

Pakistan's Terror Connections

The Man Behind Mumbai



Shimon Rosenberg, right, speaks with Rabbi Yehuda Krinsky, in front of a portrait of Rosenberg's slain daughter Rivka and son-in-law Gavriel Holtzberg at Nariman House in Mumbai on Nov. 26, 2009, a year after the Mumbai terror attacks. (Arko Datta/Reuters)

by Sebastian Rotella
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On a November night two years ago, a young American rabbi and his pregnant wife finished dinner at their home in the mega-city of Mumbai.

Gavriel and Rivka Holtzberg had come to India on a religious mission. They had established India's first outpost of Chabad Lubavitch, the Orthodox Jewish organization, in a six-story tower overlooking a shantytown. The Holtzbergs' guests that evening were two American rabbis, an Israeli grandmother and a Mexican tourist.

Hundreds of miles away in Pakistan, a terrorist chief named Sajid Mir was preparing a different sort of religious mission. Mir had spent two years using a Pakistani-American operative named David Coleman Headley to conduct meticulous reconnaissance on Mumbai, according to investigators and court documents. He had selected iconic targets and the Chabad House, a seemingly obscure choice, but one that ensured that Jews and Americans would be casualties.

On Nov. 26, 2008, Mir sat among militant chiefs in a Pakistani safe house tracking an attack team as its dinghy approached the Mumbai waterfront. The Lashkar-i-Taiba terrorist group had made Mir the project manager of its biggest strike ever, the crowning achievement of his career as a holy warrior.

The 10 gunmen split into five teams. His voice crisp and steady, Mir directed the slaughter by phone, relaying detailed instructions to his fighters. About 10:25 p.m., gunmen stormed the Chabad House. They shot the Holtzbergs and the visiting rabbis, took the Israeli grandmother and Mexican tourist hostage and barricaded themselves on an upper floor.

Mir told his men to try to trade the hostages for a gunman who had been captured. Mir spoke directly to the Mexican hostage, 50-year-old Norma Rabinovich, who had been preparing to move to Israel to join her adult children.

Mir soothed the sobbing woman in accented but smooth English.

"Save your energy for good days," Mir told her during the call intercepted by Indian intelligence. "If they contact right now, maybe you gonna, you know, celebrate your Sabbath with your family."

The prisoner swap failed. Mir ordered the gunman to "get rid" of Rabinovich.

"Stand her up on this side of your door," he said. "Shoot her such that the bullet goes right through her head and out the other side . . . Do it. I'm listening. . . . Do it, in God's name."

The three-day siege of Mumbai left 166 dead and 308 wounded. Twenty-six of the dead were foreigners, including six Americans. The attacks inflamed tension between Pakistan and India at a time when the nuclear-armed foes were trying to improve their relationship. The repercussions complicated the U.S. battle against Islamic extremism in South Asia and thrust Lashkar into the global spotlight.

Two years later, Mir and his victims are at the center of a wrenching national security dilemma confronting the Obama administration. The question, simply put, is whether the larger interests of the United States in maintaining good relations with Pakistan will permit Mir and



Sajid Mir

other suspects to get away with one of the most devastating terrorist attacks in recent history.

As President Obama's recent trip to India made clear, the Mumbai attack remains a pivotal and delicate issue in relations among the United States, India and Pakistan. Despite the diplomatic sensitivities, administration officials say they are pursuing those responsible.

"The U.S. government is completely determined to see justice done in the case," said a senior U.S. counterterrorism official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of pending prosecutions. "Sometimes it takes time."

For five months, ProPublica has examined the investigation of the attacks and previous cases documenting the rise of Lashkar. This account is based on interviews with more than two dozen law enforcement, intelligence and diplomatic officials from the United States, India, Pakistan, France, Britain, Australia and Israel, including front-line investigators. ProPublica also interviewed associates and relatives of suspects and victims who had not discussed the case with journalists and reviewed foreign and U.S. case files, some of them previously undisclosed.

These documents and interviews paint the fullest portrait yet of the mysterious Mir, whose global trail traces Lashkar's evolution. His name has surfaced in investigations on four continents, his web reaching as far as suburban Virginia. Fleeting glimpses of him appear in case files and communications intercepts. A French court even convicted him in absentia in 2007. But he remains free and dangerous, according to U.S. and Indian officials.

ProPublica's investigation leads to another disturbing revelation: Despite isolated voices of concern, for years the U.S. intelligence community was slow to focus on Lashkar and detect the extent of its determination to strike Western targets. Some officials admit that counterterrorism agencies grasped the dimensions of the threat only after the Mumbai attacks.

The FBI investigation into the killings of the Americans has focused on a half-dozen accused masterminds who are still at large: Mir, top Lashkar chiefs and a man thought to be a major in Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI). U.S. officials say Washington has urged Islamabad to arrest the suspects.

"We put consistent pressure on the Pakistanis to deal with Lashkar and do so at the highest levels," said the senior U.S. counterterrorism official. "There has been no lack of clarity in our message."

But U.S. officials acknowledge that the response has been insufficient. The effort to bring to justice the masterminds — under a U.S. law that makes terrorist attacks against Americans overseas a crime — faces obstacles. A U.S. prosecution could implicate Pakistani military chiefs who, at minimum, have allowed Lashkar to operate freely. U.S. pressure on Pakistan to confront both the military and Lashkar could damage counterterrorism efforts.

"It's a balancing act," a high-ranking U.S. law enforcement official said. "We can only push so far. It's very political. Sajid Mir is too powerful for them to go after. Too well-connected. We need the Pakistanis to go after the Taliban and al-Qaeda."

Pakistani officials said they had no information on Mir. They denied allegations that the powerful ISI supports Lashkar.

"Allegations of ISI's cadres operating in connivance with the militants . . . are based on malicious intent," said a senior Pakistani official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the issue's sensitivity. ISI "remains top-to-bottom transparent and rests under the complete control of the civilian government . . . There is no question that the government thinks that all militants are enemies of the state."

A year ago, Pakistan charged Lashkar's military chief and six less-influential suspects in the Mumbai attacks. But the trial soon stalled over legal complications and conflict with India, raising fears among U.S. and Indian officials that the prosecution will collapse in a court system that rarely convicts accused extremists.

The U.S. investigation turned up 320 potential targets abroad — only 20 of them in India — including U.S., British and Indian embassies, government buildings, tourist sites and global financial centers, officials say.

"There should have been a recognition that Lashkar had the desire and the potential to attack the West and that we needed to get up to speed on this group," said Charles Faddis, a retired CIA chief of counterterrorist operations in South Asia and other hot spots. "It was a mistake to dismiss it as just a threat to India."



Jean-Louis Bruguiere
(Karen Bleier/AFP/Getty Images)

Today, Mir personifies Lashkar's evolving danger. The group's longtime ties to the security forces have made it more professional and potentially more menacing than al-Qaeda.

"Lashkar is not just a tool of the ISI, but an ally of al-Qaeda that participates in its global jihad," said Jean-Louis Bruguiere, a French judge who investigated Mir. "Today Pakistan is the heart of the terrorist threat. And it may be too late to do anything about it."

Lashkar's beginnings

For more than a decade, Sajid Mir has operated in a blurred underworld of spies, soldiers and terrorists.

An Interpol notice last month seeking his arrest illustrates confusion about basic facts of his life. The Indian warrant identifies him as Sajid Majid, not Mir, with a birthdate of Jan. 1, 1978, which would make him 32. But most investigators think he is older — in his mid- to late 30s. They still call him Sajid Mir, saying Majid may be his true name or one of several aliases.

Mir was born in Lahore, Pakistan's second-largest city and cultural capital. His family may have owned a manufacturing business, according to court testimony.

Mir was a teenager when a professor named Hafiz Saeed created Lashkar-i-Taiba (the Army of the Pure) in the late 1980s with Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian Islamist. Azzam had another claim to fame: He was an ideological mentor of Osama bin Laden and helped him found the organization that was the forerunner of al-Qaeda.

Lashkar joined the fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan supported by the United States and Pakistan. Soon, Pakistani strategists built Lashkar into a proxy army against India in the disputed territory of Kashmir. The group won vast support with its mix of extremism and nationalism and its array of schools, hospitals and social programs, especially in the Punjab, Mir's home region. Indians called Lashkar "the government mujaheddin."



Hafiz Mohammad Saeed, founder and head of the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba (Saeed Khan/AFP/Getty Images)

Mir joined Lashkar when he was about 16, investigators say. Some senior U.S., British and French anti-terrorism officials say he also spent time in the military, although that remains murky. For years, it was common for the Pakistani military to detail officers to Lashkar, according to investigators and court testimony.

Mir went into Lashkar's international operations wing, which embraced global jihad in the 1990s. Lashkar militants joined wars in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Chechnya and built global recruitment and financing networks. Those activities and Lashkar's anti-American and anti-Jewish propaganda showed an increasingly internationalist bent, according to U.S. congressional testimony and Pakistani and Western officials.

Yet the U.S. intelligence community still viewed the group as a regional player focused on India and Kashmir. Rep. Gary L. Ackerman (D-N.Y.), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia, said he tried and failed to get Lashkar designated as a terrorist organization in the late 1990s.

"I said it had a huge potential for damage," Ackerman recalled. "People were not paying attention."

Lashkar trained tens of thousands of holy warriors. It was easier to join than al-Qaeda, operating openly from storefront offices across Pakistan. Some foreign Lashkar trainees went on to join al-Qaeda, and several led al-Qaeda plots against New York and London.

Mir became a deputy to the director of Lashkar's foreign operations unit. He had direct access to Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, Lashkar's military chief, and ties to al-Qaeda in neighboring Afghanistan, according to a French investigation. After the Sept. 11 attacks, Mir began grooming foreign volunteers who had come to Pakistan to wage war on the West.

The Class of 2001



Willie Brigitte (Benoit Peyrucq/AFP/Getty Images)

Willie Brigitte became one of Mir's favorites. Born in Guadeloupe and radicalized in Paris, the Afro-Caribbean convert was dour, burly and nearsighted behind round-rimmed glasses. Fellow trainees called him "the Grouchy Frenchman."

Brigitte was part of an al-Qaeda connected group of militants in Europe involved in numerous plots. In September 2001, he set off for Pakistan hoping to reach the Afghan battleground.

Brigitte made his way to Lashkar headquarters in Muridke outside Lahore. The complex featured a mosque, a university, dormitories and houses for leaders. Brigitte briefly studied Arabic and the Koran and met Mir, the coordinator of foreign recruits, who carried himself like a rising star.

"He was in fact an important personage," Brigitte testified later in France. "He was a man of about 30, very cordial and pleasant, with whom I had a good relationship."

Of medium build, Mir had a dark complexion, black hair and a thick beard. He spoke English, Urdu, Hindi and Arabic. His nicknames were Abu Bara (Father of Bara), Uncle Bill and Sajid Bill. A Makarov pistol on his hip, he was accompanied by two bodyguards and a driver, according to Brigitte's testimony.

Mir's recruits included four militants from the Virginia suburbs. They were part of a multiethnic crew of college graduates, U.S. Army veterans and gun enthusiasts whose spiritual leader was Ali Al-Timimi, an Iraqi-American imam based in Falls Church.

Galvanized by the Sept. 11 attacks, the men quit their jobs and traveled to Pakistan to train with Lashkar. Another Virginia militant who had already trained in Pakistan called a Lashkar contact from the parking lot of a 7-Eleven to arrange the trip, according to federal court testimony of Yong-Ki Kwon, a Korean-American convert to Islam.

"It didn't matter why the war was going to happen," testified Kwon, a Virginia Tech graduate who had worked at Sprint. "The only thing that mattered is that our brothers and sisters in Afghanistan needs [sic] help against imminent attack."

The Virginia jihadis joined up in Lahore at a Lashkar office decorated with posters depicting the U.S. Capitol in flames and the slogan: "Yesterday we saw Russia disintegrate, then India, next we see America and Israel burning."

Mir soon cleared the volunteers to train for holy war.

The camps

To reach Lashkar's mountain training complex, recruits drove overnight past checkpoints manned by Pakistani soldiers, according to court testimony.

“They were deferential to us and let us pass without difficulty,” Brigitte said. “There was no search and no verification of our passports, which were in the hands of the Lashkar bosses.”

From a base camp, the recruits hiked to an altitude of 4,000 feet for nine days of firearms instruction, then climbed another 4,000 feet to a camp that taught covert warfare. The Pakistani army supplied crates of weapons with filed-off serial numbers, Brigitte testified.

The mountains teemed with more than 3,000 trainees. Although Pakistanis dominated the ranks, there were Americans, Arabs, Australians, Azeris, Britons, Chechens, Filipinos, Kurds, Singaporeans, Turks and Uzbeks.

“It was very impressive every morning when we would gather and shout ‘Allah Ouallah Akbar,’” Brigitte testified. “The setting was imposing because you could see the outline of the Himalayas.”

The Frenchman bunked with the Virginia trainees in a mud hut. His zeal and endurance impressed his instructors, who led drills in English and Arabic. Over tea, Brigitte befriended several instructors, who told him they were Pakistani Army officers on special assignment.

“The close relations between the Pakistani Army and Lashkar were clear,” Brigitte testified.

Brigitte became convinced that Mir was also in the Pakistani military. During Mir’s visits to check on training progress, everyone from the camp chief to army sentries treated him like a superior, Brigitte said. It was clear to him that Mir was a military officer, he said.

“He never told me formally, but I understood it because of many details,” Brigitte testified. “He was very respected by the instructors who were themselves members of the Pakistani Army but also at the checkpoints where he was well-known. . . . Nonetheless, I never knew what unit Sajid belonged to or what his rank was.”

U.S. and French anti-terror officials say Mir became an army major, although he may not have reached that rank in 2001. He eventually left the military, although it is not clear when or why, officials say. And some investigators are not convinced that he served in the military.

But Bruguiere, the French judge, said the case showed “that Sajid Mir was a high-ranking officer in the Pakistani Army and apparently also was in the ISI.”

Other cases similarly describe Pakistani security forces in the camps. A Briton who trained with Lashkar and was later convicted as the ringleader of a foiled 2004 plot against London by al-Qaeda testified that ISI officers screened and trained foreign recruits in Lashkar camps in 2000.

While Mir’s men drilled in the mountains, a U.S.-led military operation toppled the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The CIA focused on the Lashkar camps in Pakistan as well, asking Pakistani intelligence to help find foreign militants who might pose a threat to the West, according to court testimony. On four occasions, instructors temporarily evacuated foreign trainees before joint U.S.-Pakistani camp inspections, Brigitte testified.

“The instructors were informed by the Pakistani army because they were part of the army,” Brigitte testified. “About 15 Pakistanis conducted these inspections with an equal number of Americans. . . . We were told they were CIA officers who were searching for the presence of foreign jihadis.”

The trainees trekked back down from a hiding place after the CIA teams left, Brigitte and Kwon testified.

Talent-spotting

In November 2001, Mir gave the trainees disappointing news: Their dreams of martyrdom had been crushed.

Mir said Lashkar would not send them to fight in Afghanistan, because the U.S. military operation was almost over and had closed the border to aspiring foreign fighters, according to the testimony of Kwon and Brigitte.

Mir approached a handful of militants about operations in the West. First, he invited two of the Virginia militants — Kwon and Masoud Khan, a tough Pakistani-American — to dinner in Lahore.

At the restaurant, Mir introduced them to a Lashkar chief who wore “tight Western clothes” and a “nice trim beard,” Kwon testified. The chief jokingly called himself “the Disco Mujahid.” He asked them to undertake missions in the United States entailing “a lot of propaganda, information-gathering and e-mailing,” said Kwon, who declined the proposal.

Khan later told FBI agents that the Lashkar bosses asked him to conduct surveillance of an unnamed chemical plant in Maryland. The request shows that Lashkar was gathering intelligence on U.S. targets as early as 2001.

About two months later, Mir told Brigitte to return to France as the group’s “sector chief” there. Mir ordered him to keep quiet if arrested.

“He absolutely did not want it known that I had trained at a Lashkar camp,” Brigitte testified.

The handling of Brigitte — veiled threats, secretive communications — would later intensify the suspicions of French investigators that Mir had ties to Pakistani intelligence. Their indictment described Mir as Brigitte’s “case officer.”

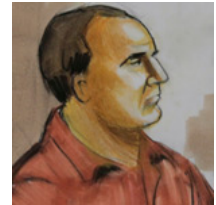
“Brigitte was told: Go back and wait,” said a former top French intelligence official. “That’s what intelligence services do. Brigitte was a clandestine operative. . . . He obeyed orders. But I don’t think he realized that he had become an agent of an intelligence service.”

Around the time Brigitte left, a Pakistani-American arrived. His name at the time was Daood Gilani, but he would become known to the world as David Coleman Headley.

Headley, now 50, differed from Mir's other proteges. He was older, a ladies' man, a globe-trotter. Born in Washington, he moved to Pakistan as an infant and attended a top military school. Returning to the United States at 17, he lived in Philadelphia and then New York and slid into heroin dealing. After a 1997 bust, he became a Drug Enforcement Administration informant, spying on drug traffickers in Pakistan.

Once casual about his Muslim faith, Headley radicalized in the late 1990s. U.S. officials say he was still a DEA informant when he began training in the Lashkar camps in early 2002. Although the Pakistani instructors thought he was too old and too slow for combat, the charming American hit it off with Mir.

Mir decided to cultivate this man of two worlds as a clandestine operative, according to documents and officials.



Daood Gilani aka David Coleman Headley (Verna Sadock/AP Photo)

Unleashing the network

In December, 2001, Lashkar took part in a commando-style attack on the Indian Parliament that killed a dozen people and left India and Pakistan on the brink of war.

Washington designated Lashkar as a terrorist group. Pakistani authorities outlawed the group and briefly held Saeed, its spiritual leader, under house arrest. But in reality, investigators say, nothing much changed.

"Lashkar was the only major jihadi outfit to escape the Pakistani crackdown," wrote Stephen Tankel, author of the forthcoming book "Storming the World Stage: The Story of Lashkar-E-Taiba," in a recent academic report. "Lashkar served as a major provider of military training for jihadi actors in the region."

In early 2002, Mir led an overseas buying spree for military equipment. He sent his British quartermaster, Abu Khalid, on four trans-Atlantic trips. Abu Khalid reported to Mir via e-mail as he worked with three of the Virginia militants, including Khan. They helped the Briton buy an unmanned airborne vehicle and more paintballs than the U.S. Marine Corps needs for a year of drills.

The procurement ended when the FBI arrested 11 Virginia militants in mid-2003. A search of Khan's home turned up guns, a terrorist manual and photos of the White House and FBI headquarters.

Because the Virginia crew had played paintball war games as they radicalized, a somewhat skeptical news media dubbed them "The Paintball Jihadis." Lawyers and Muslim activists complained about over-zealous prosecution.

Nonetheless, the defendants were sentenced to long prison terms. At the trial, Mir's role in Lashkar surfaced publicly for the first time. But the group still wasn't of much interest to the public or law enforcement, anti-terrorism officials say.

The trial revealed evidence of Lashkar's dangerous alliance with al-Qaeda. Prosecutors cited a 2002 incident when U.S. and Pakistani forces captured a key al-Qaeda coordinator in a shootout at a Lashkar safe house in Faisalabad.

He had the phone number for Lashkar's chief of international operations — Mir's boss.

The Australian plot

As the FBI closed in on the Virginia contingent, Mir launched a plot on the other side of the world.

In calls and e-mails in 2002 and 2003, he prepared Brigitte, the Grouchy Frenchman, for a trip to Australia. Mir directed British operatives to send \$5,000 to Brigitte, asking his quartermaster in an e-mail: "How is our French Connection Project going?"

Brigitte arrived in Australia in May 2003 and joined forces with Faheem Lodhi, a Pakistani-born architect and militant who had worked for Mir in the camps. With Lodhi's help, Brigitte settled into a new life in Sydney, quickly marrying a former Australian army intelligence officer who had converted to Islam.

At Mir's direction, Brigitte collected maps and photos of targets taken by his new wife, though she resisted his demands that she provide him with intelligence. Lodhi created an alias and a fictitious business to obtain bomb chemicals and maps of the electrical grid. He compiled a 15-page manual for making homemade poisons, explosives and detonators. Investigators believe the duo planned to bomb a military base or a nuclear plant.

The plot was foiled by French agents, who were hunting Brigitte as part of a larger investigation. They learned he was in Sydney and alerted Australian intelligence. Police deported him to France in October and captured Lodhi after watching him throw satellite photos of military bases in a dumpster and call Mir from a phone booth. Mir sent Lodhi an e-mail asking for "fresh news about our friend," according to court documents.

"Our friend has returned to his country and his government has him," the Australian operative responded.

Lodhi was sentenced to 20 years for preparing a terrorist act. Investigators think the plot was related to Australia's troop presence in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The judge's verdict noted Mir's role and called him a "shadowy figure" who deployed operatives for "terrorist actions in Australia."

Brigitte's deportation put Mir in the sights of Bruguiere, France's best-known terrorist hunter. Questioned by Bruguiere in November 2003, Brigitte discussed Mir in a tone of respect and fear. His account made French investigators suspect that Pakistani spies had played a role in the Australian plot.

"In the heart of Lashkar there are camps that train individuals for the mission of eliminating those who talk," Brigitte testified. "And you understand that the Pakistani army and Pakistani intelligence were stakeholders in these operations."



Faheem Lodhi (Dean Lewins/AP Image)

Bruguere took advantage of French laws allowing him to pursue terrorist conspiracies across borders. He worked with investigators in Virginia, Australia and Britain. Mir's name, he said, popped up everywhere.

Preparing the masterpiece

In 2005, Mir joined a Lashkar unit dedicated to attacks in India and embarked on a secret mission. He crossed the border into India at its only land port of entry with Pakistan, blending with Pakistani cricket fans flocking to see their national team play in India, according to U.S. and Indian anti-terrorism officials.

Mir's movements for 15 days in India are unknown. But Indian investigators think he was part of an operation — spying, terrorist scouting or both — involving a dozen Pakistani “cricket fans” who went missing after crossing the border. Indian spy-hunters eventually caught one: a suspected ISI agent with a false identity whom they accused of espionage.

Later that year, Mir turned to Headley, his top American agent, who by now had completed five stints at Lashkar camps. Headley had also survived a close call in New York that summer, when his estranged third wife reported his activities with Lashkar to federal agents. His travels around the world continued, unimpeded.

Soon, Headley met with Mir and other Lashkar bosses who told him he had been chosen as lead scout for a big job. He went to Philadelphia in November on Mir's instructions and legally changed his name from Daood Gilani to David Coleman Headley to conceal his Pakistani origin.

Armed with his new identity, Headley returned to Pakistan. In July 2006 he received \$25,000 for a new assignment. The money came from a man he knew only as Major Iqbal, according to officials and court documents.

U.S. and Indian anti-terrorism officials suspect Major Iqbal was a serving ISI officer and a liaison to Lashkar. According to anti-terrorism officials and U.S. court documents, Major Iqbal and Mir became Headley's handlers. They instructed him to use the money to open a front company and begin reconnaissance in the city that was their next target: Mumbai.

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