Amitava Kumar’s book centers around the conviction of two men in the United States for terrorist related crimes. Kumar begins each story signifying the convicted as guilty, slowly revealing falsity in the case against each man. Men who seemed like zealous terrorists were actually victims of baiting and the manufacturing of crime, as Kumar reveals. The book reads like a novel, as the stories are presented in a very readable and gripping way. The reader wants to jump to conclusions fast and hard when the individual is first presented as a terrorist. Soon enough, Kumar has the reader empathizing with them, picturing their faces, and feeling their plight. Kumar opens up a world that few Americans choose to enter/encounter/confront/explore, where we are forced to face the fact that we do profile, we are suspicious of innocent people, and Muslims who come here seeking freedom from adversity at home have not necessarily escaped from danger.

In the story of Lakhani, the reader initially believes him to be a terrorist, the way the evidence is presented. That is one of the key points in Kumar’s story; the way the evidence is presented. In a courtroom, Lakhani was portrayed as a zealous arms dealer. The United States informant, Rehman, supports his accusation that Lakhani was a dangerous terrorist. As Kumar reveals Lakhani’s story piece by piece, the reader begins to gain an understanding of Lakhani as less of a terrorist and more of a desperate, lost man. Lakhani is unfamiliar with weapons and lacks an understanding of how to conduct business. “No real terrorist would ever approach Lakhani.” Lakhani’s lawyer, Klingeman argued, “There was no missile plot until the government
created the missile plot.” Kumar writes that Lakhani, as well as the paid informant Rehman were in financial need. Both were playing a part in this true story.

Kumar furthers his argument by implying that the informant Rehman baited Lakhani, while Lakhani, with no past record of terrorism, fell into the trap. Kumar’s argument is convincing enough that the reader almost disregards the fact that Lakhani was going along with a plot that had the potential to harm innocent people, rather than seeking other solutions to his financial burden. As U.S. attorney Rabner reminded the jurors, “He’s not charged with being sophisticated in his illegal arms dealings. You don’t have to be sophisticated to be a criminal. You could be a dumb criminal.” With this in mind, Kumar cites the jury case of Hollingsworth, “For…traditional targets of stings all that must be shown to establish predisposition and thus defeat the defense of entrapment is willingness to violate the law without extraordinary inducements….The government may not provoke or create a crime, and then punish the criminal, its creature” (Kumar, 54). A question crosses the readers mind; do we sympathize with Lakhani for falling victim to entrapment, or admonish his behavior in terrorist activities?

Kumar pursues his argument supporting those who have fallen victim to anti-terrorist schemes. Terrorism is brutal, and so is the war against it; we live in a world of uncertainty, where anyone can become a casualty. After the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, the FBI, desperate to nab anyone who fit the description of a terrorist, paid an informant $1 million “to deliver one lie after another.” Soon after the bombing, the CIA began a covert policy of kidnapping suspected terrorists globally and detaining them in prisons called “black sites.” After September 11th, 2001, many were imprisoned in indefinite detention at Guantanamo. Many have disappeared, and many have suffered through torture. Kumar’s argument is poignant here; these
are not the stories we (typically) read in the newspaper. Even when we do, we rationalize that it is for our safety.

Being victims of terror, it is necessary for the United States to view all terrorist statements as potential threats. In the case of Siraj, he is presented similarly to Lakhani; inexperienced, entrapped, and incapable of executing the plan on his own. However, Siraj’s planning and his intention to “engage in violent jihad until he achieved a martyr’s death” was a matter of concern to the United States. What if it was not an informant, but another individual intent on engaging in jihad that met Siraj? Perhaps Siraj could not execute his plan alone, but what about with another? As revealed by the 2013 Boston Bombings, anyone can commit a terrorist crime, regardless of their experience, sophistication, and intelligence.

Kumar persistently argues that profiling is rampant in the United States, stating “How has it come to be accepted as a fact that a young Muslim man is likely to be a terrorist?” Kumar is correct in this statement, many Americans are comfortable with this stereotype, which is a product of experiencing the loss, panic, and horror of the September 11th attacks. Every individual is susceptible to stereotyping, especially when living in fear. Individuals living in the United States from 1945 through the 1980s similarly stereotyped Soviet-Americans, and suspected Soviet Union sympathizers were subject to profiling and arrest, many of whom were innocent. Japanese-Americans were interned after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, also victims of profiling. Profiling is not a new phenomenon; the United States has been targeting specific ethnic and religious groups for decades in response to events that shook the nation. I would be curious to see the demographics of those targeted for sting operations in the past century. Was the United States as zealous about profiling and targeting Soviet-Americans or Japanese-Americans as they have been with Muslim-Americans? Kumar’s argument is true, but I cannot disregard how many
others have been subjected to a similar fate as those whose stories he has shared in his book. The United States government is persistent and often ruthless when it comes to pursuing foreign threats. Kumar’s book has reinforced this belief for me.

Nicole A. Jacoberger, Doctoral Candidate at St. John’s University