

The secret war

A matrix of terrorist cells - allied to bin Laden but often more extreme than him - planned mayhem across the continent from bases in Britain, Spain, Germany and France. Only now are the links between these shadowy groups coming to light as intelligence services realise that, unknown to them, the battle had started long before 11 September **The secret war. Part 2 War on Terrorism - Observer special**

Martin Bright, Antony Barnett, Burhan Wazir, Tony Thompson and Peter Beaumont in London; Stuart Jeffries in Paris; Ed Vulliamy in Washington; Kate Connolly in Berlin; Giles Tremlett in Madrid; Rory Carroll in Rome

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When Djamel Beghal was approached by intelligence officers in the departure lounge of Dubai airport two months ago, he looked like any other smart business traveller from the Middle East. Beghal was a devout 36-year-old Algerian who dressed in Western clothes and travelled clean-shaven in order to attract as little attention as possible during his travels between the Muslim world and the West. As a member of Takfir-wal-Hijra, an extreme and puritanical Islamist organisation financed by Osama bin Laden, he knew he had to keep a low profile, but Beghal was being cautious for a second reason. Returning to Europe from Kabul after a year of training with Abu Zoubeida, named on the FBI's list of most wanted bin Laden lieutenants, he was preparing to participate in a series of pan-European 'spectaculars' on American targets. Beghal - a constant presence at Finsbury Park mosque in London where he recruited for his cause in the late 1990s - was on his way to open the European front of bin Laden's war on the West.

It is a disclosure that has sent a shudder of fear and horror through Europe's intelligence and police: the knowledge that the murderous attacks on New York and Washington which took the lives of almost 7,000, were to be repeated throughout Europe as well.

French investigators now believe Beghal was returning to France to give the go-ahead for a suicide attack on the US embassy in the Place de la Concorde in central Paris, using a lorry or even a helicopter. By last week Beghal - who spent two years in London recruiting for his violent and bizarre organisation of fanatics - was emerging as one of the key British links at the centre of a worldwide conspiracy; the point of contact between bin Laden's group and a wider network of allied Islamist terror groups.

Last Friday another possibly crucial link, **Lotfi Raissi - an Algerian pilot resident in Britain - was standing before a British court, fighting his extradition to the US. He had been named by the FBI as the man who trained key figures in the suicide attacks in America on 11 September.** Britain, along with Germany and France, had emerged as a key jumping off place for the world's biggest terrorist conspiracy.

Raissi's home in Colnbrook, Berkshire, sits under the Heathrow flight path. It is an unassuming modern suburban house, divided into flats. His neighbours knew him as a quiet, dumpy, slightly strange character who spoke little and gave nothing away when he did. Many assumed he didn't speak English because he often failed to acknowledge them when they greeted him. 'I would see him and his wife out in the back garden but they just kept themselves to themselves,' says neighbour Gary Hanley. 'When you looked at them to say hello, they would just look the other way. They made it clear they didn't really want to get involved with anyone socially.'

The first neighbours knew of Raissi's background was when armed police raided his house last weekend. He now stands accused by US investigators of training four of the suicide hijackers, giving increasing credibility to claims that Britain has become a haven for Islamic terrorists. It is a claim borne out by the evidence presented to Bow Street magistrates on Friday, outlining in detail for the first time the allegations against Raissi at a hearing to determine whether he should be extradited to the US.

Prosecutor Arvinda Sambir gave a list of devastating charges which put him at the heart of the terror plot. She claimed he was the lead instructor for four of the hijackers, including the man who seized the controls of American Airlines Flight 77 from Washington to Los Angeles and skillfully steered it into the Pentagon.

On 23 June Raissi visited Las Vegas with his wife and then flew to Arizona with the Pentagon pilot. The FBI claim he was there to ensure the hijackers were capable of taking control of the aircraft and smashing it into the Pentagon. 'He attended a number of flying schools attended by four of the hijackers,' said Sambir. Raissi has denied all the accusations, and his family say they are confident he will be found innocent.

US officials have identified a 29-year-old man who used the name Hani Hanjour as the hijacker who crashed the plane into the Pentagon. He attended CRM Airline Training Centre in Scottsdale, Arizona and was videotaped travelling with Raissi.

Raissi, who previously worked for Algeria's national airline, had registered for an advanced flying course at the Four Forces Aviation flying school in nearby Poyle. The company promises to give pilots all the training they need to fly jets in just three months, and has a number of state-of-the-art simulators. He was determined to get a licence to fly commercial planes in Europe and was described as a good student by his instructor. The company went into voluntary liquidation earlier this month for reasons unconnected to the attack on the World Trade Centre.

Prosecutors say that the warrant from the US was for obtaining a pilot's licence dishonestly - because he did not declare a previous conviction for theft or that he had had surgery on his knee. Both would have barred him from applying for a licence. Further charges are expected. **One source said: 'It is no secret that conspiracy to murder is being looked at.'**

Sambir said that when Raissi was arrested by British police, logbooks were found in his house with crucial dates missing. Further details about Raissi were also emerging in the US yesterday, including the disclosure that he received a US commercial pilot licence in January 1999, with a rating to fly a Boeing 737. Two days later he was certified a ground instructor, and in March 1999 received a license to be a flight instructor.

Raissi, who lived at this time in a Phoenix apartment complex, listed himself as both a student and employee at Westwind Aviation Academy, a flight school at the Phoenix Deer Valley Airport. He has said he trained at Westwind in 1997 and 1998, according to documents the FBI showed to another local flight school director. In an odd twist, a database search of public records shows Raissi had used the social security number of a Jersey City woman who died in 1991. The woman, Dorothy Hansen, was a retired factory worker.

There was further evidence to show his relationship with the hijackers went further than mere association. Relatives of Raissi have said he flew jets in the US for several years and was undergoing further training at Heathrow. Police spent two days searching his ground floor flat and took items away for further examination, including flying manuals. But Raissi's uncle, Kamal, has insisted he had no links with terror groups. 'Of course Lotfi has flying manuals at home - he is learning to be a pilot.'

The truth about Raissi's possible involvement in the American carnage may not be established for many years as long-winded extradition proceedings in Britain must precede any American trial. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to investigators on both sides of the Atlantic. Europe has played host to a sprawling network of terror groups whose activists were crucial to the 11 September terror, and who are currently planning to repeat their murderous actions. And key to many of the plans was Djamel Beghal - until he was seized at Dubai airport.

For Beghal, Dubai airport, the busiest in the Middle East, was perfect for his purposes. It allowed him to travel unremarked between Afghanistan and Europe, where he had established cells in several countries including Britain. This was a key transit point from the Far East and South Asia, and Beghal knew it was better to arrive from an Arab country than draw unwanted attention by coming straight from Kabul or Islamabad. As he waited for his flight to be called, he knew his terrorist cells were primed for action as soon as he touched down on European soil.

But Beghal had not counted on the vigilance of staff at passport control, who spotted he was travelling on false French documents. At first, the local intelligence officers who seized him had no idea of the coup they had pulled off. Calls to CIA officers and officers of the French foreign intelligence service - the DGSE, based in Dubai - set alarm bells ringing.

Excited French intelligence officials told them they had been tracking Beghal for almost a decade. He was, they explained, a known activist with Takfir-wal Hijra, which they defined as 'a radical hardline Islamist movement founded in Egypt as a splinter group from the Muslim Brotherhood'.

The story of Beghal and his friends, as it has emerged in the last few days, is the inside story of the secret war of Osama bin Laden and his allies in Europe against America and the West. It is the story of a coalition of nebulous anti-American Islamic fundamentalists. It is also the story of the fanatic who lived to tell his shocked interrogators of the full scope of their plans.

It is all the more compelling for the fact that while others implicated in the attacks and planned attacks - Lotfi Raissi included - have furiously denied their involvement in bin Laden's terrorist campaign, Beghal has described it in its most frightening details.

Beghal's story also tells of a failure of imagination and cooperation among US and European anti-terrorist specialists on a massive scale. If police and intelligence services had all the pieces of the jigsaw - as it has now emerged - they were unable, or unwilling, to make sense of them.

That 'vast picture' was described in graphic detail on Friday by FBI chief Robert Mueller, a terrorist network spanning the globe, a 'picture' that he added 'is nowhere near painted'. Alongside Mueller, Attorney General John Ashcroft significantly widened the frame of that picture beyond bin Laden and his network, saying the investigation 'has not ruled out the involvement of other individuals and other organisations in this attack'. He said the FBI and intelligence services were 'not just looking at the al-Qaeda network' but 'a series of networks all over the world'. Among them - it is now becoming clear - is the network commanded by Beghal.

Beghal's Takfir group has emerged as central to the wider terrorist plan to hit Americans throughout the world. Crucial to that plan were groups and individuals across Britain.

When Beghal left his flat at 112 Boulevard John Kennedy in Corbeil just outside Paris in October 1997, he was heading for London, where he was to emerge as a key figure in recruiting young Muslims for the Jihad - Holy War. He would travel around Britain's mosques and sometimes venture as far as Germany before returning to his London base.

Crucial to the case against Beghal and his associates is the extremity of his beliefs. Translated, Takfir-wal-Hijra means 'Anathema and Exile', adhering to an extreme fundamentalist view of Islam. Unusually for a religion that has historically tolerated Christianity and Judaism, this form of Islam regards even other Muslims who don't share its extreme ideals as 'infidels' who should be punished brutally, sharing an outlook with the Taliban's hardline clerics.

In London, Beghal naturally gravitated to the mosque at Finsbury Park, fast emerging as a magnet for Islamic extremists in Britain - despite the well-established moderate credentials of the mosque's leadership. And even among the extremists, Beghal stood out as one of the most dangerous.

Members of the Algerian community in north London have told The Observer that Beghal was a feared figure around the mosque. 'It is always the ones without beards who are the most dangerous,' said one moderate Algerian who met him. 'Members of this group would kill their own fathers if they caught them smoking or drinking.'

Indeed, one video doing the rounds at London mosques is a Takfir-wal-Hijra 'snuff movie', showing the execution of a member of the organisation judged to have committed a sin.

The group, once thought beyond the pale - even by bin Laden's al-Qaeda organisation - believes that everyone who does not adhere to their views, including less devout Muslims, should be counted as infidels and were legitimate targets in any Holy War.

One man who knew Beghal during his time in London said: 'This is the most terrifying group of extremists you are ever likely to meet. If you don't agree with them you are an enemy to Islam, and they believe it is legitimate to kill you.'

Beghal's voice, while extreme, was not a lone one among young Muslim extremists on the fringes of Britain's mosques during this key period. Many - including the police and intelligence services - were happy to write off their activities as that of a noisy but harmless group of hotheads playing at being Holy Warriors.

What they did not realise is that Beghal and others like him had long gone beyond talking and joined in an alliance with Islamic fundamentalists' terrorist-in-chief, Osama bin Laden, and his al-Qaeda group.

Evidence of those close links emerged in a Paris court case last week in evidence gathered by the DST, the French counter-terrorist service. One member of the network, Nacer Eddine Mettai, said: 'Bin Laden approved the ties between Takfir and the Algerian GIA (the Armed Islamic Group, responsible for the slaughter of thousands of Algerians). He agreed to finance Takfir as long as it helped him put his own programme into practice.'

Mettai's evidence has proved crucial to the understanding of bin Laden's methodology, revealing how terrorists from different countries and organisations - but all extreme Islamist and hostile to the West - have gathered under a flag of convenience. These are links, both financial and material, that the West's intelligence agencies have simply missed, allowing men like Beghal to operate almost with impunity.

By August of last year, Beghal had dropped off the radar of MI5 and other agencies which had been watching him in Britain, curious to learn more about his activities but lacking sufficient evidence to intervene and arrest him. What they now know is that he left for Pakistan to study with religious scholars before moving on to the training camps in Afghanistan to prepare for his eventual mission.

Though Beghal had disappeared, French intelligence officers keeping watch on his apartment outside Paris, still rented in his name, became curious about a regular visitor to Corbeil. Kamel Daoudi, a 23-year-old French-born computer specialist, shared Beghal's extremist sympathies. When the young man left his own home earlier this month and moved in permanently to Beghal's apartment, French investigators believed they had identified the new leader of a French extremist cell, dubbing him 'Commander of Corbeil'.

What is now clear is that Daoudi was a key player in Beghal's terrorist group. As well as being a computer expert, French intelligence believed he was also Takfir's master bomb-maker, and that he had been given the job of building the explosive device they believe would have demolished the US embassy in Paris and killed hundreds in another spectacular terrorist attack.

Alarmed that a huge atrocity was being planned, the French authorities finally decided to move against Takfir-wal-Hijra on Monday 10 September. They applied to anti-terrorist judges to begin proceedings, little knowing they had barely scratched the surface of a huge conspiracy that, within a day, would see four hijacked US jets attack America.

Within hours of the devastating attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon alarm bells were ringing, not just at the headquarters of the French intelligence service but among police and intelligence services across Europe, all of which had been tracking similar groups and individuals, and catching hints of similar plots so appalling that they almost beggared belief.

Slowly, an appalling realisation began to dawn: the men they had been following, watching and waiting to make their move, were miles ahead of them. War had been declared by the terrorist months - perhaps years - before. And they hadn't noticed.

Twenty-four hours after the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, police in Belgium and Holland told the French they could not wait for their byzantine legal system to crank into action before acting against Takfir. They raided addresses linked to Beghal, unravelling a vast network of cells planning a series of attacks on prominent targets later in the year. All of these arrests were made possible because of information supplied by Beghal to French anti-terrorist officials who flew to Dubai last weekend.

Thanks to his evidence, the full scale and scope of what was intended finally began to become clear to police and intelligence agencies across Europe and the US. It consisted of a loose network of groups in Germany, France, Spain and UK, all with the same aim in mind: attacks on US interests across the globe.

Among the planned attacks, police now know, was one on the US consulate in Marseille, and a plot to kill President Bush and other G8 leaders by crashing an airliner into the Genoa summit of industrialised nations. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak said last week his government provided information to the United States about possible attacks on the Genoa summit by terrorists linked to Osama bin Laden. 'There was a question of an airplane stuffed with explosives,' said Mubarak. 'As a result, precautions were taken. But no one imagined that Boeings full of passengers were going to crash into buildings.'

Last Friday French police finally smashed down the door of Beghal's flat in Paris. But Daoudi, the 'Commander of Corbeil', was not at home. Having been alerted to Beghal's arrest by an article in the French press he had escaped the raid on the flat. When police burst in at 1.30am they found mobile phones and bomb-manufacturing equipment but no Daoudi. The presumed number two of Takfir Wal-Hijra's French operation had fled, along with the simcards and chips for the cell phones used by the organisation.

Daoudi's father, Tahar Daoudi, said last week that his son had lived a peaceful life in Paris's chic fifth arrondissement until, in straitened circumstances, the family of Algerian origin was forced to move out to the suburbs of Paris.

'He was a brilliant boy,' said Tahar Daoudi of his son. 'We arrived in France when he was five years old and in the following year he was brilliant in school. Later he started specialising in computer studies, but finally he decided he didn't want to work any more.'

'When we moved he changed all his friends. He was very generous and they got a lot of money out of him - all the money that was supposed to pay for his studies.'

'We were furious with him and threw him out of the house. I was furious with him for hanging around with kids who filled his head full of nonsense. I saw him for his civil marriage in 1999, but that was pretty much it.'

Yet this once generous computer whizz-kid was now on the run from international security services, with police closing in on his seven associates. Where would he go? Who could he turn to offer him a safe haven? It appears there was only one choice - Britain, where a sophisticated Islamist support network operated in every major city.

A mile from the centre of Leicester on the Prospect Hill estate, Muslims in the predominantly Asian community were going about their everyday lives. Some were going to the local mosque in Asfordby Street, others were doing some early morning shopping at the nearby Hill View Stores or getting their children ready for school.

Four days after the Paris raids there was no reason for this quiet Leicester community to expect the events across the Channel were about to have any impact on them.

Just before 8am on Tuesday the sirens of dozens of police cars shattered the morning peace. Armed anti-terrorist officers surrounded the house where Daoudi was sheltering and, as the doors were smashed in with a battering ram, the area was sealed off. Three men were arrested, two from Prospect Hill and one from an upstairs flat in Rolleston Street around the corner.

Scotland Yard would not give any information other than that the arrests have been made in connection with the 'arrest of seven Arab suspects in Paris'.

One of the those arrested was described as an intense, serious man, tall and well-built and very protective of his wife, who always wore a veil.

The next day French television named the individual who had escaped the police raids in France and been caught in Britain. It was Daoudi. In four days, a man alleged to have been an explosives and computer expert for one of the most dangerous terrorist groups in the world had slipped quietly into the UK.

Despite these arrests in Leicester, British police were keen to dampen down fears that the country was a key base for Islamic terrorists. By yesterday Daoudi's run was over. France's most wanted terrorist was back in France, quickly extradited by the UK, and in the custody of the anti-terrorist police the DST.

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- The Observer
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