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## Hardball Tactics in an Era of Threats

To the government, they were a terrorist risk in the Washington area. To local Muslims, they were unfairly singled out for prosecution and severe sentences in a post-9/11 world.

By Mary Beth Sheridan  
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The crowd was so big it spilled out of the Alexandria courtroom: teachers, parents, the leader of a College Park mosque. Ali Asad Chandia, 29, a bearded man in a crisp, white shirt, sat quietly amid the throng -- a beloved third-grade teacher convicted of supporting terrorism.

"The defendant portrays himself as a mild-mannered, kind individual," federal prosecutor David Laufman told the judge at the sentencing nine days ago. But in Chandia's home and car, he said, FBI agents had found recordings glorifying terrorism, one even asking God to "grant safety to Osama bin Laden."

"That," concluded Laufman, "is who the defendant really is."

After the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, law enforcement officials pledged an aggressive effort to choke off future plots. People identified as security threats would be charged as soon as a crime could be proven, even if it was well short of a terrorist strike. The Washington area, where seven of the 19 al-Qaeda hijackers spent time before the attacks, became a focus of their investigations.

"Awaiting an attack is not an option," Paul J. McNulty, the deputy U.S. attorney general, said in a recent speech. He described the approach as "preventative prosecutions."

For prosecutors, that effort has been a success: Chandia was the 11th man convicted in what they describe as a "jihad network" in the D.C. suburbs dedicated to supporting military action on behalf of Muslims. He was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Muslims in the Washington area, even those unconnected to the defendants, wonder and worry about the implications of these cases for their community. Some feel that the prosecutions could increase the stigma Muslims have faced since Sept. 11. And many Muslims say the aggressive law enforcement has been far out of proportion to the offenses, which harmed no one.

Chandia's trial, for example, focused on favors he did for an acquaintance who belonged to a Pakistani group on the U.S. terrorist list. Chandia drove the visitor around the D.C. suburbs and helped him ship packages abroad.

For that, prosecutors sought 30 years to life. Some of the other defendants will spend decades in jail, including two who received life sentences.

"If this is how you deliver justice, you lose your trust in the justice system," protested Muddasar Ahmed, a Beltsville consultant who was among Chandia's supporters at his sentencing.

Ahmed and others have also argued that the prosecutions show a fundamental misunderstanding of Muslims in America: The local men wanted to help oppressed Muslims overseas, which isn't the same as backing bin Laden.

"The Muslim community . . . does not agree with Osama bin Laden at all," said Tanweer K. Ahmed, a College Park medical specialist who is not related to Muddasar Ahmed but is also among Chandia's supporters.

Law enforcement officials in Washington see powerful evidence for their concern about homegrown terrorists, including the bombings in London a year ago and last month's arrests in an airline-bombing plot.

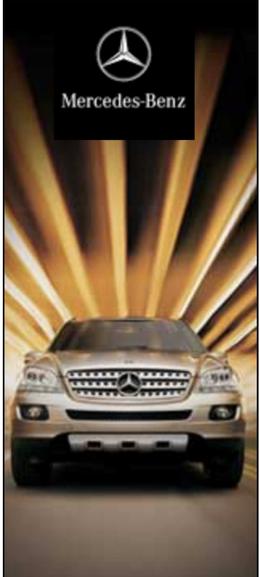
A few of the local men admitted trying to fight U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan. And even if the local jihad network had its focus abroad, officials say, they couldn't ignore its potential danger.

"These individuals established strong relationships [and] received ideological and physical training" from a group now on the U.S. terrorist list, McNulty said in an interview last year, when he was U.S. attorney in Alexandria. "At the very least, they became a kind of infrastructure of support for international terrorists."

### Turning to Their Back Yard

Before the Sept. 11 attacks, hundreds of FBI agents worked on counterterrorism at the headquarters on Pennsylvania Avenue NW. But their focus was overseas.

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"What we did not know was our own back yard," said Michael E. Rolince, a retired FBI counterterrorism official. Hobbled by staff reductions and wary of violating civil rights, the FBI paid little attention to the Muslim community in the Washington suburbs.

Meanwhile, that community was changing rapidly. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of local residents who claimed ancestry from a mostly Muslim country jumped 75 percent to about 114,000, according to census data analyzed at the State University of New York at Albany. The Council on American-Islamic Relations estimates the total Muslim population in the area at 250,000, including African Americans and white converts.

Like other immigrants, Muslims have been drawn here by the embassies and universities, as well as the booming economy. Many are secular professionals.

But in recent years, an ultra-orthodox Islamic movement blossomed, spurred by a global Saudi missionary campaign. By 2000, the Saudis had built Islamic colleges in Fairfax County and Alexandria and were sending free Korans and preachers to the area. Hundreds of young people were inspired by the movement -- among them, Chandia.

The short, dark-eyed youth arrived from Pakistan in 1994, the son of a lawyer who wanted a U.S. education for his children. "Ali was never especially religious" before he arrived in Gaithersburg at age 17, according to a Web site organized by his supporters.

But he gravitated toward Muslim youths who shared his culture, said the mother of one of his friends at Watkins Mill High School, who spoke on condition of anonymity because Chandia's supporters discouraged contact with the media. For the boys, she said, the mosque "became a community center . . . because they're not really comfortable with the opposite sex. That's a cultural thing."

As a college student, Chandia became increasingly religious. He took classes at a Saudi college in Fairfax. And he began to frequent a new Islamic center in Falls Church called Dar al-Arqam, where he became the assistant to the main speaker, a charismatic scientist in his late thirties named Ali al-Timimi.

Many of those attending the center were children of secular immigrants, rebelling against what they considered their parents' lax observance.

"The older generation was taught that religion was a backward thing," said one of those who attended, referring to the secular nationalism that held sway in the Middle East and South Asia in the 1950s and '60s. But their American children found Islam "did answer a lot of questions. It gave them a purpose in life."

The gung-ho young Muslims tried to strictly adhere to Islamic scriptures and imitate the prophet Muhammad and his companions in the 7th century -- an approach known as salafism. Men wore beards; women were veiled and sat behind a curtain.

The zealous salafis weren't impressed by the efforts of big mosques in the area -- such as Dar al-Hijrah in Falls Church and the All Dulles Area Muslim Society -- to integrate into American society.

Those mosques "kind of gave you the mushy middle. Don't rock the boat. Don't make people mad," said Umar Lee, a former Falls Church resident who attended Dar al-Arqam. The young people, he said, "wanted authenticity."

### **From Georgetown to Saudi Arabia**

Law enforcement officials would eventually trace the rise of the jihad network to two men: Timimi, the lecturer at Dar al-Arqam, and Randall "Ismail" Royer, a public relations professional.

Neither started out as religious Muslims.

The son of an Iraqi lawyer, Timimi had grown up in Northwest Washington and attended the elite Georgetown Day School. When he was 15 years old, his family moved temporarily to Saudi Arabia, where he became an observant Muslim. Timimi spent another year in the kingdom in the late 1980s on a Saudi scholarship, studying with one of the "awakening sheikhs" who would inspire bin Laden with their anti-Western speeches.

His supporters at Dar al-Arqam bristle at prosecutors' assertions that he was spouting radical politics; his speeches, they say, focused on spiritual subjects. But they also reflected an alienation from his own culture.

In one of his taped lectures available on the Internet, Timimi warned Muslims not to become too friendly with non-Muslim "disbelievers" or even work for them if other jobs were available. "A Muslim should never allow the disbeliever to have the upper hand," he said.

And he echoed the widespread perception in the Muslim world that the West is an enemy in a clash of civilizations.

"The greatest power in the world inimical to Islam is the United States," he declared in a lecture cited by prosecutors.

Not all his followers in the Washington suburbs shared such extreme views. But they were dazzled by Timimi, a man who could both translate 7th-century Koranic Arabic and joke about the Redskins.

Increasingly, some of Timimi's students were also pulled by country and faith. Many were U.S. citizens, but their faith emphasized Muslims' responsibility for one another. And the battles over control of Chechnya, the Palestinian territories and Kashmir were flowing into the D.C. suburbs on TV and the Internet. Web sites boasted of young men doing something about the suffering of their fellow Muslims: waging jihad.

"In those days, young men [in the D.C. area] were very interested in jihad and martyrdom," Timimi told the FBI in a voluntary interview before his arrest in 2004, according to an agent's report. Chandia, he said, "used to ask hundreds of questions regarding jihad."

### **Dabbling in Jihad**

Since the Sept. 11 attacks, authorities have assiduously tracked down and prosecuted Americans who traveled abroad to train with Islamic militant groups, fearing they could return and form terrorist sleeper cells.

But many Muslims say that supporting such groups was not always the same as backing bin Laden.

Royer, a blue-eyed convert, was studying at American University in the early 1990s when he became aghast at TV footage showing Serb savagery against Bosnian Muslims.

"I felt an obligation, in the same way if you were to see a neighbor being beaten or raped you would feel compelled to step in," he recalled in a telephone interview in 2003. He said he fought in Bosnia for six months.

Royer was among thousands of youths from Europe, South Asia and the Middle East who took up arms to defend Muslims in the 1990s, spurred by the horrors they had glimpsed on al-Jazeera or CNN.

"It became a very, very romantic movement," said Fawaz Gerges, an expert on Islamic militancy at Sarah Lawrence College. But some of the youths gradually became radicalized by a culture of martyrdom. And a small number began to see the United States as the enemy to target.

Long after he returned home, Royer maintained his idealistic view of armed jihad. By 2000, he and other Muslims in Northern Virginia had formed a group that played paintball in the woods near Fredericksburg, donning camouflage gear and learning maneuvers from Muslim U.S. military veterans. Royer would regale them with his stories from Bosnia.

"What was really going on was a group of young men dabbling with the idea of jihad, basking in its aura, dipping their toes in it," Royer wrote recently from a federal prison in Pennsylvania. But officials would later note what they called alarming signs. The men watched bloody videos of holy warriors in Chechnya, Bosnia and Kashmir. Several bought AK-47-style rifles, like those used by the guerrillas.

And starting with Royer, the men began going to Pakistan to train with Lashkar-e-Taiba, a group fighting to drive India from the disputed border area of Kashmir. Royer later said he didn't think his actions were illegal since the group wasn't on the U.S. terrorist list at the time.

"Neither I nor anyone else had the idea 'I'm doing something against America,' " Royer said.

### **The Impetus to Fight**

Five days after the Sept. 11, 2001, hijackings, Royer and several other young Muslims met Timimi at the Fairfax home of a Dar al-Arqam regular, 25-year-old Yong Ki Kwon, and anxiously asked the lecturer's opinion of the attacks.

Timimi urged the men to keep their conversation secret. He suggested that a global war between Muslims and non-Muslims was beginning, according to later testimony. He urged the men to "go be with the mujaheddin anywhere in the world," as Royer would recall. According to three men at the dinner, Timimi urged them to defend the Taliban against an imminent U.S. attack; Timimi and two others denied that.

Four of the men promptly set out for a Lashkar camp, using Royer's contacts. The men were hoping to get weapons training, Kwon later testified, to defend their "brothers and sisters in Afghanistan."

The young men who once dreamed of bravely fighting distant enemies now had widened their idea of jihad: Some were prepared to fight U.S. soldiers, according to court testimony.

But their plans soon fell apart. With the Taliban crumbling, Timimi's followers gave up after a few weeks and left the Pakistani camp. On their way out, two said, they saw Chandia at a Lashkar office.

### **Agents Take No Chances**

In late 2002, the FBI's Washington field office received two similar tips from local Muslims: Timimi was running "an Islamic group known as the Dar al-Arqam" that had "conducted military-style training," FBI special agent John Wyman would later write in an affidavit.

Wyman and another agent, Wade Ammerman, pounced on the tips. Searching the Internet, they found a speech by Timimi celebrating the crash of the space shuttle Columbia in 2003, according to the affidavit. The agents also found that Timimi was in contact with Sheikh

Safar al-Hawali, a Saudi whose anti-Western speeches in the early 1990s had helped inspire bin Laden.

The agents reached an alarming conclusion: "Timimi is an Islamist supporter of Bin Laden" who was leading a group "training for jihad," the agent wrote in the affidavit. The FBI even came to speculate that Timimi, a doctoral candidate pursuing cancer gene research, might have been involved in the anthrax attacks.

On a frigid day in February 2003, the FBI searched Timimi's brick townhouse on Meadow Field Court, a cul-de-sac near Fair Oaks Mall in Fairfax. Among the items they were seeking, according to court testimony: material on weapons of mass destruction.

There was, in the end, nothing related to that in the house. And yet, as the investigation proceeded, officials learned that some of Timimi's followers had indeed been practicing for possible armed jihad during their paintball games.

Of greater interest to prosecutors were the men's trips to the Lashkar camp. Searches of their homes turned up semiautomatic rifles and radical literature from the Internet, including "The Terrorists' Handbook." And agents would make a chilling discovery in Chandia's house: audiotapes praising bin Laden. On the front seat of Chandia's Dodge Neon, FBI agents found a CD showing the planes smashing into the World Trade Center. Voices in the background chanted "Allahu Akbar" -- God is great.

McNulty acknowledged that simply attending a guerrilla camp "may not have been seen as threatening or as significant prior" to Sept. 11. But after the al-Qaeda attacks, authorities were taking no chances.

Prosecutors hit the men with a barrage of charges. They accused them of violating the Neutrality Act, a decades-old, seldom-enforced law that bans Americans from fighting a nation at peace with the United States -- such as India, the main target of Lashkar's guerrillas. And prosecutors stacked multiple gun charges carrying "mandatory minimum" sentences, based on the few times the men fired weapons at a Lashkar camp.

The hardball tactics worked. Three of the men accused of going to the Lashkar camp after Sept. 11 pleaded guilty and testified against their friends. They served about three years and are now free.

In contrast, Masaud Khan of Gaithersburg, who traveled with them, pleaded not guilty and was convicted. On Friday, a federal appeals court upheld his sentence: life plus 45 years.

### Looking for Links to Lashkar

At the federal courthouse in Alexandria this summer, witnesses recounted the latest act of the jihad network story.

Prosecutors accused Chandia of attending the Lashkar camp in fall 2001, at Timimi's urging. Chandia's attorney and other witnesses said he simply flew to Pakistan in November 2001 to organize his brother's wedding.

Chandia's real trouble began three months later, after he had returned home. At a friend's request, he went to Reagan National Airport to pick up Mohammed Ajmal Khan, a Lashkar official. By then, the group was on the U.S. terrorist list.

Over the next year, two of the local men who had trained at the Lashkar camp helped Khan place orders with U.S. companies for 50,000 paintballs -- which are sometimes used in military training -- as well as equipment for a small, remote-controlled glider, according to court testimony.

Chandia's role was apparently smaller. Prosecutors said he allowed the Lashkar official to use his computer. And when Khan visited again in March 2003, Chandia helped him take 21 boxes of Pakistani-bound goods, including the paintballs, to a shipping company in Sterling, according to testimony. Chandia paid the shipping bill -- \$761.84, according to testimony.

To the teacher's supporters at the trial, his acts seemed far short of terrorism.

"He mailed something," said Muddasar Ahmed's wife, Keryn, a homemaker whose sons were in Chandia's class. "So what?"

But the U.S. government has grown increasingly concerned about Lashkar, which it designated a terror group in December 2001. Although the group is not known to target Americans, Abu Zubaida, an al-Qaeda official, was seized at a Lashkar safe house in March 2002, raising questions about their ties.

"I'm conceding that it's small types of support" the men provided, McNulty said in the interview. "But a relationship [was] established . . . and that could become more significant in the future."

Legal experts say there is nothing new in charging suspects to head off an attack. In 1995, for example, a federal jury convicted 10 people, including Omar Abdel Rahman -- the "blind sheikh" -- of planning a terrorism rampage in New York. But in that case, the FBI taped the men's conversations about bomb plots and caught several mixing chemicals.

"The paradigm has shifted," said Wayne McCormack, a professor at the University of Utah and author of a textbook on anti-terrorism law. The Justice Department, he said, is "moving much earlier than what would have been true before."

In doing so, he added, the government risks "prosecuting people who, left to their own devices, would never do anything."

In the Chandia case, prosecutors tried to demonstrate his extremism by presenting the material seized in his home and car. Chandia's friends testified that some of the items were for academic research on radical Islam.

"And he is not on trial for what he believes," defense attorney Marvin Miller told the jury. "He is on trial for you to decide whether or not he did anything."

The jury found Chandia guilty of three counts of conspiracy and providing material support to Lashkar. He was acquitted of a charge that he attended a training camp.

Yet even one of the jurors who convicted him said Chandia hardly seemed a security risk. The case "shouldn't have been brought at all," Robert Stosch told The Washington Post.

### Anger Among Muslims Simmers

Today, the group of ardent salafis who once gathered in Falls Church has dispersed. Dar al-Arqam has closed. Timimi was sentenced to life in prison for urging the men to help the Taliban. One of the local men who ordered equipment for Lashkar got 65 years. Royer, who pleaded guilty to weapons charges, received 20.

The Justice Department has described the jihad network case as one of a string of successes in the war on terrorism. But officials say the threat persists.

"As we approach the fifth anniversary of September 11. . . terrorists and their supporters are growing more sophisticated," McNulty said in his recent speech, noting that the groups are using the Internet to recruit and raise money.

At some local mosques, the trials have left a legacy of distrust of the justice system. Dar al-Hijrah is financially assisting the families of some of those convicted. To raise money for the defendants, a worshiper printed T-shirts with the slogan "Free Our Unjustly Detained Brothers -- Political Pawns in the War on Terror."

Members of Dar-us-Salaam, the mosque connected with the school where Chandia teaches, helped organize a fundraiser and Web site for him.

Authorities "are trying to send a message to every Muslim" with the long imprisonments, said Keryn Ahmed. "But they're just making us mad."

The government has strenuously denied targeting Muslims based on their faith. But prosecutors agree that they are trying to send a message -- of zero tolerance for terrorism-related activities.

In the end, officials acknowledge that they will never know how dangerous the local men were.

"Did we break something up? Yeah, we think we did," said a law enforcement official involved in the case, speaking on condition of anonymity under Justice Department rules. "But we would not profess to say we had anything more than the potential for it."

Tomorrow: Two young Muslims follow different paths

after the Sept. 11 attacks.

*Staff writers Jerry Markon and Timothy Dwyer and news researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.*

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