



**Report #2 in a New Series
"Connecting the Dots":
"Operation Gibraltar"
April 2010**

Report #2 in a New NEFA Series: "Connecting the Dots"
"Operation Gibraltar: A Foiled Al-Qaida Plot Against NATO Ships"
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Operation Gibraltar

In the first months of 2002, an international intelligence operation, "Operation Gibraltar", was initiated to uncover an Al-Qaida plot in Morocco to attack NATO warships in Gibraltar. Intelligence services from the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Spain, and Morocco worked around the clock to unravel the plot.¹

In early 2002, Moroccan intelligence officers flew to Guantanamo Bay in Cuba to interview 17 Moroccan prisoners. While interviews were being conducted in Guantanamo, in Morocco, authorities simultaneously questioned recently arrested Al-Qaida suspects.² During interrogations at Guantanamo, in early March 2002, Zuhair al-Hayli, also known as al-Dub (the Bear), provided information about an attack being organized in Morocco.³ Al-Hayli was the recruiter and facilitator Al-Qaida had charged with preparing suicide bombings outside Morocco. Morocco served as a sanctuary for the network run by al-Hayli, as Morocco provided a haven where they felt secure and where they could readily find shelter.⁴

The information collected through the interviews was shared with Moroccan authorities, who began to focus on two heavily populated districts in the main cities of Rabat and Casablanca. Authorities narrowed their investigation to three Saudis and the Moroccans who were living in Casablanca.⁵ Suspects were identified and put under surveillance in three cities: Tangier, Fès, and Casablanca. In April, the police obtained a photograph and the name of a Saudi national living in Casablanca. The man, married to a Moroccan woman, was trained in Afghanistan, but integrated seamlessly. At the beginning of May, two other terrorists, also of Saudi origin, were also identified. The

¹ Mukul Devichand, "International Cloak and Dagger," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No 591, 20-26 June 2006.

² Peter Finn, "Saudis Seized by Morocco Outline Post-Afghanistan Strategy," *Washington Post*, June 17, 2002 and Douglas Frantz, "U.S. Enlists Morocco's Help to Counter Terrorist Plots," *New York Times*, June 24, 2002.

³ CNN, June 16, 2002.

⁴ Jean-Marie Pontaut, "Révélations sur les réseaux Ben Laden; l'Operation Gibraltar d'Al-Qaeda," *L'Express*, June 13, 2002, <http://www.leexpress.fr/info/monde/dossier/benladen/dossier.asp?ida=339130>

⁵ CNN, June 16, 2002.

three had well established covers: one imported fabrics and spare parts, while another founded a small employment agency, and the third purchased land.⁶

Moroccan officials tailed the group. In April, Moroccan authorities received information that Zuhair Hilal Mohamed Al-Tabayiti (or Tbaiti) had entered the Spanish enclave of Melilla in northern Morocco.⁷ Al-Tabayiti was placed under surveillance for a month, during which time he traveled extensively around Morocco and repeatedly entered Melilla and another Spanish enclave, Ceuta, on the Moroccan coast opposite Gibraltar. Tabayiti claimed that he was a businessman interested in opening an import-export business and also inquired about the purchase of Zodiac speedboats.⁸ In total, the group traveled to Gibraltar twice. Utilizing a technique previously used by Al-Qaida, a second “logistics” team would take over from the quartermasters to bring in weapons and explosives. The attack itself was to be carried out by a group of suicide bombers specially trained for this mission.⁹

In late April, Tabayiti received a call from outside the country to return to Saudi Arabia. On May 12, 2002, when he was ready to board a plane at Casablanca airport, Moroccan intelligence officials arrested him, along with another Saudi, Hilal Jaber al-Assiri, and two Moroccan women; between the four of them, they had \$10,000 cash in their possession. The men gave up the name of the third Saudi man, Abdallah M’Sefer Ali al-Ghamdi, who was arrested the next day in Agadir in the south of Morocco.¹⁰



Al-Ghamdi, al-Tabayiti and Assiri; Photo – AFP

⁶ Jean-Marie Pontaut, Révélations sur les réseaux Ben Laden; L'Opération Gibraltar d'Al-Qaeda, L'Express, June 13, 2002,

<http://www.lexpress.fr/info/monde/dossier/benladen/dossier.asp?ida=339130>

⁷ Peter Finn, “Saudis Seized by Morocco Outline Post-Afghanistan Strategy,” *Washington Post*, June 17, 2002.

⁸ Peter Finn, “Saudis Seized by Morocco Outline Post-Afghanistan Strategy,” *Washington Post*, June 17, 2002.

⁹ Jean-Marie Pontaut, Révélations sur les réseaux Ben Laden; L'Opération Gibraltar d'Al-Qaeda, L'Express, June 13, 2002,

<http://www.lexpress.fr/info/monde/dossier/benladen/dossier.asp?ida=339130>

¹⁰ Peter Finn, “Saudis Seized by Morocco Outline Post-Afghanistan Strategy,” *Washington Post*, June 17, 2002; L'Hebdo, *Les zones d'ombre de l'affaire 'Gibraltar'*, November 18, 2003.

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Preparations in Afghanistan

The idea to attack ships crossing the Straits of Gibraltar developed after the 9/11 attacks. The originator of the operation was Abd al-Rahim Hussein Mohammed al-Nashiri, a.k.a Mullah Ahmed Bilal, who was also the brains behind the suicide attack on the USS Cole, in the Port of Aden, in Yemen, on October 12, 2000.¹¹ Abdallah Tabarak, also known as Abu Assem Al-Maghrebi, was responsible for arranging contact between Tabayiti and al-Nashiri, the “mastermind” of the plan to attack NATO warships in the Strait of Gibraltar.¹² Until his arrest in 2002, al-Nashiri was the head of Al-Qaida for Maritime Warfare and head of Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula.

Al-Tabayiti and al-Umayri met Al-Nashiri in Kandahar after the 9/11 attacks, in the presence of Saif-al-Adl. Orders were given at that time to all Arab members of Al-Qaida to leave Afghanistan via Pakistan. During that time, the idea of launching attacks on Western installations also took shape.¹³ According to his testimony in Guantanamo, Nashiri was tortured to confess that he was involved in the attacks on the USS Cole, the French merchant vessel Limburg, a plan to bomb American ships in the Gulf, and other planned attacks.¹⁴ He admits to having known some of the people involved in the USS Cole attack.¹⁵ Interestingly, Nashiri claims he did not take the pledge of allegiance to Usama bin Ladin, which means he is technically not a member of Al-Qaida; however, he still is a member of the Global Jihad Movement.¹⁶

Al-Tabayiti’s training in Afghanistan, in the Kandahar compound, and Kabul in particular, included assassination methods, the use of weapons, and techniques related to decoding messages and forging documents.¹⁷ Hilal Jabir Awad also underwent training in Afghanistan, at the Al-Farooq camp under the supervision of a Syrian called Asad and a Yemeni called Abu Mu’ad. The latter was killed during the U.S.-led attack on Afghanistan in late 2001.¹⁸

During the second half of 2002, after the U.S. invasion began, the cell left Afghanistan moving toward Lahore and then Karachi, where they met Abdallah al-Ghamdi, who was fighting alongside the Taliban. Their discussions concerned carrying out attacks against U.S. interests in Pakistan. Al-Usayri said that a man called Khalid Bin Attash, a.k.a. Khallad, was most interested in such attacks, and further a Pakistani trader

¹¹ Jean-Marie Pontaut, Révélations sur les réseaux Ben Laden; L’«Opération Gibraltar» d’Al-Qaeda, L’Express, June 13, 2002,

<http://www.lexpress.fr/info/monde/dossier/benladen/dossier.asp?id=339130>.

¹² Mohamed Lach’hab and Iqbal Ilhami, “The Story of the Al-Qa’ida Cell, From Afghanistan to Morocco: Bin Ladin Exhorted Them to Kill Infidels,” *al-Hayat*, July 3, 2002

¹³ Muhammad al-Ashhab, “Confessions of Detainees in Morocco Helped ‘Catch’ Al-Nashiri,” *al-Hayat*, November 25, 2002.

¹⁴ Verbatim Transcript of Combatant Status Review Tribunal Hearing for ISN10015; http://www.defenselink.mil/news/transcript_ISN10015.pdf, p. 10

¹⁵ Verbatim Transcript of Combatant Status Review Tribunal Hearing for ISN10015; http://www.defenselink.mil/news/transcript_ISN10015.pdf, p. 15

¹⁶ Verbatim Transcript of Combatant Status Review Tribunal Hearing for ISN10015; http://www.defenselink.mil/news/transcript_ISN10015.pdf, p. 27.

¹⁷ Mohamed Lach’hab and Iqbal Ilhami, “The Story of the Al-Qa’ida Cell, From Afghanistan to Morocco: Bin Ladin Exhorted Them to Kill Infidels,” *al-Hayat*, July 3, 2002.

¹⁸ idem

expressed his readiness to pay 1 million Saudi riyals (approximately 267,000 USD) for the assassination of then Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.¹⁹

Moroccan Wives

According to the Moroccan press, it was the former personal bodyguard of Usama bin Ladin, Abdallah Tabarak, who arranged Moroccan wives for the three Saudis. Tabarak acknowledged that he knew al-Tabayiti, a.k.a. Abu al-Barra, whose Moroccan wife died in Afghanistan.²⁰ He also told interrogators that he put al-Tabayiti in contact with Abu Huthaifa who arranged a meeting with Abd al-Wahab, an imam in a mosque in Fes, to arrange for a temporary marriage. Al-Tabayiti and his Moroccan wife Raja Ben Moujan settled next door to Abdallah Tabarak and his family in Kandahar.²¹ Raja Ben Moujan died in Kandahar after 9/11, and Zuhair Tabayiti asked to marry a second Moroccan woman.²²

The contacts between Al-Ghamdi and Zuhair Tabayiti began because of Tabayiti's desire to marry a Moroccan woman. Al-Ghamdi provided him with addresses and telephone numbers for his in-laws in Morocco. Tabayiti needed a passport, and Abu Yasir who, according to the investigations, is an Algerian national, was given this responsibility. Abu Yasir managed to produce a forged passport for Tabayiti.²³

The late Raja was not the only Moroccan woman who was party to such actions. The other accused, Hilal Awad Jaber al-Assiri, also married a Moroccan woman named Naima Haroun. He spent some time with her in Morocco before he managed to forge a passport bearing the name of his first wife, Maryam, in order to enable Naima to travel with him to Saudi Arabia.²⁴

Naima revealed to authorities that approximately two months after the September 11th attacks, orders were issued for them to leave Afghanistan through Quetta and Karachi as part of a larger group, among them family members of the Moroccan Abu Assem. However, her husband, Hilal al-Assiri, did not join her in Karachi until after she gave birth to a baby boy named Jabir. In early 2002 she returned to Morocco.²⁵

Financing and Communication

Abu Yasir al-Jazairi was entrusted with providing the cell in Morocco with funds and travel tickets.²⁶ Some Moroccan nationals were accustomed to receiving money transfers, as was the case with the Moroccan trader, Mohamed Nadiri. The other transfers allocated to the attacks against U.S. and U.K. ships crossing the Straits of

¹⁹ Mohamed Lach'hab and Iqbal Ilhami, "The Story of the Al-Qa'ida Cell, From Afghanistan to Morocco: Bin Ladin Exhorted Them to Kill Infidels," *al-Hayat*, July 3, 2002

²⁰ Other a.k.a.'s of Tabayiti are Abu al-Barra al-Hijzai, Abu Afia, and Al-Hajja.

²¹ Testimony by Abdallah Tabarek, August 7, 2004 at 10 O'Clock; Mohamed Lach'hab and Iqbal Ilhami, "The Story of the al-Qa'ida Cell, From Afghanistan to Morocco: Bin Ladin Exhorted Them to Kill Infidels," *al-Hayat*, July 3, 2002.

²² Mohamed Lach'hab and Iqbal Ilhami, "The Story of the Al-Qa'ida Cell, From Afghanistan to Morocco: Bin Ladin Exhorted Them to Kill Infidels", *al-Hayat*, July 3, 2002

²³ idem

²⁴ ibidem

²⁵ Mohamed Lach'hab and Iqbal Ilhami, "The Story of the Al-Qa'ida Cell, From Afghanistan to Morocco: Bin Ladin Exhorted Them to Kill Infidels", *al-Hayat*, July 3, 2002

²⁶ Abu Yasir al-Jazairi was arrested in the first months of 2003 in Pakistan.

Gibraltar did not arrive. The funds were to be used to purchase inflatable boats, manufacture explosives, and cover the logistical preparations.²⁷

Contact with al-Nashiri, the commander of Operation Gibraltar, were established through email as al-Nashiri was not in the theater. Zuhair al-Tabayiti had spent much of his time establishing contacts through the Internet and was planning to open a shop for electronic games in Rabat.²⁸

Al-Ghamdi admitted to having received funds through the Pakistani terrorist organization Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT); however, he alleged these funds were meant to help him get married. The money was transferred from Lahore to an Arab Bank account bearing the name of Kalthoum Haroun, the sister of Naima. He also admitted receiving other amounts from members of his family, such as from his cousin Khalid Hasan al-Ghamdi.²⁹

Planning the Attack

The coordination meeting and the planning for the attacks against U.S. interests took place in a Moroccan house in the Mellah quarter, the former Jewish quarter in the old part of Rabat. In al-Farooq camp in Afghanistan, al-Ghamdi met Zuhair al-Hayli.³⁰

At the same place in Rabat, a discussion took place behind closed doors between the three accused. Zuhair talked about attacking U.S. and Israeli installations in Morocco, but Hilal al-Assiri suggested the operation should take place in Rabat, after having assessed the security situation and defining the targets. Zuhair, however, put forward the idea of striking buses carrying Israeli tourists or any other U.S. target. In the final analysis, it would be the decision of Mullah Ahmad Bilal, who was to be informed about the defined targets, to decide upon the choice of targets.³¹ The divergence of views became more apparent between the accused about the possibility of using poisonous products or explosives, following the training they received in Al-Qaida military camps in Afghanistan.³²

Zuhair al-Tabayiti asked al-Ghamdi to shave his beard to avoid attracting undue attention. He also spoke about a man close to al-Nashiri who might be visiting Morocco to examine details of the attacks and provide the members of the cell with the financial backing to carry out their mission.³³

In February 2003, the three Saudis – al-Ghamdi, al-Tabayiti and al-Assiri – were sentenced to 10 years in jail by a Moroccan court. The two Moroccan wives, including Naima Haroun, were sentenced to six months in prison for their part in the plot. Three other Moroccans received sentences ranging from four months to one year.³⁴

²⁷ idem

²⁸ Mohamed Lach'hab and Iqbal Ilhami, "The Story of the Al-Qa'ida Cell, From Afghanistan to Morocco: Bin Ladin Exhorted Them to Kill Infidels," *al-Hayat*, July 3, 2002.

²⁹ Mohamed Lach'hab and Iqbal Ilhami, "The Story of the Al-Qa'ida Cell, From Afghanistan to Morocco: Bin Ladin Exhorted Them to Kill Infidels," *al-Hayat*, July 3, 2002.

³⁰ idem

³¹ ibidem

³² Mohamed Lach'hab and Iqbal Ilhami, "The Story of the Al-Qa'ida Cell, From Afghanistan to Morocco: Bin Ladin Exhorted Them to Kill Infidels," *al-Hayat*, July 3, 2002.

³³ idem

³⁴ "Saudis Jailed for 'al-Qaeda' Plot," *BBC*, February 21, 2003

Conclusion

The plan for attacking NATO ships in the Strait of Gibraltar was devised after 9/11. Within months after the cell was dispatched from Afghanistan, serious preparations for the attacks started, and the initial reconnaissance was carried out quickly and efficiently.

The constant monitoring of returning Afghan Arabs to Morocco enabled Moroccan authorities to uncover the conspiracy, primarily with the assistance of U.S. authorities.

Morocco is one of the few countries that took the threat of the returning Afghan Arabs seriously. Since the early 1990s, Moroccan authorities have aimed to closely monitor them, especially since the Moroccan nationals in Afghanistan were known for their closeness to Usama bin Ladin. This situation is reflected by a Moroccan, employed by bin Ladin as a cook, who was quoted as saying how fond bin Ladin was of Moroccan food; this sentiment was also repeated by Abdallah Tabarak, the head of Bin Ladin's personal guards, thereby underscoring the affinity that existed.