

The Enemies in Their Midst

FIVE YEARS AFTER

Europe Confronts Suspected Terrorists Home-Grown and Inspired Abroad
By Sebastian Rotella, Times Staff Writer

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LONDON — The evolution of terrorism in Europe in the five years since the Sept. 11 attacks can be told as a tale of two threats.

The first spread consternation worldwide when it was revealed in London last month. The alleged plot to blow up transatlantic airliners in midair raised again the specter of Britain's "home-grown" problem: militants with British passports and the accompanying resources and Western ways, as well as links to lethal networks in Pakistan.

The second threat unfolded more quietly in Paris. The suspects arrested beginning last year was largely French, but their inspiration came from a North African network that had allied itself with groups in Iraq to forge a strategy for jihad beyond the war zone. The new target: Europe. In the years since a group of Arab university students hatched a cell in Hamburg, Germany, that changed the world, Europe remains the front line for a post-Sept. 11 generation of extremists. Major attacks struck transport systems in Madrid and London. Amsterdam suffered a high-profile murder. Vast Muslim immigrant communities, primarily Pakistani here and North African on the European mainland, became a prime recruitment pool, with a staging area within striking distance of the United States.

The cases in London and Paris had elements typical of the fast-changing landscape of extremism: Big plans for massacres in the heart of the West. Ambiguity about the imminence of attacks and the nature of networks. And a dangerous nexus of battle-hardened foreign groups with militants born or bred in Europe. In the years when Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden oversaw a multiethnic complex of training camps, the disparate networks intertwined in Afghanistan. Today, British extremists find inspiration and expertise in Pakistan, the suspected hide-out of the remnants of Al Qaeda, European anti-terrorism chiefs say. Extremists elsewhere in Europe gravitate toward hotbeds in North Africa and Iraq.

Open borders, tolerant laws and social alienation combine to create a space for radical activity in Europe that does not exist in the U.S. Muslim community or even in some Muslim countries. The rise of the enemy within makes European leaders even more uncomfortable with the American-coined phrase "war on terror." "We work very well with the United States in counter-terrorism," said Jean-Louis Bruguiere, France's top anti-terrorism judge. "They are our closest partners. The U.S. approach in one way is fundamentally different than the European approach. The U.S. method, though there has been progress, is still based very much on a military concept of the threat. "In Afghanistan, where French and American troops fight side by side, that's appropriate. But

how can military means do the job when the enemy is not yet identified, well integrated into the social fabric and plotting behind your back?"

With an anti-terrorism apparatus based on aggressive domestic spying and extensive judicial power, Bruguiere and other French security chiefs lead a regional alliance trying to overcome differences in law enforcement cultures. It benefits from partnerships with nations such as Algeria and Morocco.

Despite criticism in Europe of the U.S. detention camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and secret U.S. "renditions" of foreign suspects, European police acknowledge that they work closely with North African security services whose methods can be brutal but effective. So the menace should not be overstated: Most European extremist cells are dismantled well before the attack stage. Moreover, the killing of Abu Mus'ab Zarqawi, the Jordanian-born leader of Al Qaeda in Iraq, by the U.S. military this year hurt nascent efforts to build an anti-Western federation spanning Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, said Stefano Dambroso, an Italian former anti-terrorism prosecutor.

But hundreds, if not thousands, of "graduates" of the Afghan camps and Jihadi combat theaters are potential new bosses. And Dambroso, now a judicial attaché to international organizations, worries about the speed with which threats transform. He cited the recent case in which Lebanese suspects in Germany allegedly planted suitcase bombs on trains, an attempt seemingly inspired by Al Qaeda ideology and the recent Israel-Hezbollah conflict in Lebanon. "There is an extremely fast evolution of things, and you can't underestimate the impact in Europe of things happening outside Europe," Dambroso said. "A lot of people aspire to replace Al Qaeda. There are new leaders we don't know about who seem always more ambitious. You have lots of guys who went to Iraq who were trained concretely. Before that they never had an opportunity to fight; now they are back in Europe and they know how to operate.

As for the old leaders of Al Qaeda, it's not clear to what extent they still call the shots from refuges in the Pakistani-Afghan border area. The direct influence of Bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman Zawahiri, has been curtailed by life on the run. Few post-Sept. 11 plots can be traced to them, investigators say. "I think Al Qaeda central, the original leaders are hunted men and devote much energy to avoiding capture," Bruguiere said. "They have been reduced in some cases mainly to propaganda and communication. But I think they still have an operational role as well."

Zawahiri's videotaped claim of responsibility for last year's London transit bombings seems opportunistic and after-the-fact, a British counter-terrorism official said. Nonetheless, this year's alleged airline plot and previous cases here reveal a strong Pakistani connection, whether to Al Qaeda or networks that Dambroso calls "the sons of Al Qaeda." The British official said: "It might not matter that much whether Al Qaeda central is involved. I don't think there's clarity or structure that the plotters in the various cases are going back to the same network or individuals in Pakistan. But there's so much there in Pakistan."

Pakistan abounds with Al Qaeda-connected or influenced ideologues, groups and training camps that are sometimes permitted or backed by the Pakistani government security forces, officials say. In Britain, meanwhile, second- and third-generation young people from Pakistani immigrant families have roots here giving them ease of travel and access to sources of funding such as bank loans, front companies or welfare scams. The Internet and the proliferation of ideologues here drive radicalization at home, but recent history shows that the path to violence invariably requires foreign support. All that explains why Pakistani-British militants are the most dangerous of the moment, the British official said. "With North Africans, many seem to become involved in terrorism through crime, whereas Brit-Paks are going straight to terrorism," the official said. "They are considerably more inspired, more pure. The scope is much greater. It's *the* threat. It's way ahead of everything else in terms of complexity. And it multiplies a thousand fold when they disappear back to Pakistan."

In a pattern resembling previous cells aided by planners and trainers in Pakistan, at least seven suspects in the alleged airline plot traveled there, officials say. A group at the heart of the suspected conspiracy was formed by "an experience at a training camp" in Pakistan, a British law enforcement official said.

The suspects communicated with operatives in Pakistan up until their arrest, officials said. There are also signs of travel to and contacts with South Africa that may be related to financing, officials say. British officials say they have identified a suspected leader in London. They say a man in his mid-20s oversaw the preparation of explosive devices and filming of six "martyrdom" videos in a so-called safe house: a second-floor apartment on Forest Road in Walthamstow, a heavily Pakistani, and middle-class area on the eastern edge of the capital.

Investigators believe that the 11 suspects charged with conspiracy to murder also include bomb-makers and half a dozen would-be suicide bombers, officials said. Four suspects are charged with lesser offenses, and five more remain in custody and under investigation. The suspected plan to use materials for liquid explosives smuggled in sports drinks containers for bombings over the Atlantic recalls a 1995 hijacking plot targeting airliners over the Pacific. The earlier plan was developed in Manila by Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the Kuwaiti Pakistani godfather of the Sept. 11 attacks, and Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, who is serving a life sentence for his role in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. But this time, the project may have been developed on Forest Road.

The possibility that a British mastermind aspired to match the carnage of the Sept. 11 attacks has profound implications as the anniversary approaches, officials said. "It has the same audaciousness," the British official said.

But it raises doubts, too. British and European officials said in recent days that the suspected plotters did not target as many planes as first described publicly. Officials estimate a maximum of six planes as opposed to nine or 10. The group was under audio and video surveillance and had not chosen a date for the attacks, which were at least weeks away, officials said. Some European anti-terrorism officials suggest the initial British accounts were alarmist.

Other questions concern Rashid Rauf, a Birmingham, England, businessman living in Pakistan. His arrest there caused the suspects here to film a martyrdom video, which in turn triggered the police decision to round up the group last month, the British counter-terrorism official said. Pakistani authorities describe him as a key figure who has confessed to meeting with an Al Qaeda leader about the plot.

British officials, in contrast, say Rauf communicated frequently with the London group, but his role is unclear. One official said Rauf did not appear to be a mastermind. European anti-terrorism officials worry that information from Pakistan tends to be clouded by political manipulation and unsavory tactics. Rauf confessed after four days of interrogation, which raises the specter that he was tortured, said a European anti-terrorism official with information about the case. "After four days of interrogation, I think he would say pretty much what they wanted," the European official said. "I am a little bit skeptical."

Although the same problem haunts cooperation with North African and Arab security agents, intelligence from North Africa helped police in Paris detect a major threat developing about a year ago. It emerged from the fury in Iraq, a land of jihad that is revitalizing and reshaping networks such as Algeria's Salafist Group for Call and Combat, known by the French initials GSPC. The GSPC, a longtime Al Qaeda ally, spent the late 1990s embroiled in Algeria's bloody civil conflict. It expanded throughout the Maghreb countries, north into Europe and south into the Sahel region of countries including Mali and Niger. With the advent of war in Iraq, combat-hardened Algerians were a large component of the jihadists flocking to join the insurgency along with inexperienced Europeans, who tended to be thrown into the fray. "At the start of war there are very radicalized extremists, and it's kind of the era of cannon fodder in which Zarqawi and other organizations absorbed these people and sent them on suicide operations," Bruguiere said. "Later, in 2005, while the situation is degrading in Iraq, some of these people are recuperated by the Zarqawi movement, and groups like it, to be trained for terror operations in Europe."

The Algerian network began working with Zarqawi and others to develop a regionwide version of Al Qaeda that would unite groups in Morocco, Mali, Libya and elsewhere and create "a zone of destabilization" across northern Africa, French and Italian investigators said. "The strategy changes," a senior Italian police official said. "The GSPC loses its nationalist Algerian focus, embraces the anti-Western ideas of Al Qaeda. They set up new training camps on the border of Algeria and Mali that disappear whenever someone looks for them. And they form a big structure in Syria, in Aleppo and Damascus, that sends some foreign fighters who come to Syria into Iraq, and others back to Europe."

Leaders forged the alliance partly with traveling emissaries and e-mails, including one intercepted by the CIA in late 2004, officials say. But it was also a fluid process that is typical of Islamic extremism and has intensified as Al Qaeda's networks have been damaged and dispersed, they say. The "emirs" set a general strategy guiding the initiatives of the cells, which are often spontaneously formed and largely autonomous.

In exchange for fighters and logistics, Zarqawi and like-minded bosses in the Iraq region decided to provide manpower and training — in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon — to help the GSPC attack France, a dire foe because of its support for the Algerian government. The Jordanian began singling out Algeria and France in propaganda statements and terrorist operations. As Iraq grew increasingly chaotic last year, insurgent chiefs had more wannabe foreign fighters than they could handle, investigators said. "In 2005, the flow of Jihadis to Syria was unmanageable," the senior Italian police official said. "There were too many, and too many were untrained. The structure in Syria decided that they only wanted serious people with combat experience, especially from the Algerian army. The others are sent to Algeria to the camps to train. Because the GSPC wants to hit Europe."

The new alliance produced brazen schemes to bomb targets in France: the Paris subway, the Orly airport, the headquarters of the DST anti-terrorism agency, even a Parisian restaurant frequented by DST agents. Starting with the capture of a boss in Algeria last September and continuing into the spring, security forces launched periodic raids north and south of the Mediterranean. The operations revealed that new cells inherited projects from dismantled groups and tried again.

The suspects were a cross-section of extremism today. French police arrested accused ringleaders Safe Bourada, 35, and Ouassini Cherifi, 31. Both are from Algerian immigrant families and grew up in tough suburbs of Paris. Both did time on previous terrorism charges. Bourada was involved in a mid-1990s bombing campaign in France. Cherifi, who has a university math degree and had worked as a chief receptionist at a luxury hotel, was convicted in 2002 of providing fraudulent documents to a suspected Al Qaeda cell.

Their new-generation soldiers ranged from radicalized hoodlums, who raised a war chest by robbing armored cars and extorting from prostitutes, to fierce converts trained in bomb-making in Lebanon. Like militants across Europe, they were swept up in a wave of radicalization that is faster and wider than ever.

In December, French police found a stash of weapons and explosives in the garage of a housing project in the gray slums north of Paris. One plan called for simultaneous attacks during Bastille Day celebrations July 14, investigators said. In April, Moroccan police captured a Tunisian based in Milan and seven suspected henchmen accused of preparing to bomb a cathedral in Bologna, Italy, because it displays a painting of Muhammad in Dante's *Inferno*. Nonetheless, the network did not come close to striking, officials say. Information from North Africa may have been manipulated, they say. The fog of the battlefield obscures the true dangers and even the face of the enemy. "For me, using the term GSPC can be problematic," Dambruoso said. "I think it encompasses many things, many groups, it has stimulated and motivated a lot of different radicals. But in this world, it's difficult to talk about the networks as if they were very organized."

Five years from Ground Zero, the threats on this side of the Atlantic are fragmented and elusive. But they have moved uncomfortably close for Europeans and, as a result, for Americans as well. European-born terrorists "are willing to attack their homeland," a U.S.

law enforcement official said. "Something's happening in their melting pot. And the fear with these guys is that they are just an e-ticket away from getting to the U.S."

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