake Tribune](#)

"The 14 best movies we saw at Sundance"

- [Esquire](#)

"Cinematically new and politically incisive"

- [Ioncinema](#)

"Thriller-style show of cat and mouse"

- [Slant Magazine](#)

"Great journalism and great filmmaking"

- [Sight and Sound Magazine](#)

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Directors/Producers

Lyric R. Cabral

David Felix Sutcliffe

Producer

Christopher St. John

Co-Producer

Shirel Kozak

Executive Producers

Eugene Jarecki

Nick Fraser

Executive Producer for ITVS

Sally Jo Fifer

Supervising Producer for ITVS

David Eisenberg

Music by

Robert Miller

Directors of Photography

Lyric R. Cabral

David Felix Sutcliffe

Editors

Laura Minnear

Jean-Philippe Boucicaud

Additional Editors
Anoosh Tertzakian
Todd Woody Richman

Consulting Editors
Jonathan Oppenheim
Lewis Erskine A.C.E.

Creative Consultant
Laura Poitras

Co-Editor
David Felix Sutcliffe

Commissioning Editor for BBC Storyville
Kate Townsend-Vision

Sample Editor
Sabrina S. Gordon

Trailer Editor
Harry Geller

Archival Research
Lyric R. Cabral

Archival Producers
Lyric R. Cabral
Dan DiMauro

Photo Retouching
Misra Walker
Lyric R. Cabral

Still Photographer
Mark Nevers

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Frisly Soberanis

Office Manager
Kara Elverson

Transcribers
Madison Ferris
Ian Greenspan
Andrew McLain
Tunisia Mitchell
Jake Rabinbach
Dawson Smith

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Mina So

Teranex Operator
Evan Johnson

Animation
Paul Docherty
Peter Haas

Additional Animation
Aaron Hodgins Davis

Conform Editor
Ben Cortes

Re-recording Mixer
Paul Levin

Supervising Re-recording Mixer
Kevin Wilson

Foley Artist
Jason Trammell

Colorist
Eric Alvarado

Post Production Services
Prime Focus

Music Rights Supervisor
John McCollough

Legal Counsel
Fernando Ramirez

E&O Legal Counsel
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Gwen Schantz
Tarik Shah
Othello St. John
Solomon St. John
Saeed Shariff Torres/Theodore Shelby
Saeed's son
The Sutcliffe Family
Lois Vossen

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Untitled, Chicago, Illinois, 1963
Untitled, Chicago, Illinois, 1963
Malcolm X at Rally, Chicago, Illinois, 1963
Malcolm X Leads Muslims in Prayer, Chicago, Illinois, 1963
Untitled, Harlem, New York, 1963
Ethel Sharrieff, Chicago, Illinois, 1963
Untitled, Chicago, Illinois, 1963

“Mississippi Mud”
Written by Valerian Smith and Bob Robin
Performed by Black Blood and the Chocolate Pickles
Courtesy of Tuff City Records

“Door Peeper”
Written by Tommy Tornado
Performed by Tommy Tornado backed by The Rude Rich & High Notes
Courtesy of Noise Problems

This program was produced by Stories Seldom Seen LLC which is solely responsible for its content.

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