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Spiegel Online

Al-Qaida Said To Be Planning European Hostage-Takings

By Yassin Musharbash

10/27/2010

Security agencies suspect that al-Qaida is planning new attacks in Europe. Details of a possible 'Euro Plot' remain unclear, but ex-jihadist Noman Benotman, a former trainer in terror camps, believes that al-Qaida wants to take hostages here to force the release of 9/11 terror mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. Experts say the theory is plausible.

Berlin -- On Sept 17, 1974, in the evening, four terrorists with the Japanese Red Army (JRA) boarded an aircraft made available by the French government at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport and ordered Dutch pilot Pim Siericks to take off -- the destination was initially unknown.

The flight of the Boeing 707 marked the end of a successful terrorist operation. Three JRA members had occupied the French embassy in The Hague for four days and had held the staff hostage. The French government gave in to their demand to hand over a fourth JRA man, Yutuka Furuya, who had been in prison in France, in return for the hostages.

Top terrorist Carlos the Jackal had helped JRA by supplying the M26 grenades with which they were armed in The Hague. One day after they took the hostages, Carlos

himself used one of the grenades to cause a bloodbath in a Paris café in order to press home JRA's demands.

Some 15 years later, thousands of miles away, a group of young militants studied this cooperation between JRA and Carlos, and came to the conclusion that it could be a model for freeing their own prisoners one day. Noman Benotman, a Libyan national who was one of the leaders of a Libyan jihadist contingent aligned with al-Qaida and a trainer in terrorist training camps in Afghanistan, was present at those discussions.

More than 30 years later, that scenario from 1974 seems noteworthy again. "I have information that I consider to be reliable, according to which al-Qaida in Waziristan is training how to carry out multiple parallel hostage takings in order to enforce the release of a prisoner," Benotman says.

Benotman believes that the alleged plans for attacks on European targets that authorities have been warning about in recent weeks are real. He says the plan consists of storming buildings in Germany, France and Britain at the same time and holding the people inside hostage with the aim of forcing the release of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind behind 9/11 who is now sitting in jail in the United States awaiting trial for the attacks.

Benotman lives in London today -- a destination he first reached after a long personal journey. After the 9/11 attacks, he turned his back on terrorism. He has since become one of the world's leading experts on al-Qaida. He works with the London-based Quilliam Foundation, which runs programs aimed at deradicalizing young Islamists. The 43-year-old, who is sitting in a café located between London's Paddington Station and the Edgware Road underground station where a suicide bomber detonated himself on July 7, 2005, recalls his days in Afghanistan. "At the start of the 1990s we even trained for such a scenario," he says.

Will Al-Qaida Seek to Force Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's Release?

The idea that al-Qaida is revisiting this scenario, Benotman emphasizes, is more than just speculation. He says that he cannot name his sources, in order to protect them, but he vouches for their credibility. Berlin based terror expert Guido Steinberg, with the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, sees little reason to cast doubt on them, either. "Benotman knows the jihadist scene and their leadership better than most," he says. "It is entirely possible that he obtained information on terror plots. In the past all of his information proved to be right."

The Libyan also refers to two events that add credence to his claim. Last fall, he points out, al-Qaida named Germany as a target for an attack, a threat he considers to be still

valid. He also refers to an audio message from Osama bin Laden in June 2010, in which he warned the United States that al-Qaida would kill American prisoners if the US executes Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. "The day America makes that decision (to execute Mohammed) will be the day it has issued a death sentence for any one of you that is taken captive."

"I know Osama bin Laden personally," says Benotman. "It's very important to him that, after every operation, he can claim: Why are you surprised? It was exactly as I had announced."

Can al-Qaida really be planning to take hostages in Europe to force the United States to release Khalid Sheikh Mohammed? The calculation, says Benotman, is simple. Even if the US didn't fulfil al-Qaida's demand -- which is the more probable scenario -- the terrorists could still manage to achieve two goals. The global media would spend days focusing entirely on al-Qaida and its demands. And they would drive a wedge between the US and Europe, if innocent people were to die here because Washington didn't want to release Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.

'It Makes Sense'

Various intelligence officials, terrorism experts and employees of Western security authorities interviewed by SPIEGEL ONLINE consider the scenario described by Benotman to be plausible.

"The scenario by Benotman is entirely plausible," says Magnus Ranstorp, research director at the Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies at the Swedish National Defense College. Ranstorp points out that even the 9/11 attacks had originally been devised as an effort to free imprisoned jihadi cleric Omar Abdelrahman. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed had originally wanted to crash nine planes into buildings and personally take hostages on the 10th plane as negotiating pawns. "Given the context of how al-Qaida thinks about operational impact and surprise, this would be a low-cost, high-impact operation that would surprise and shock the West," he says. Ranstorp says that attack plans against the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2009 also envisioned hostage-takings and executions.

"It makes sense," agrees one intelligence official, who wishes to remain anonymous because he is not authorized to discuss the issue in public. "However, we have no evidence." Others offer similar remarks.

German Jihadists with Al-Qaida Ties

The terror warnings from security agencies now circulating share concerns about a "Mumbai scenario" on European territory, similar to the 2008 attacks in the Indian city where teams of terrorists targeted public venues with bombs, hand grenades and weapons, killing 174 people. The series of attacks went on for days and was partially broadcast live on TV.

According to an internal document drawn up by German authorities summarizing intelligence, such a Mumbai-style attack could include hostage-taking. But that paper does not assume that hostage-taking would be connected to specific demands.

The warnings are based on diverse intelligence. The most important is evidence from Ahmed Siddiqui, a jihadist from Hamburg, Germany, who was detained this summer in Afghanistan by US forces. During his interrogation, he claimed that he had met with a high-ranking al-Qaida man named Younis al-Mauretani, who had told him about plans for attacks in several European countries. He claimed to have been told that Osama bin Laden was privy to the attacks and that several teams had already been deployed to Europe. German security authorities, who were permitted to meet with Siddiqui, consider his statements to be largely valid. They also believe that al-Mauretani is a real al-Qaida operative.

A New Level of Cooperation Between Terror Groups

At the beginning of October, three further German jihadists were killed in Pakistan's Waziristan province by CIA drones. US agencies hope that they have dealt a setback with the strikes to planning for a "Euro Plot."

Against that backdrop, it may be significant that Siddiqui and the three other Germans jihadists have so far been considered to be members of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has a rather difficult relationship with al-Qaida. Are al-Qaida, IMU and other terror organizations working together on the attack plans?

Some analysts consider it to be plausible, and the shared threat of drone attacks could actually promote such cooperation. In addition, several dozen and possibly even a few hundred fighters with American and European passports are currently believed to be present in the region. Al-Qaida may well be tempted to make use of them across traditional organizational boundaries in order to plan a common spectacular attack in the West. A piece of information provided to SPIEGEL ONLINE last week may support this theory. According to jihadists in the Waziristan region, at least one of the three Germans killed by a CIA drone, was also connected to al-Qaida.

Plot Could Be in Early Planning Stages

A current reorganization taking place within al-Qaida's leadership ranks could simplify cooperation between groups. According to Noman Benotman's sources, Ilyas Kashmiri, a man with considerable experience collaborating with other groups, has been put in charge of the planning of foreign operations. He was in touch with the perpetrators of the Mumbai terror attacks as well as other terrorists who had allegedly planned attacks in the USA and Europe. *Newsweek* has reported the Siddiqui also had contact with Kashmiri, but German intelligence agencies have been unable to confirm that.

The **recent return** of top terrorist Saif al-Adel to Waziristan and his suspected promotion to become al-Qaida's new military chief would have a similar effect because the Egyptian has also had a lot of experience working together with other groups.

But Benotman says another aspect should also be taken into consideration -- and that is that the operations which are being planned according to his information will rise or fall based on the quality of training. Such training, he says from experience, would take months, "much longer than with suicide bombings." In addition, the account of Siddiqui's meeting with al-Mauretani makes it sound as if it were an effort at recruiting him -- a possible indication that the planning isn't at a very advanced stage yet and that the terror group is still shopping for perpetrators.

Benotman therefore believes there is still time to foil the plot. He even thinks it is possible that al-Qaida may have to abort its planning if too many details were to become public.