

The 2008 Belgium Cell and FATA's Terrorist Pipeline

By Paul Cruickshank

ON DECEMBER 11, 2008, 14 individuals were arrested in Belgium and two in France in a major counterterrorism operation.¹ The arrests, just hours before an EU Summit meeting in Brussels, made headlines around the world because one of the six charged by Belgian authorities was "al-Qa`ida living legend" Malika el-Aroud, the widow of the al-Qa`ida operative who assassinated Afghan Northern Alliance Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud two days before the September 11 attacks on the United States.²

Belgian authorities accuse her of having worked together with her new husband, Moez Garsallaoui, a Tunisian militant, to recruit individuals for training in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan.³ Police launched the arrest operation after three young Belgian Moroccans allegedly recruited by el-Aroud and Garsallaoui returned from FATA to Belgium.⁴ According to Glen Audenaert, the director of the Belgian Federal Police, "We established there were contacts between members of the terrorist organization in Belgium and the highest levels of Al Qaeda... people in direct contact with Mr. Bin Laden."⁵

Based on information drawn from interviews with senior U.S. and Belgian counterterrorism officials, lawyers involved in the case, and some of the suspects themselves, this article sheds new light on the "terror pipeline" connecting Europe and FATA in the context of the alleged Belgian cell.

A Europe-Wide Problem

Until recently, the FATA safe haven troubled British counterterrorism officials significantly more than their counterparts in other European countries. This was a result of the United Kingdom's large Pakistani diaspora community.⁶ The British intelligence agency MI5 recently estimated that 75% of terrorist plots they investigate have ties to Pakistan.⁷ Those plots included a 2006 failed operation to blow up at least seven transatlantic airliners.⁸

Governments in continental Europe were more concerned about citizens gaining terrorist knowledge in Iraq and North Africa, a function of continental Europe's large Arab diaspora. In the last year, however, that view has been changing. While travel flows to North Africa still cause serious concern, there has been a significant reduction in the number of European militants traveling to Iraq, a function of al-Qa`ida in Iraq's (AQI) waning fortunes, the extreme barbarism that has tarnished its brand, and a crackdown on cross-border infiltration networks.⁹ Few plots in Europe have been tied to returnees from Iraq.¹⁰ Conversely, a growing number of terrorist plots, such as a plot to target the U.S. Ramstein Air Base in Germany in September 2007 and a plot to target the Barcelona metro in January 2008, have seen operatives train in FATA.¹¹

Alain Grignard, who heads counterterrorist operations for the Belgian Federal Police, said that the mountains of Afghanistan and Pakistan have replaced Iraq as the destination

of choice for aspiring jihadists from Belgium and other countries on the European continent. According to Grignard, "Not since the year before 9/11 have we seen as many people travel towards the Afghanistan-Pakistan conflict region."¹² This view is echoed by U.S. intelligence agencies who have observed an "an influx of new Western recruits into the tribal areas since mid-2006."¹³ In February 2009, Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair warned that "the primary threat from Europe-based extremists stems from al-Qa`ida and Sunni affiliates who return from training in Pakistan to conduct attacks in Europe or the United States."¹⁴

Unlike the Iraqi insurgency, fighting Americans in Afghanistan does not seem to have lost its luster for European militants. It appears that aspiring recruits have wised up to the notion that joining AQI means leaping aboard a rapidly moving conveyor belt for suicide bombing.¹⁵

Recruitment

The recent Belgian case provides a window into how young European militants are lured to Pakistan's tribal areas. Belgian police claim that el-Aroud and her husband, Moez Garsallaoui, acted in tandem to encourage individuals to leave Belgium to fight in Afghanistan. El-Aroud, they argue, inspired radical-leaning youngsters to sign up for jihad through inflammatory postings on a website she ran called "Minbar SOS." Garsallaoui, for his part, toured Brussels' immigrant neighborhoods to physically recruit people.¹⁶

During an interview for CNN three years ago, el-Aroud explained how she administered Minbar SOS, her French language website. The website included postings of attacks on U.S. troops in

1 Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, "Belgian 'Al Qaeda Cell' Linked to 2006 Airline Plot," CNN, February 13, 2009; "Terrorisme: un Franco-Tunisien mis en examen pour ses liens présumés avec une filière afghane," Agence France-Presse, December 15, 2008.

2 The six individuals were charged with "participation in a terrorist group." For an in-depth profile of Malika el-Aroud, see Paul Cruickshank, "Love in the Time of Terror," *Marie Claire*, March 2009.

3 Robertson and Cruickshank.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 It is estimated that there are more than one million people in the United Kingdom of Pakistani ancestry.

7 Duncan Gardham, "MI5 Chief Warns of Threat from Global Recession," *Daily Telegraph*, January 8, 2009.

8 Senior U.S. officials stated that several of the airline plotters trained in FATA. See Richard Greenberg, Paul Cruickshank, and Chris Hansen, "Inside the Terror Plot that Rivalled 9/11," NBC, September 15, 2008.

9 Elaine Sciolino, "Fears of Iraq Becoming a Terrorist Incubator Seem Overblown French Say," *New York Times*, April 8, 2008; Karen DeYoung, "Fewer Foreigners Crossing Into Iraq from Syria to Fight," *Washington Post*, September 16, 2007.

10 Ibid.

11 Souad Mekhennet and Michael Moss, "Europeans Get Terror Training Inside Pakistan," *New York Times*, September 10, 2007; Elaine Sciolino, "Terror Threat from Pakistan Said to Expand," *New York Times*, February 10, 2008.

12 Robertson and Cruickshank.

13 J. Michael McConnell, "Annual Threat Assessment of the Director of National Intelligence for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence," U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 5, 2008.

14 Dennis C. Blair, "Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence," U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, February 12, 2009.

15 Personal interview, Alain Grignard, head of counterterrorist operations for the Belgian Federal Police, August 2008.

16 Robertson and Cruickshank.

Iraq, along with a section dedicated to the speeches of top al-Qa`ida leaders.¹⁷ By the end of 2008, the site had more than 1,400 subscribers.¹⁸ Authorities in Belgium, however, could do little to prevent el-Aroud from administering the site due to strong freedom of speech protections under Belgian law.¹⁹

According to Grignard, websites such as Minbar SOS function as recruiting grounds for terrorist operatives who use them to identify individuals willing to fight jihad. "It's a good way to get people together and then establish a more secret dialogue with people that are interesting to the organization," he explained.²⁰ Belgian counterterrorism officials said that monitoring her website helped identify the presence of a recruiting network for Afghanistan.²¹

El-Aroud's iconic status appears to have attracted Hicham Beyayo, 23, one of the young Belgian Moroccans arrested in the case, who became a Minbar SOS site administrator before traveling to Pakistan.²² Beyayo claims that Garsallaoui recruited him to fight jihad in Afghanistan. Christophe Marchand, Beyayo's lawyer, said that his client was approached by Garsallaoui in a mosque near his home in Anderlecht, a tough immigrant neighborhood, and that el-Aroud's husband persuaded him to travel to Afghanistan to fight against Americans to restore the Taliban to power. Garsallaoui allegedly emphasized that jihad in Afghanistan was a religious duty and also cast the fighting in heroic and glamorous tones.²³

Garsallaoui's recruiting was not restricted to Belgium. He also recruited two French subscribers to Minbar SOS who for legal reasons can only be identified by their initials H.A. and W.O.²⁴ W.O. claimed he was arrested by Turkish police in the summer of 2008 after he tried to return to Europe from FATA. When he was later interrogated by French authorities, he provided an extremely detailed account of his journey to the tribal areas of Pakistan. During the interrogation, W.O. stated that "calls to jihad" on Minbar SOS were "incessant" and the video propaganda he viewed on the site made him want to volunteer.

Travel to FATA

In December 2007, Garsallaoui's recruits gathered in Istanbul, Turkey. There were six in total. Two from France and four from Belgium,²⁵ including Beyayo and two friends who lived on his square in Anderlecht, Ali el-Ghanouti and Y. Harrizi.²⁶ Garsallaoui's plan was to bribe smugglers to take them illegally across the Iranian and Pakistani borders to FATA. Garsallaoui instructed each of the recruits to bring 2,000 euros for this purpose; he himself was carrying a significantly larger sum in cash.²⁷ Garsallaoui set off first and the others followed two weeks later. They eventually arrived in Zahedan in eastern Iran, a border town described by the French recruit W.O. as a key staging point for militants traveling to fight in the Afghan-Pakistan war zone.²⁸ From there, smugglers took them across the Pakistani border into the tribal areas, which they entered on January 10, 2008, transiting through Bannu, a district that borders both South and

North Waziristan.²⁹ Beyayo later told his lawyer that he was amazed at the lack of controls and how easy it was to enter the area.³⁰

Beyayo's and W.O.'s accounts of their time in FATA, where they stayed for much of 2008, provide a rare glimpse into the terrorist safe haven. Their accounts suggest that jihadist networks in FATA have relatively loose organizational structures, a view shared by American and Belgian counterterrorism officials.³¹ In the 1980s and 1990s, several jihadist groups, including al-Qa`ida, had organizational structures in place, mainly centered around Peshawar, to process arriving volunteers. Yet when the Belgian and French recruits crossed into the tribal areas in early 2008, they received no such greeting. Nobody knew who they were.³² Although their smuggler introduced them to individuals linked to the "Arab camp" in FATA, they were initially met with open suspicion.³³ Eventually, however, they were able to persuade their interlocutors of their jihadist bona fides. The fact that they were reunited with Garsallaoui, their recruiter, on January 13, presumably helped in this regard. For the next several months, a Syrian operative by the name of "Driss" was their principle handler.³⁴

A senior counterterrorism source with detailed knowledge of the investigation told the author that during Garsallaoui's time in the Afghan-Pakistan border region, he developed close connections with a senior al-Qa`ida operative who orchestrated the 2006 airline plot in the United Kingdom. The source could not reveal the al-Qa`ida operative's name because of the ongoing investigation. Separately, Belgian counterterrorism officials believe that Garsallaoui was the main link between the Belgian cell and al-Qa`ida.³⁵

17 Personal interviews, Malika el-Aroud and Moez Garsallaoui, Guin, Switzerland, February 2006. For the video of Malika el-Aroud demonstrating her website, see Nic Robertson and Paul Cruickshank, "One Woman's War," CNN, February 10, 2009.

18 This figure is based on the author's own monitoring of el-Aroud's website, Minbar SOS. Many more individuals presumably regularly accessed the site.

19 Personal interviews, Belgian counterterrorism officials, Brussels, January and February 2009.

20 Personal interview, Alain Grignard, head of counterterrorist operations for the Belgian Federal Police, February 2009.

21 Personal interviews, Belgian counterterrorism officials, Brussels, January and February 2009.

22 Robertson and Cruickshank.

23 Personal interview, Christophe Marchand, lawyer for Hicham Beyayo, Brussels, February 2009.

24 Details of W.O.'s interrogation by French authorities in January and February 2009 were made available to the author by Christophe Marchand, Hicham Beyayo's lawyer. Under Belgian law, defense attorneys can make public details of the legal case against their clients in the interests of their defense.

25 This information was drawn from W.O.'s interrogation.

26 Gilbert Dupont, "Les six du réseau kamikaze," *La Dernière Heure*, December 13, 2008; Personal interviews, Belgian counterterrorism officials, Brussels, January and February 2009. Ali el-Ghanouti and Y. Harrizi were also charged in the case.

27 This information was drawn from W.O.'s interrogation.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Personal interview, Christophe Marchand, Brussels, February 2009.

31 Personal interview, Belgian intelligence official, December 2008; Personal interview, U.S. counterterrorism official, March 2009.

32 Personal interview, Christophe Marchand, Brussels, February 2009.

33 This information was drawn from W.O.'s interrogation.

34 Ibid.

35 Personal interviews, Belgian counterterrorism offi-

W.O., the French recruit, stated that “the Arab camp” was for all intents and purposes run by al-Qa`ida. He said that the Arab camp was the smallest grouping of foreign fighters in FATA with about 300 to 400 recruits, mostly from Saudi Arabia but some from other parts of the Middle East and North Africa.³⁶ According to W.O., al-Qa`ida’s fighters and zones where they conducted training were spread out across North and South Waziristan for security reasons. W.O. stated that al-Qa`ida’s military commander at the time of their arrival was Abu Laith al-Libi. Abu Laith was killed by a U.S. missile strike in the tribal areas in late January 2008.³⁷ As for Bin Ladin, the “overall commander,” W.O. was told by their handler Driss that it was “impossible to approach” him.³⁸

According to W.O., the Belgian and French recruits were asked to fill out a contract by their handlers, illustrating that al-Qa`ida’s penchant for paperwork has remained intact over the years.³⁹ The three page form, which they signed, included questions on their marriage status, health, criminal convictions, and whether or not they wanted to become suicide bombers.⁴⁰ It also set out precise rules for their conduct in FATA such as the need to unquestioningly obey orders. They were told that they would be punished if they failed to adhere to the contract.⁴¹

According to the interrogation report, W.O. stated that early on in their stay, their group, with the exception of Beyayo who had fallen ill, completed a two week training course, much of

it inside a residence. They received both religious instruction and military training from Egyptian and Syrian instructors. Their military trainer taught them how to assemble weapons, fire rocket launchers, and how to handle explosives. He even set off a small charge of TNT in demonstration, telling them that the explosive was used to attack U.S. convoys in Afghanistan and in suicide vests. They each had to pay 400 euros for the course, which included rent for the dwelling. This illustrates the degree of self-motivation and self-organization that can be required in recruits traveling to FATA.

W.O. described the training as “an enrollment amongst the Taliban and Al Qaeda.” According to his account, Pakistani Taliban fighters mixed freely with al-Qa`ida operatives in FATA, illustrating the close connections between the two groups. According to both W.O. and Beyayo, most of the Belgian and French jihadists never received “approval” to fight in Afghanistan. During the next few months, they moved from dwelling to dwelling in the mountains of North and South Waziristan, frustrated at being kept away from the fighting over the border. Garsallaoui, according to both accounts, eventually received approval to fight in Afghanistan.⁴² W.O. stated that he was surprised by the lack of large groupings of fighters in the tribal areas. Al-Qa`ida propaganda led him to believe that fighters lived in groupings of more than 50 in an area; the reality was that fighters were grouped together in units of 10 or less.⁴³

During his time in FATA, Beyayo claims he had to move frequently to avoid being targeted by U.S. Predator drones. The strikes had a reputation in jihadist circles of being “very effective.”⁴⁴ Garsallaoui was almost hit by such a strike, according to an intercepted e-mail he sent his wife.⁴⁵ The French and Belgian recruits were told not to venture outside their dwellings because spies would pass on the coordinates of

suspected jihadists to the Americans.⁴⁶ The accounts corroborate a recent judgment by U.S. intelligence agencies that the strikes, intensified in the second half of 2008, have put significant pressure on al-Qa`ida in FATA.⁴⁷

Communications with Europe

The case reveals that terrorist operatives in the Afghan-Pakistan border region can maintain contact with the outside world relatively easily. Garsallaoui, for example, was in regular e-mail contact with his wife, Malika el-Aroud, from the Afghan-Pakistan border region, and sometimes even by Skype.⁴⁸ He also periodically tuned in to the forums on his wife’s website Minbar SOS, even sending an e-mail from Afghanistan explaining why he was fighting jihad.⁴⁹

One of the e-mails Garsallaoui sent to his wife, intercepted by U.S. counterterrorism agencies in the first half of 2008, contained a photograph of himself firing a rocket launcher somewhere in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region.⁵⁰ The picture, later posted on el-Aroud’s website, was clearly useful for propaganda purposes. Garsallaoui, posing in a “Rambo” like stance, was glamorizing the fighting. In June, Garsallaoui sent el-Aroud an e-mail claiming to have killed five Americans in Afghanistan.⁵¹ According to W.O., Garsallaoui told him when they met in July in Mir Ali, North Waziristan, that he had killed the Americans by firing a bazooka on a U.S. camp near the Pakistani border.⁵²

cials, Brussels, January and February 2009.

36 W.O. stated that the largest group of foreign fighters in FATA was from East Turkestan in northwest China. He also stated that there were two Uzbek groups operating in FATA numbering a total of around 3,000 fighters, and two Kurdish groups.

37 “U.S. Officials: CIA Kills Top Al Qaeda Terrorist in Pakistan,” CNN, January 31, 2008.

38 This information was drawn from W.O.’s interrogation.

39 In the years before 9/11, al-Qa`ida required recruits to fill out copious amounts of paperwork. See Peter Bergen, *The Osama bin Laden I Know: An Oral history of Al Qaeda’s Leader* (Washington, D.C.: Free Press, 2006).

40 This information was drawn from W.O.’s interrogation. The contract did not have the insignia of any particular militant group.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.; Personal interview, Christophe Marchand, Brussels, February 2009.

43 Ibid.

44 Personal interview, Christophe Marchand, Brussels, February 2009.

45 Ibid.

46 This information was drawn from W.O.’s interrogation.

47 Director of National Intelligence Blair testified in February 2009 that “in the FATA Al Qaeda lost significant parts of its command structure since 2008 in a succession of blows as damaging to the group as any since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001.”

48 Skype is an online communication website widely used around the world to make telephone calls by using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology.

49 This information is based on the author’s own monitoring of el-Aroud’s website, Minbar SOS. According to private Belgian counterterrorism sources, his e-mail was intercepted by U.S. counterterrorism agencies.

50 Personal interviews, Belgian counterterrorism officials, Brussels, January and February 2009.

51 Robertson and Cruickshank.

52 This information was drawn from W.O.’s interrogation.

On September 26, 2008, Garsallaoui urged attacks in Europe in an online statement on Minbar SOS. "The solution my brothers and sisters is not fatwas but booooooooooms," the posting stated. His communication demonstrated al-Qa`ida's ability to instigate violence in the West from the Afghan-Pakistan border region.⁵³

Return to Belgium

In the fall of 2008, Belgian security services were placed on alert after el-Ghanouti and Harrizi, Beyayo's friends from Anderlecht, returned from FATA.⁵⁴ On December 4, Beyayo returned to Belgium.⁵⁵ The trigger for the arrests was an e-mail sent by Beyayo three days later,⁵⁶ intercepted by U.S. counterterrorism agencies,⁵⁷ suggesting he had received the go-ahead for an operation in Belgium.⁵⁸ "It was impossible for Belgian authorities at this stage to take any risk," said the director of Belgian intelligence.⁵⁹

On December 11, a week after Beyayo's return, police rounded up the alleged cell, including Malika el-Aroud. Yet when police raided 16 properties in Brussels and Liège, they found little evidence of an imminent attack.⁶⁰ Beyayo's lawyer, Marchand, said that the e-mail that triggered the arrests was just "tough" talk sent to an impress an ex-girlfriend and disputed the notion that the group may have been a "sleeping cell" sent back to Europe after deliberately being held back from the front lines.⁶¹ Beyayo told him he returned to Belgium because he was frustrated at not being able to fight in Afghanistan, the uncomfortable living

conditions, and bouts of sickness.⁶² W.O., for his part, claimed that he grew frustrated with his handlers' repeated demands of payment.⁶³ Belgian authorities, however, insist that the alleged cell was a potential national security threat. All those charged deny the allegations against them and are set to face trial within the next year.⁶⁴ Garsallaoui is still at large and believed to be operating around the tribal areas of Pakistan, which is of great concern to Belgian counterterrorism officials.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The Belgian case illustrates the continuing danger posed by al-Qa`ida's safe haven in FATA and the urgent need to tackle it. Accounts by those who traveled there do, however, suggest that the CIA's increased use of Predator strikes have put pressure on the Taliban and al-Qa`ida in FATA. While Belgian and U.S. intelligence agencies successfully tracked the Belgian cell, the increased numbers of Europeans traveling to FATA will require intensified efforts by Western intelligence agencies to track recruiting networks. "The big task for secret services," stressed Winants, is to "identify the network by which these people leave, where they got the logistical support to go there, and what they intend to do when they come back."⁶⁶

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53 This information is based on the author's own monitoring of Minbar SOS.

54 Dupont.

55 Personal interview, Christophe Marchand, Brussels, February 2009.

56 Ibid.

57 Jean-Pierre Stroobants, "La cible visée par le groupe belge démantelé n'a pas été identifiée," *Le Monde*, December 18, 2008.

58 Personal interviews, Belgian counterterrorism officials, Brussels, January and February 2009.

59 Personal interview, Alain Winants, director of Belgium's State Security Service, Brussels, February 2009.

60 According to Belgian counterterrorism sources, no explosives, firearms, or attack blueprints were recovered.

61 Personal interview, Christophe Marchand, Brussels, February 2009.

62 Personal interview, Christophe Marchand, New York, April 2009.

63 During his interrogation, W.O. said his handlers behaved like "hustlers." He claimed that in addition to charging 400 euros for training, they charged 900 euros per person for equipment and weapons.

64 Robertson and Cruickshank.

65 Personal interviews, Belgian counterterrorism officials, Brussels, January and February 2009.

66 Personal interview, Alain Winants, director of Belgium's State Security Service, Brussels, February 2009.