

Algerian Described as Hijackers' Flight Instructor

The Associated Press

September 29, 2001

<http://www.nctimes.net/news/2001/20010929/73128.html>

LONDON ---- An Algerian pilot arrested in London was a flight instructor for some of the hijackers involved in the attack on the Pentagon and took at least one of them on a flight this summer from Nevada to Arizona, a British prosecutor said in court Friday.

Lotfi Raissi, 27, who was arrested on Sept. 21, is the first overseas suspect that officials have directly linked to the hijackers who carried out the Sept. 11 attacks in New York and Washington.

"He was a lead instructor of four of the pilots that were responsible for the hijackings," prosecuting attorney Arvinda Sambir said in Magistrates Court. She said prosecutors believe he helped train the hijackers who crashed a jetliner into the Pentagon.

Sambir said that Raissi made several trips to the United States this summer, trained with several of the suspected hijackers and flew with one of them on June 23 from Las Vegas to Arizona. She did not provide further details about that flight.

Raissi started training for a U.S. commercial pilot's license in 1997, Sambir said. It was unclear where Raissi allegedly attended flight schools with the hijackers, although Sambir mentioned a flight school in Arizona. One of the pilots on American Airlines Flight 77, which crashed into the Pentagon, is believed to have attended flight school in Arizona in 1997.

Ed Hall, a spokesman for the FBI's office in Phoenix, declined to say whether Raissi and suspected hijacker Hani Hanjour were connected.

Raissi was formally arrested Friday after a week in custody when a federal court in Arizona issued an arrest warrant alleging that he gave false information on a Federal Aviation Administration form. The warrant also says Raissi failed to disclose a 1993 criminal conviction for theft in England.

He will remain in custody in London pending an additional hearing scheduled for Oct. 5. U.S. authorities have 60 days to file an extradition request, British officials said.

He has not been formally charged with any offense but Sambir said further allegations were expected. "It is no secret that conspiracy to murder is being looked at."

Richard Egan, Raissi's defense lawyer, said his client was not involved in any way in the terror attacks.

"He adamantly denies any involvement in the recent appalling tragedies," Egan said outside the court.

Meanwhile, photographs released in Washington of the 19 suspected hijackers were published in newspapers throughout the Arab world on Friday. U.S. officials hope wide distribution of the photographs will help in the investigation.

A Saudi Arabian diplomat said Friday that many of the FBI photographs of the men suspected of carrying out the Sept. 11 suicide hijackings appear to be of people who either stole passports or

assumed the identities of Saudi citizens.

The prospect that the FBI does not know the real identities of many of the hijackers further complicates an already complicated investigation.

At least eight of the men whose photographs were released Thursday by the FBI were thought to be Saudi nationals, but officials at the Saudi Arabian embassy in Washington said the photographs do not resemble Saudi citizens with the same name, most of whom are pilots or work in the aviation industry.

Speaking on the condition that he was not named, a Saudi diplomat said his government was doing a "thorough review" of the photos to see if they are of actual Saudi citizens.

Even before the photos were released, the Saudi government had said four men named as dead hijackers ---- Abdulaziz Alomari, Saeed Alghamdi, Salem Alhamzi and Mohald Alshehri ---- were alive and were not in the United States at the time of the hijackings.

Alhamzi/Alhazmi told his government he was not on American Flight 77, which crashed into the Pentagon, has never been to the United States, and has been living in fear since his name appeared on the FBI's hijackers list. He said his passport was stolen in the United Arab Emirates, where some of the hijackers lived.

Alomari was listed as sitting next to Mohamed Atta, whom authorities believe was the ringleader of the suicide hijacking plot on American Flight 11, which was the first to crash into the World Trade Center towers.

But a Saudi government spokesman said Alomari is a Saudi pilot who went to flight school in Florida, as did many of the hijackers, but had moved back to Saudi Arabia before the hijackings.

A Saudi diplomat said the pilot Abdulaziz Alomari is 43, while the photo released by the FBI shows a man who appears to be in his 20s.

Alghamdi, the diplomat said, is a Saudi pilot on loan to Tunisia's national airline. He was in Tunis when the hijackings took place and looks nothing like the photo released by the FBI.

He said the photos showing two brothers, Waleed and Wail Alshehri, are not the pair originally believed to be among the dead hijackers. The Alshehri brothers were initially thought to be the sons of a Saudi diplomat posted in India, but the embassy said the photos are not those of the diplomat's sons.

"Whoever stole these identities knew what they were doing," said an embassy spokesman. "These are very common names in Saudi Arabia."

Two of the hijackers attended the University of Colorado, according to officials there. One was Alomari, the other Ahmed Alghamdi, who was on United Flight 175 out of Boston. Larry Bell, the director of international education at the University of Colorado, told the Globe that the FBI took their records.

Patricia Hagelberg, who rented a room to Alghamdi in Golden, Colo., for about a year, said the FBI had interviewed her. She said she didn't think Alghamdi was one of the hijackers, but the FBI confiscated photographs of him.

"He was quite and he was shy," she said. "He wasn't too friendly."

The Saudi government also confirmed an earlier Globe report that a reputed associate of the hijackers, Amer Kamfar, who is being sought by police in Florida, is a Saudi airlines employee who had moved back to Saudi Arabia a week before the hijackings.

According to the Saudi embassy, about 300 Saudis living in the United States took up their government's offer to fly home if they feared reprisals in the wake of the suicide hijackings.

But that repatriation program has been shelved, according to a Saudi diplomat, because at least some of those who volunteered to fly home did so for reasons that had nothing to do with fear.

The diplomat said Saudi officials learned that some of those who flew home were students who were in danger of flunking out.

"Too many people were abusing it, so we suspended the program," said the diplomat.

In addition, many US-based relatives of Osama bin Laden, the Saudi-born terrorist who is accused of masterminding the hijackings, returned to Saudi Arabia on privately-chartered jets. A Saudi diplomat said his government and the FBI advised the bin Ladens to leave for their own safety.

He said he didn't know how many bin Laden family members remain in the United States. He said all Saudi citizens who flew home were first interviewed by the FBI, and that none who wanted to go home were detained.

The Saudi government said it knew of only two cases of Saudi citizens being attacked in the wake of the hijackings. One of them was a 20-year-old Boston University student who was stabbed outside a Back Bay nightclub four days after the hijackings, the other an engineering student in California stabbed and left for dead on a Santa Barbara sidewalk in broad daylight a few days after the hijackings.

A Boston Police spokesman last night said the attack on the BU student is being investigated as a hate crime, but that there have been no arrests.

Since the terrorist strikes, some 20 people have been arrested in a European sweep for suspected associates of Osama bin Laden, thought to be the mastermind behind the attacks.

In Madrid, Spain, six Algerians on Friday were ordered held without bail on charges they belong to an militant Algerian group funded by bin Laden.

The suspects have not been linked to the Sept. 11 attacks but Juan Cotino of the Spanish National Police said the six had direct links with others arrested in Europe who were planning suicide attacks against U.S. targets on the continent, including the U.S. embassy in Paris.

Spanish officials picked up the six after they learned that a Tunisian arrested in Belgium with bomb-making material and documents suggesting he was planning a suicide attack had met with the Algerians in Spain.

Raissi, who lived near London's Heathrow airport, was one of four people detained by British police on Sept. 21. Two were released without charge and have been identified in news reports as Raissi's 25-year-old wife, Sonia and his 29-year-old brother, Mohamed. A fourth person identified as Abu Imard, who was arrested in Birmingham, was released Friday evening.

Raissi's relatives have told journalists that he flew jets in the United States for several years and was taking further training at Heathrow.

"Of course Lotfi has flying manuals at home -- he is learning to be a pilot," Raissi's uncle, Kamal Raissi, told a reporter after his nephew's arrest.

According to a database search by The Associated Press, Raissi appeared to have lived in Arizona for several years in the late 1990s. He listed addresses in Phoenix on four pilot licenses.

Other court records show Raissi received a February 1999 traffic ticket in suburban Mesa, Arizona, that listed a north Phoenix address.

Police in central England were still holding three other men detained Tuesday under the Terrorism Act. Police said the men were linked to previous arrests in France and Belgium, but gave few details.

Scotland Yard confirmed Friday that 11 of the suspected hijackers passed through British airports this year.

Ten arrived at Gatwick or Heathrow airports on flights from Dubai between April and June, Scotland Yard said, and all caught connecting flights out of the country within three hours. An 11th suspected hijacker passed through Britain in January, police said.

Deputy Assistant Commissioner Alan Fry, head of Scotland Yard's Anti-Terrorist Branch, said the FBI has passed on 100 requests to trace suspects, witnesses and others connected to the case.

"The indications are that we can expect the number of requests from the FBI to increase over coming weeks. That does not mean there is more evidence of a major part of this conspiracy taking place in this country," Fry said.

Separately, British police received permission to continue holding for an additional three days the seven men -- six Iraqis and a German driver -- found hiding Wednesday in a truck outside a Royal Air Force base used by U.S. fighter jets.

Police say they do not believe the men are tied to the U.S. terror attacks, but because of where they were found, authorities invoked anti-terrorism laws to detain them.

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