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## The PATH Tunnel Plot

Report #5 in a NEFA Series, "Target: America"  
A NEFA analysis of the PATH tunnel plot  
June 2007

### **The Mastermind – Assem Hammoud**

On April 27, 2006, Lebanese authorities arrested Beirut resident Assem Hammoud (a.k.a. Amer al-Andalusi) and charged him with terrorism-related offenses.<sup>1</sup> According to the FBI and the Lebanese government, Hammoud confessed to plotting an attack on U.S. soil, pledging allegiance to Usama Bin Laden,<sup>2</sup> and acting "on a religious order from bin Laden." He reportedly told interrogators: "I am proud to carry out his orders."<sup>3</sup>

### **The Plotters – Operating on Three Continents**

Mark Mershon, head of the FBI's New York office, told reporters that seven other operatives were involved in the plot, two of whom (an unnamed Syrian and an unidentified individual) are in custody.<sup>4</sup> Press sources have stated that the group included a Saudi, a Yemeni, a Jordanian, a Palestinian and an Iranian Kurd.<sup>5</sup>

The men were allegedly operating on three continents. Major General Ashraf Rifi, commander of Lebanon's Internal Security Forces, reported that at one point the individuals were in Bosnia, Canada, Denmark and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>6</sup>

Providing further detail on the plotters, FBI Assistant Director John Miller noted, "It was a self-initiating foreign cell that had access to al-Qaeda's connections."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, an unnamed U.S. official told *The Washington Post* that one of the cell members "had a connection high up" in Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's Al-Qaida in Iraq organization. That

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<sup>1</sup> Translation of Lebanon Internal Security Force Press Release, *The Counterterrorism Blog*, July 7, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> FBI New York Press Conference, July 7, 2006 and Josh Meyer and Ellen Barry, "FBI Links 8 Abroad to N.Y. Terror Plot," *The Chicago Tribune*, July 8, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> "NYC Plot: 'Real Deal' or 'Bravado'?", *CBS News*, July 7, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> "FBI: Three Held in New York Tunnel Plot," *CNN*, July 7, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Mohamad Bazzi, "Bomb Plot Suspect Saw Gate Bridge as Possible Target," *Newsday*, July 9, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Spencer Hsu and Robin Wright, "Tunnel Plot Suspects Linked to Al-Qaeda," *The Washington Post*, July 11, 2006. Note: FBI New York chief Mark Mershon revealed that the investigation involved authorities in six countries and called the international cooperation "beyond textbook." See: "FBI: Three Held in New York Tunnel Plot," *CNN*, July 7, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Spencer Hsu and Robin Wright, "Tunnel Plot Suspects Linked to Al-Qaeda," *The Washington Post*, July 11, 2006.

official asserted, "What we know is one individual in the plot said that they had that connection, and could tap into it for money"<sup>8</sup>

The group communicated on the Internet, and Hammoud used the web to send his co-conspirators detailed maps of their target, the PATH tunnel.<sup>9</sup> FBI agents monitoring radical Islamic chat rooms eventually detected the plot and alerted Lebanese authorities.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Target – The PATH Tunnel**

On July 7, 2006, the FBI announced that it had "disrupted a terrorist network that was in the planning stages of an attack against the transportation system in the New York-New Jersey area."<sup>11</sup> Elaborating on this allegation, the Lebanese government revealed that Hammoud was plotting "a big terrorist act targeting the tunnels in New York City under the Hudson River."<sup>12</sup>

More specifically, media sources report that the plotters intended to attack Port Authority Trans-Hudson Corporation (PATH) trains traveling under the Hudson River with explosive-filled backpacks.<sup>13</sup> The PATH website notes that the "PATH presently carries 227,000 passengers each weekday."<sup>14</sup> The men also allegedly talked about the amount of explosives required to breach the tunnel lining.<sup>15</sup> Some news reports indicate the cell hoped to flood the financial district by destroying the wall that separates the Hudson River and the World Trade Center site.<sup>16</sup>

While unnamed officials have downplayed the plot in the press, with one labeling it "jihadist bravado,"<sup>17</sup> Mark Mershon, head of the FBI's New York Office, asserted that the plot was "what we believe was the real deal." He added, "This is a plot that would have involved martyrdom, [and] explosives..."<sup>18</sup> He continued, "They were about to go to a phase where they would attempt to surveil targets, establish a regimen of attack and acquire the resources necessary to effectuate the attacks."<sup>19</sup>

Assessing the plot, Homeland Security head Michael Chertoff declared, "we did not wait, and we do not wait until the fuse is lit. We swoop in as early as possible

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<sup>8</sup> Spencer Hsu and Robin Wright, "Tunnel Plot Suspects Linked to Al-Qaeda," *The Washington Post*, July 11, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Translation of Lebanon Internal Security Force Press Release, *The Counterterrorism Blog*, July 7, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Translation of Lebanon Internal Security Force Press Release, *The Counterterrorism Blog*, July 7, 2006 and Spencer Hsu and Robin Wright, "Tunnel Plot Suspects Linked to Al-Qaeda," *The Washington Post*, July 11, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> "Lebanese-US Government Cooperate and Disrupt Plan to NY-NJ Transportation System," FBI Press Release, July 7, 2006,

[http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/PATH/FBIPR\\_07072006.pdf](http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/PATH/FBIPR_07072006.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Translation of Lebanon Internal Security Force Press Release, *The Counterterrorism Blog*, July 7, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> "FBI: Three Held in New York Tunnel Plot," *CNN*, July 7, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/PATH/PATH.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> "FBI: Three Held in New York Tunnel Plot," *CNN*, July 7, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> "Officials: Plotters Targeted Flood Wall at WTC," *Associated Press*, July 13, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Josh Meyer, "Tunnel Plot May Have Been Wider," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 9, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> "NYC Plot: 'Real Deal' or 'Bravado'?", *CBS News*, July 7, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> "FBI: Three Held in New York Tunnel Plot," *CNN*, July 7, 2006.

because experience shows...that the distance between planning and actually operational activity is a very short distance."<sup>20</sup> Due to the government's proactive stance, Chertoff asserted that "there was never a concern that this would actually be executed. We were, as I say, all over this."<sup>21</sup>

### **Selecting a Date for the Attack**

In a press release, Lebanese authorities stated that Hammoud confessed the operation was to be launched "at the end of 2006."<sup>22</sup> And at the FBI press conference, Mark Mershon identified October or November as the planned date for the bombings.<sup>23</sup>

### **Training for Jihad**

According to the Lebanese government, "During 2003, he [Hammoud] met a Syrian in Lebanon, who gave him many weapons courses. He headed in the Syrian's company to Ain El-Helweh camp [in Lebanon] and undertook a training session of light weapons during the tenth month of 2005."<sup>24</sup>

Further, also according to Lebanese authorities, Hammoud admitted he intended to "travel to Pakistan in the near future to undertake a training course" that would "last for four months."<sup>25</sup>

### **Additional Information – Hammoud's Deceptive Lifestyle**

In the hopes of deflecting attention, Hammoud lived a highly Westernized lifestyle. Lebanese General Security spokesman Elie Baradei said, "He was requested not to show any religious inclinations during his time in Lebanon and to give the impression of being of a playboy. He has done that perfectly."<sup>26</sup>

For example, Hammoud's mother told the media that her son "drinks alcohol, had girlfriends and showed no similarities to Islamic militants."<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Hammoud, who was reportedly fluent in Arabic, English, French and German, was a professor of economics and management at Lebanese International University.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, such behavior is not unusual for terrorist operatives. Significantly, an Al-Qaida manual, seized in a raid in England, advises operatives that they should "have a general appearance that does not indicate Islamic orientation (beard, toothpick, book, (long) shirt, small Koran). The manual adds, "Be careful not to mention the brothers' common expressions or show their behaviors (special praying appearance, 'may Allah reward

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<sup>20</sup> Transcript of press conference featuring DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff, July 7, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Transcript of press conference featuring DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff, July 7, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Translation of Lebanon Internal Security Force Press Release, *The Counterterrorism Blog*, July 7, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> "FBI: Three Held in New York Tunnel Plot," *CNN*, July 7, 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Translation of Lebanon Internal Security Force Press Release, *The Counterterrorism Blog*, July 7, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Translation of Lebanon Internal Security Force Press Release, *The Counterterrorism Blog*, July 7, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> "FBI: Three Held in New York Tunnel Plot," *CNN*, July 7, 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Mohamad Bazzi, "Bomb Plot Suspect Saw Gate Bridge as Possible Target," *Newsday*, July 9, 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Mohamad Bazzi, "Bomb Plot Suspect Saw Gate Bridge as Possible Target," *Newsday*, July 9, 2006.

you', 'peace be on you' while arriving and departing, etc.)." Operatives are further urged to "avoid visiting famous Islamic places (mosques, libraries, Islamic fairs, etc)."<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, in a summary of 9/11 planner Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's interrogations, the U.S. government states, "Sheikh Mohammed said that he explicitly told Mohammad Atta and the other pilots and muscle operatives not to speak with any Muslims once in the United States."<sup>30</sup>

And, court filings in a Hezbollah case in Michigan detail a practice known as "taqiya," which prosecutors define as a "Shia Muslim doctrine of concealment, pretense, and fraud." The filing notes that the operative "would, when he it thought necessary, avoid going to mosques, not attend Shiite religious rituals, shave his beard, and otherwise keep his true beliefs secret while inside what he considered to be hostile territory..."<sup>31</sup> While Al-Qaida is a Sunni group, understanding "taqiya" still helps shed light on Hammoud's behavior.

### **Additional Information – Discussing Setting Fires in CA; Bombing NYC Subways**

According to open sources, the plotters chatted on the Internet about bombing subways in Manhattan,<sup>32</sup> as well as targeting the Golden Gate Bridge and the Brooklyn Bridge.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, the men allegedly discussed starting a wildfire in California.<sup>34</sup> Maps and information on the bridges and forests were reportedly seized at Hammoud's Beirut home.<sup>35</sup>

2003 press reports, citing an FBI warning, had referenced a similar plot, stating that "an al-Qaeda terrorist now in detention had talked of masterminding a plot to set a series of devastating forest fires around the western United States." The reports added, "the detainee...said the plot involved three or four people setting wildfires using timed devices in Colorado, Montana, Utah and Wyoming that would detonate in forests and grasslands after the operatives had left the country."<sup>36</sup> Further, a document from high ranking Al-Qaida leader Abu Zubaydah's Guantanamo Bay hearing reveals that, in a 2002 diary entry, Abu Zubaydah wrote about "starting timed fires."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Al-Qaida Training Manual,

<http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/PATH/AQManual.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. v. Moussaoui, (E.D. VA.), No. 01-455-A, "Substitution For The Testimony of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed," Defendant's Exhibit 941, Filed March 28, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. v. Kourani, (E.D. MI.), No. 03-81030, Indictment, Filed November 19, 2003.

<sup>32</sup> Josh Meyer, "Tunnel Plot May Have Been Wider," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 9, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Mohamad Bazzi, "Bomb Plot Suspect Saw Gate Bridge as Possible Target," *Newsday*, July 9, 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Josh Meyer, "Tunnel Plot May Have Been Wider," *The Los Angeles Times*, July 9, 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Mohamad Bazzi, "Bomb Plot Suspect Saw Gate Bridge as Possible Target," *Newsday*, July 9, 2006.

<sup>36</sup> "FBI: al-Qaeda Detainee Spoke of Fire Plot," *Associated Press*, July 11, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> "Verbatim Transcript of Combatant Status Review Tribunal Hearing for ISN 10016," U.S. Department of Defense,

[http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/PATH/DOD\\_AZ.pdf](http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/PATH/DOD_AZ.pdf).

### **Additional Information – Hammoud’s Radicalization**

While Lebanese authorities report that Hammoud first became involved with extremist groups in 1994, he reportedly turned to radical websites in 2003 because of anger over the U.S. invasion of Iraq.<sup>38</sup>

### **Additional Information – Hammoud’s Ties to Canada**

According to school officials, Hammoud attended Concordia University in Montreal from 1995-2002, graduating with a bachelor of commerce in finance.<sup>39</sup>

### **Additional Information – Hammoud’s U.S. Visit**

News reports assert that Hammoud spent time in Northern California in 2000, although authorities believe that he was visiting relatives rather than preparing for an attack.<sup>40</sup> Officials also acknowledge Hammoud may have made additional trips to the U.S. that were not documented.<sup>41</sup>

Prior to his arrest, he reportedly applied for a new Canadian visa.<sup>42</sup>

### **Additional Information – Hammoud’s Ties to Lebanese Extremists**

Lebanese security officials, cited in media reports, link Hammoud to Hassan Nabaat, a Lebanese, and Hany Shanti, a dual Lebanese/Jordanian citizen. The men were part of a group arrested in Lebanon in December 2005 for allegedly plotting attacks in the country.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, the Lebanese government’s press release alleges that in 2005, Hammoud “met a foreigner, who asked him to guarantee apartments to host jihadists, recruit persons, and collect money and weapons for the organization.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Mohamad Bazzi, “The Man Behind the Terror Plan,” *Newsday*, July 8, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Katherine Wilton, “Montreal Grad Fingering in N.Y. Plot,” *National Post*, July 10, 2006.

<sup>40</sup> James Gordon Meek, Annia Ciezadlo, and Adam Nichols, “Jet-Set Jihadist,” *The New York Daily News*, July 9, 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Spencer Hsu and Robin Wright, “Tunnel Plot Suspects Linked to Al-Qaeda,” *The Washington Post*, July 11, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> James Gordon Meek, Annia Ciezadlo, and Adam Nichols, “Jet-Set Jihadist,” *The New York Daily News*, July 9, 2006.

<sup>43</sup> Mohamad Bazzi, “Bomb Plot Suspect Saw Gate Bridge as Possible Target,” *Newsday*, July 9, 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Translation of Lebanon Internal Security Force Press Release, *The Counterterrorism Blog*, July 7, 2006.