

APNewsBreak: US identifies anti-Muslim filmmaker

EILEEN SULLIVAN - Associated Press - Associated Press

Federal authorities have identified a Coptic Christian in southern California who is on probation after his conviction for financial crimes as the key figure behind the anti-Muslim film that ignited mob violence against U.S. embassies across the Mideast, a U.S. law enforcement official told The Associated Press on Thursday.

The official said authorities had concluded that Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, 55, was behind "Innocence of Muslims," a film that denigrated Islam and the prophet Muhammad and sparked protests earlier this week in Egypt, Libya and most recently in Yemen. It was not immediately clear whether Nakoula was the target of a criminal investigation or part of the broader investigation into the deaths of U.S. Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans in Libya during a terrorist attack.

Attorney General Eric Holder confirmed Thursday that Justice Department officials were investigating the deaths, which occurred during an attack on the American mission in Benghazi.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss an ongoing investigation, said Nakoula was connected to the persona of Sam Bacile, a man who initially told the AP he was the film's writer and director. But Bacile turned out to be a false identity, and the AP traced a cellphone number Bacile used to a southern California house where it located and interviewed Nakoula.

Bacile initially told AP he was Jewish and Israeli, although Israeli officials said they had no records of such a citizen. Others involved in the film said his statements were contrived, as evidence mounted that the film's key player was a Coptic Christian with a checkered past.

Nakoula told the AP in an interview outside Los Angeles on Wednesday that he managed logistics for the company that produced the film. Nakoula denied he was Bacile and said he did not direct the film, though he said he knew Bacile.

Federal court papers filed against Nakoula in a 2010 criminal prosecution noted that he had used numerous aliases, including Nicola Bacily, Robert Bacily, Erwin Salameh and others.

During a conversation outside his home, Nakoula offered his driver's license to show his identity but kept his thumb over his middle name, Basseley. Records checks by the AP subsequently found that middle name as well as other connections to the Bacile persona.

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

The AP located the man calling himself Bacile after obtaining his cellphone number from Morris Sadek, a conservative Coptic Christian in the U.S. who has promoted the anti-Muslim film in recent days on his website. Egypt's Christian Coptic populace has long decried what they describe as a history of discrimination and occasional violence from the country's Muslim majority.

Pastor Terry Jones of Gainesville, Fla., who sparked outrage in the Arab world when he burned Qurans on the ninth anniversary of 9/11, said he spoke with the movie's director on the phone Wednesday and prayed for him. Jones said he has not met the filmmaker in person but added that the man contacted him a few weeks ago about promoting the movie. Jones and others who have dealt with the filmmaker said Wednesday that Bacile was hiding his real identity.

"I have not met him. Sam Bacile, that is not his real name," Jones said. "He is definitely in hiding and does not reveal his identity."

The YouTube account under the username "Sam Bacile" was used to publish excerpts of the provocative movie in July and was used to post comments online as recently as Tuesday, including this defense of the film written in Arabic: "It is a 100 percent American movie, you cows."

Nakoula, who talked guardedly with AP about his role, pleaded no contest in 2010 to federal bank fraud charges in California and was ordered to pay more than \$790,000 in restitution. He was also sentenced to 21 months in federal prison and was ordered not to use computers or the Internet for five years without approval from his probation officer.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Jennifer Leigh Williams said Nakoula set up fraudulent bank accounts using stolen identities and Social Security numbers; then, checks from those accounts would be deposited into other bogus accounts from which Nakoula would withdraw money at ATM machines.

It was "basically a check-kiting scheme," the prosecutor told the AP. "You try to get the money out of the bank before the bank realizes they are drawn from a fraudulent account. There basically is no money."

Prior to his bank fraud conviction, Nakoula struggled with a series of financial problems in recent years, according to California state tax and bankruptcy records. In June 2006, a \$191,000 tax lien was filed against him in the Los Angeles County Recorder of Deeds office. In 1997, a \$106,000 lien was filed against him in Orange County.

American actors and actresses who appeared in "Innocence of Muslims" issued a joint statement Wednesday saying they were misled about the project and alleged that some of their dialogue was crudely dubbed during post-production.

In the English-language version of the trailer, direct references to Muhammad appear to be the result of post-production changes to the movie. Either actors aren't

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seen when the name "Muhammad" is spoken in the overdubbed sound, or they appear to be mouthing something else as the name of the prophet is spoken.

"The entire cast and crew are extremely upset and feel taken advantage of by the producer," said the statement, obtained by the Los Angeles Times. "We are 100 percent not behind this film and were grossly misled about its intent and purpose. We are shocked by the drastic rewrites of the script and lies that were told to all involved. We are deeply saddened by the tragedies that have occurred."

One of the actresses, Cindy Lee Garcia, told KERO-TV in Bakersfield that the film was originally titled "Desert Warriors" and the script did not contain offensive references to Islam.

"When I found out this movie had caused all this havoc, I called Sam and asked him why, what happened, why did he do this? I said, 'Why did you do this to us, to me and to us?' And he said, 'Tell the world that it wasn't you that did it, it was me, the one who wrote the script, because I'm tired of the radical Muslims running around killing everyone,'" she said.

Garcia said the director, who called himself Sam Bacile, told her then that he was Egyptian.

The man identifying himself as Bacile told the AP he was an Israeli-born, 56-year-old Jewish writer and director. But a Christian activist involved in the film project, Steve Klein, told the AP on Wednesday that Bacile was a pseudonym and that the man was Christian. Klein had told the AP on Tuesday that the filmmaker was an Israeli Jew who was concerned for family members who live in Egypt.

About 15 key players from the Middle East — people from Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan and Iran, and a couple of Coptic Christians from Egypt — worked on the film, Klein said.

"Most of them won't tell me their real names because they're terrified," Klein said.

Bishop Serapion of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Los Angeles said Thursday that the church opposes the views expressed in the inflammatory movie, and, initially, none of his priests recognized Nakoula as a congregant. On Thursday morning, Nakoula called Serapion and said he had attended services at the church in Bellflower, Calif.

Serapion told the AP that Nakoula immediately claimed innocence on the phone call, saying there had been a mix-up with his name and he had no involvement with the movie.

"This is the first sentence he mentioned, that is 'I want to tell you I am not part of it,'" said Serapion.

Serapion told the AP he confirmed with the priest in Bellflower that Nakoula had once gone to the parish but hadn't been to services in a very long time.

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Serapion said only "God knows" if Nakoula was truthful, but the holy man told Nakoula the filmmaker must take responsibility.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors hate groups, said Klein is a former Marine and longtime religious-right activist who has helped train paramilitary militias at a California church. It described Klein as founder of Courageous Christians United, which conducts protests outside abortion clinics, Mormon temples and mosques.

Google Inc., which owns YouTube, pulled down the video Wednesday in Egypt, citing a legal complaint. It was still accessible in the U.S. and other countries.

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Associated Press writers Gillian Flaccus, Shaya Tayefe Mohajer and Michael Blood in Los Angeles; Tamara Lush in Tampa, Fla.; and AP researcher Rhonda Shafner in New York contributed to this report.

Source URL (retrieved on 12/19/2014 - 11:09am):

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