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Al-Qaeda has plans for its new recruit

By Syed Saleem Shahzad
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ISLAMABAD - With the United States on the brink of taking a decision on whether to send an additional 40,000 troops to Afghanistan, and with the leadership of al-Qaeda redefining its vision eight years after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the US, a new phase in al-Qaeda's war is likely to begin.

Soon after top al-Qaeda commander Ilyas Kashmiri surfaced for an exclusive interview with Asia Times Online (see [Al-Qaeda's guerrilla chief lays out strategy](#) Asia Times Online, October 15) to deny that he had been killed in a missile attack by a US Predator drone, US agents exposed a plot to use an American national for terrorist attacks in Denmark and India.

According to reports, the man, identified as David Coleman Headley, was one of two suspects arrested last month by the Joint Terrorism Task Force of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport before he boarded a flight to Philadelphia, from where he was said to be going to travel to Pakistan to meet his handlers, including Ilyas.

Headley's alleged partner in the claimed terror plot, which included plans to attack the Danish newspaper that published cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, was a Pakistani-Canadian named Tahawwur Hussain Rana, also a Chicago resident. He was arrested by the FBI on October 18.

According to an FBI affidavit filed in a Chicago court, Headley was in close contact with Ilyas and several unidentified leaders of the militant group, the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT); they were only identified as "LeT member A" and "Individual A". Headley had visited Pakistan before to meet LeT handlers and was returning there ostensibly to finalize plans for strikes.

"In July and August, Headley exchanged a series of e-mails with LeT Member A, including an exchange in which Headley asked if the Denmark project was on hold, and whether a visit to India that LeT member A had asked him to undertake was for the purpose of surveilling targets for a new terrorist attack," the FBI said in its affidavit.

"These e-mails reflect that LeT Member A was placing a higher priority on using Headley to assist in planning a new attack in India than on completing the planned attack in Denmark," it said.

Ilyas was never associated with LeT, but his 313 Brigade comprises several top former LeT commanders.

The plot has been unearthed at a time when al-Qaeda is preparing for a new phase in its struggle. Its central front in the global war theater is Afghanistan. Here it has over the past few years hit targets that it believed would enhance its popularity among the masses. It has not been particularly successful, mainly due to the arrest and killing of a number of its key operators in Pakistan.

However, the recent placement of Ilyas as the chairman of its military committee will allow al-Qaeda to use commandos from the notorious 313 Brigade to launch attacks in Western countries as well as in India. The brigade comprises jihadis with extensive experience in Pakistan's Kashmir struggle with India.

In his interview with Asia Times Online, Ilyas mentioned the cartoons published in the Danish press, but only in passing as a reference to Western tyranny. He said, "We have been exposing all sorts of their victimization and tyranny. These nations have published cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in order to humiliate all Muslims."

He would not be drawn on any of his plans. "I am not a traditional jihadi cleric who is involved in sloganeering. As a military commander, I would say every target has a specific time and reason, and the responses will be forthcoming accordingly."

In the interview, his first given to the English-language media, his emphasis was against India for the "liberation of Kashmir", although he said he had now expanded his struggle against America, which he referred to as "the big Satan", and its allies.

By utilizing the experienced Ilyas, al-Qaeda hopes to launch attacks that will create a backlash in the Muslim world against the West and boost the morale of the masses on the streets. The publisher of the Danish cartoons would have been a popular target, given the waves of demonstrations throughout the Muslim world at the publication of the cartoons. This especially as the Organization of Islamic Countries failed to take any popular steps, such as severing diplomatic ties or boycotting Danish products.

Ilyas' 313 Brigade is an elite group with stiff entry requirements - it takes more than just a good jihadi background to get in. Ilyas, who denies media reports that he was once part of a special services group of the Pakistani army, was a mujahid during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s and received top training in explosives and guerrilla operations in the air, on water and on land.

Recruits to 313 Brigade are required to undergo extensive training that includes spiritual awareness - members have to pray five times a day, plus additional prayers at midnight (*Tahajud*). They suffer sleep and food deprivation to toughen them and learn deep-water diving and survival skills, including orienteering and how to plan operations.

Once a jihad passes all tests, most of which Ilyas personally oversees, he is assigned for commando operations in Afghanistan - and from there, if al-Qaeda is to be believed - to the wider world.