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Al-Qaeda Moneyman Caught

By Elaine Shannon

A Pakistani police roundup of al-Qaeda figures in Karachi Tuesday has netted a Bin Laden bagman who funneled nearly \$120,000 to ringleader Mohammed Atta and other 9/11 hijackers to finance their flight lessons and living expenses in the US, according to FBI and U.S. intelligence officials.

Ali Abd al-Aziz (also known as Ammar al-Baluchi), a nephew of captured al-Qaeda operations boss Khalid Shaikh Mohammed and first cousin of 1993 World Trade Center bombing mastermind Ramzi Yousef, was arrested with a higher-ranking al-Qaeda lieutenant, Walid Ba 'Attash, aka "Khallad" or Tawfiq Bin Attash an Osama bin Laden intimate who is believed to have organized the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen.

"This is huge," exults a top U.S. official. Both men are believed to have crucial information about the 9/11 attacks and other spectacular al-Qaeda schemes. More important, authorities believe the men were captured just as they were setting in motion new attacks on the U.S. and its allies. Perhaps most important, they may know where Osama bin Laden is living.

While the capture of the more notorious Attash has dominated the headlines, Aziz, about 25, is also a prize catch. He is believed to have provided the 9/11 hijackers with about a quarter of their financial support. If he cooperates he can expose details of secret financial channels used by al-Qaeda in other operations, including those still in the planning stages.

The FBI and CIA have quietly sought Aziz ever since investigators determined that he was behind a number of wire transfers to the 9/11 hijacking team. An FBI/CIA financial investigation has determined that the first transfer, dated April 18, 2000, was sent from one "Ali," believed to be Aziz, to Nawaf Al Hazmi, then in flight school in San Diego.

On June 29, 2000, using the alias Isam Mansur, Aziz wired \$5000 via Western Union from the United Arab Emirates to hijacker Marwan al-Shehhi in New York City. From July 18 to September 18, 2000, Aziz, using the Mansur alias or calling himself "Mr. Ali" or "Hani" of "Fawaz Trading" (SIC), wired another \$109,500 from the UAE Exchange Centre in Dubai to an account at Sun Trust Bank held jointly by Al Shehhi and 9/11 hijack team leader Mohammed Atta, while both men were attending Huffman Aviation school in Venice, Florida. Atta, who conceived the hijacking-attack scheme while living in Hamburg, Germany, flew American Flight 11 into the north tower of the World Trade Center. Al-Shehhi, a member of Atta's Hamburg al-Qaeda cell, crashed United Flight 17 into the World Trade Center's south tower. Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Midhar spearheaded the hijacking of

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American Flight 77, which crashed into the Pentagon.


According to U.S. intelligence reports, Aziz traveled with his uncle, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, al-Qaeda's chief operating officer, until Mohammed was arrested in Rawalpindi on March 1 and placed in CIA custody.

Mohammed's entourage also included Aziz's cousins Abd al-Karim Yousef and Abd al-Mun'im Yousef, the older brothers of Ramzi Yousef, now serving a life term in a US prison for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. One of the Yousefs (U.S. officials won't say which) was captured recently. The other Yousef and Aziz were attempting to carry on the terror plots Mohammed was overseeing at the time of his arrest.

After his uncle's arrest, Aziz hooked up with Attash, who got to know bin Laden well while serving as his bodyguard in the 90s. That relationship and the capture or death of other al-Qaeda figures has caused Attash to rise rapidly in the al-Qaeda ranks to become one of the organization's most senior executives. U.S. officials say Attash presided over a key al-Qaeda convocation in Kuala Lumpur in January 2000, along with hijackers al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Midhar. At the time, the CIA had vague knowledge that the session involved al-Qaeda figures and asked the Malaysian police to videotape them arriving. But no audiotape was made. Shortly after the Cole bombing in October 2000, and the identification of Attash as the operational commander, the CIA realized that the Malaysia meeting was more significant than had been previously thought and began looking for Attash and others who had been there. The agency assumed the meeting had been about the Cole plot. In retrospect, some officials speculate the presence of two 9/11 hijackers means the Atta plan was also discussed.

Either way, FBI and CIA officials have thousands of questions to put to Attash, who is in Pakistani custody at the moment but is likely to be handed over to U.S. or joint custody soon. The most vital questions concern schemes currently on the drawing board. He was caught with a massive pile of explosives and weapons, probably for use against Western interests in Pakistan, but, says a U.S. official, "We think he's involved in operations around the world."

And, of course, Attash and Aziz will be asked about bin Laden's whereabouts. "Clearly, there are certain neighborhoods in Pakistan where members of al-Qaeda feel comfortable," says one U.S. counter-terror official. Among those who have fled the caves of Afghanistan for the relative luxury of Pakistan's teeming cities, the official thinking goes, could be bin Laden himself.

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