

Analysis: Officials Eradicate Domestic Terrorist Sleeper Cell

Six men from Lackawanna, NY attended the al-Farooq terrorist training camp near Kandahar

Summary

- An al-Qaeda recruiter enlisted six men from Lackawanna, NY, who followed him to a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan. The men trained at the camp, some staying up to six weeks, and were indoctrinated into al-Qaeda methodology and weapons training
- In May and June 2001, the men met in small groups with Osama bin Laden where they were told of an imminent attack upon the United States
- Upon their return in June 2002, the FBI began intense surveillance on the men
- In September 2002, after noticing heightened chatter, all six men were arrested and prosecuted
- The Department of Justice sent out a press release announcing one defendant's guilty plea:
http://www.usdoj.gov/opa/pr/2003/May/03_crm_307.html

Profile of an al Qaeda Recruiter:

- Ahmed Hijazi, alias "Kamal Derwish," was the leader of the group and an al-Qaeda recruiter
- Born in Buffalo in 1973, and grew up in Saudi Arabia and Yemen
- November 2002, he was killed in Yemen when a missile fired from a predator drone hit his car
- Derwish attended terrorist camps in Afghanistan and was a jihadi fighter in Bosnia. In 1997, he was jailed in Saudi Arabia for extremist activities
- Derwish immediately became an Islamic leader upon returning to Lackawanna. He encouraged groups of young men to meet at his apartment, gave them free pizza and held impromptu wrestling matches. He also gave informal lectures and nightly prayer sessions at the local mosque. Eventually he established a group of loyal and fervent followers. His lectures focused on the persecution of Muslims around the world and the need to join the jihad
- Juma al-Dosari, an imam and al-Qaeda leader, visited Derwish and lectured the followers about Muslim persecution and their need to assist oppressed Muslims. A few weeks after al-Dosari's visit, the first group flew to Pakistan
- Juma al-Dosari has been held at Guantanamo Bay since his capture on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border over four years ago. Dosari allegedly began his al Qaeda training as early as 1989
- The FBI uncovered communication between Derwish and key members of the U.S.S. Cole bombing plot, as well as evidence that Derwish attended the January 20, 2000 meeting in Malaysia where 9/11 may have been planned



Kamal Derwish was assassinated in Yemen



Terrorist activity centered at this store-front

The Lackawanna Terrorist Sleeper Cell

- All six men lived in the small Yemeni-American community of Lackawanna, New York. The men were all in their twenties, married, and attended the same mosque. Four of the men were United States citizens and a fifth was naturalized
- Sahim Alwan, alias “Suhab” was a youth counselor. He escaped the camp after 10 days, realizing he was in over his head. He had three meetings with bin Laden. Audiotapes calling for jihad against the West were found in his home. He received a nine and a half year prison sentence
- Yahya Goba: Tapes calling for jihad were found in his home. He received a 10 year prison sentence
- Yasein Taher, alias “Abu Noah”. A document was found in his apartment that detailed the efficacy of suicide bombing. He received an eight year prison sentence
- Jaber Elbaneh: He is connected to the other six. In February 2006, he and other al Qaeda operatives tunneled out of a Yemeni prison. The FBI is offering \$5 million for information on Elbaneh
- Faysal Galab: He received a seven year prison sentence
- Shafal Mosed: He received an eight year prison sentence
- Mukhtar al-Bakri, alias “Abu Omar Alyafei”: Authorities uncovered a rifle, a telescopic site and a cassette tape in his apartment. The recording calls for “Allah to give Jews and their enablers a black day”
- While in Pakistan, al-Bakri said he watched a video depicting the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole and saw a book written by bin Laden that contained maps of various U.S. installations in the Middle East. Al-Bakri also admitted to claiming a replacement passport in order to conceal his trip to Pakistan. He received a ten year prison sentence



Wanted by the FBI:
Jaber Elbaneh

Al-Farooq: Life Inside a Terrorist Training Camp

- Under Derwish’s direction, the group devised a cover story for their trip, claiming they were traveling to Pakistan to study with the Islamic evangelical group Tablighi Jamaat. The first group flew to Lahore and the second flew into Quetta
- The two groups met in Pakistan and then traveled into Afghanistan, some by motorcycle
- The men were indoctrinated at a guesthouse where they read al-Qaeda literature, watched al-Qaeda videos and debated the merits of joining the jihad. They were all assigned code-names
- Osama bin Laden arrived at the guesthouse and met briefly with all of the men. While answering a question regarding tension with the United States, bin Laden stated “They've made threats and we've made threats...but there are brothers that are willing to carry their souls in their hands.” 9/11 occurred a few months later
- In May 2001 they traveled to the al-Farooq terrorist training camp near Kandahar. The camp was so full they had to stay in tents for three days outside the gates until there was room for them
- The boot-camp like schedule began with 4:00 AM prayers, and included weapons training, physical training and military lectures
- They trained with weapons such as Kalashnikovs, 9-millimeter handguns, M-16 rifles, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, plastic explosives, land mines, TNT, and concealment and camouflage techniques
- They were fed pasta, beans and rice. At night they slept in blankets on the ground with four to five men per tent. The men who did not rise promptly in the morning had buckets of cold water poured on their groins
- One night they were crowded into a mosque and bin Laden arrived with Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of Egyptian Islamic Jihad. He



announced the historic union between the two terrorist groups. Al-Zawahiri is now considered bin Laden's top deputy. Bin Laden also announced there would be attacks on the United States and that 40-50 men were willing to become martyrs for the cause. One trainee asked for volunteers for suicide missions

- John Walker Lindh arrived at al-Farooq right after the Lackawanna Six left. Wail al-Shehri and Abdulaziz al-Omeri had also trained there. They ultimately flew American Airlines Flight 11 into the North Tower of the World Trade Center



Osama bin Laden
and Ayman al-Zawahiri

Capture

- The group came under suspicion when an anonymous letter arrived at the F.B.I building in Buffalo, New York. The letter named the eight members and a dozen others who had received terrorist training and been recruited by al-Qaeda. The author identified himself as an Arab-American and stated that "I can not give you my name because I fear for my life"
- Five members of the sleeper cell were arrested in Lackawanna on September 12 and 13, 2002. Officials had the men under surveillance beginning in late June, 2001. See United States v. Goba et al: <http://files.findlaw.com/news.findlaw.com/cnn/docs/terrorism/usgoba091302cmp.pdf>
- In March 2004, Aref Ahmed, a Yemeni-American businessman, was convicted of funding the Lackawanna Six's trip to Afghanistan. He gave \$14,000 to at least five of the members
- Juma al-Dosari, while in detention in Guantanamo, told investigators that Derwish had gone to Lackawanna specifically to recruit for al-Qaeda
- On May 17, 2002 the FBI received news of Derwish's recruitment activities and dozens of FBI members descended on Buffalo
- The FBI and CIA monitored the group for months in the hope that they would be led to 'bigger prey.'
- Al-Bakri returned to the Middle East to be married. He sent an email entitled "Big Meal" on July 18, 2002. The email said: "How are you, my beloved? Allah willing, you are fine. I would like to remind you of obeying Allah and keeping him in your heart because the next meal will be very huge. No one will be able to withstand it except those of faith. There are people here who had visions and their visions were explained that this thing will be very strong. No one will be able to bear it"
- Officials believed the email was code for a major attack
- Officials burst into al-Bakri's hotel room on his wedding night and arrested him. When interrogated about the email, al-Bakri claimed he had overheard men in a Saudi mosque discussing an upcoming large-scale explosion, but that he knew nothing more. Al-Bakri then admitted to attending the terrorist training camp and divulged the names of his co-conspirators
- All six men were sentenced in late 2003. In all of the cases, the sentencing requires the men to cooperate with future terrorism investigations. All of the men changed their pleas to guilty under pressure from the Department of Justice that the men would be designated enemy combatants

Law Enforcement Tactics

- The FBI utilized a set of new anti-terrorism tools that became available in the War on Terror including improved surveillance, interrogation of enemy combatants and a free flow of information between criminal investigators and intelligence officers
- The prosecution never accused any of the six of planning an attack on U.S. soil. The case instead focused on their intention to plan a future attack. They argued that the group was waiting for direction from al-Qaeda leaders
- Surveillance led to the capture of the cell before the "big meal" could be accomplished. In the past, "wedding" was a code-word for attack, so authorities became alarmed when a word similar to any sort of code was used

Implications for Law Enforcement

- Derwish was part of an al-Qaeda recruiting effort, active in the US since the late 1990's
- Law enforcement must consider that al-Qaeda will continue to attempt to recruit US citizens and legal residents
- Significant signs of radicalization included private meetings hosted by Derwish (the spiritual sanctioner of this group), withdrawal from their mosque in Lackawanna, bonding activities (wrestling matches) and travel abroad
- The radicalization of this group is described more fully in NYPD's report, "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat" available at http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/files/NYPD_Report-Radicalization_in_the_West.pdf
- Identifying signatures associated with the radicalization process enables law enforcement to develop strategies to confront emerging threats
- For example, one of the six, Taher, had been declared 'most friendly' in his high-school yearbook. Despite his friendliness and positive social skills, he fell victim to the appeal of Derwish's radicalizing themes. Taher eschewed his moderate views for fanatical ones at the expense of his family and friends. Such noticeable changes in personality, political views and family relations are common when individuals first become radicalized
- Radicalization of second generation Muslim immigrants has been uncommon in the US, and much more likely to occur in Europe
- Law enforcement should consider partnering with Muslim groups to prevent or disrupt the radicalization process from succeeding in their communities
- Post 9-11 counter-terrorism legislation facilitated the prevention of attacks. Prosecutors used this authority to maintain surveillance and bring the case to trial

Report provided to CPT by Christen Eddy and Eric Rojas
For more information please contact Tim Connors, at (212) 599-7000 or via e-mail:
tconnors@manhattan-institute.org, or visit our website at www.cpt-mi.org.