

## Lessons Learned from the September 2007 German Terrorist Plot

By Petter Nesser

IDENTIFYING CLEAR TRENDS in jihadism in Europe has proved difficult.<sup>1</sup> A jihadist terrorist plot in Germany in the fall of 2007, in which German converts to Islam played key roles, testifies to the increasing complexity and amorphous nature of the jihadist threat. The case illustrates that, more often than not, the distinction between “homegrown” and “international” jihadism in the European context is vague in terms of organizational affiliation and motivational landscape. Another lesson learned is that despite alternative sources of recruitment, radicalization and training for jihadist networks on the internet, Europe’s mujahidin still value and seek out real life training and personal interaction with organized groups and experienced fighters abroad.<sup>2</sup> From a counter-terrorism perspective, the case shows that Western security services have increased and improved international cooperation and their capacities to deal with the changing realities of transnational jihadism.

### A Conspiracy to Kill Americans

On September 4, 2007, German police arrested three terrorist suspects in Oberschlehdorn, Westphalia for allegedly planning and preparing three powerful car bomb attacks against U.S. interests and citizens in Germany. The core of the cell consisted of two German converts to Islam and one Turkish immigrant. They were in contact with, and received training, support and instructions from, a Pakistan-based Uzbek jihadist group called the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU).

The suspects had gathered large quantities of chemicals and military detonators. They discussed several targets, including Frankfurt International Airport and the U.S. Ramstein military airbase, as well as

a restaurant/discothèque frequented by Americans. At the time of the arrests, they were in the process of manufacturing explosives (based on internet recipes) in a cabin in Sauerland, Westphalia. The chemical hydrogen peroxide was to be the main component of the explosive. A similar chemical was used by the London bombers and by a number of al-Qa`ida-affiliated terrorists worldwide. The suspects had gathered what amounted to more than 700 kilograms of the substance, loaded into 12 barrels. The chemical had a concentration of 35%, and theoretically it could have created an explosive force equivalent to 500 kilograms of TNT. The detonators, believed to have originated from Syrian stocks, were smuggled into Germany from Turkey by a German-Tunisian teenager, sewn into a pair of sneakers.<sup>3</sup>

The anti-terrorism operation, dubbed “Alberich,” was launched in October 2006 when the U.S. National Security Agency and the CIA informed German counterparts about internet communications between IJU in Pakistan and the suspects in Germany. Altogether, 45 individuals were put under surveillance during the operation.<sup>4</sup> The terrorist suspects knew that they were being monitored, and implemented several counter-surveillance strategies, such as coding their communications. Nevertheless, while protecting their communications, they also took actions that seemed irrational, or at least hazardous, given that they knew they were being watched. For example, the leader of the group, Fritz Gelowicz, gave an interview to the German media complaining about being persecuted by the authorities for no reason.<sup>5</sup> In another incident, one suspect shadowed by German agents walked up to the agents’ vehicle and stabbed one of the front tires with his pocketknife.<sup>6</sup> On New Year’s Eve 2006, Gelowicz and his accomplices drove a car back and forth

near a U.S. military barracks in the town of Hanau; confronted by evidence, they claimed that they wanted to see “how the Americans celebrate New Year’s Eve.”<sup>7</sup>

### The Terrorist Profile

The core of the alleged terrorist cell consisted of three individuals: two Germans and one Turkish immigrant. They have been named in the international press as Fritz Gelowicz (28-years-old), Daniel Schneider (21-years-old) and Adem Yilmaz (28-years-old). Gelowicz studied engineering; Yilmaz survived on odd jobs; and Schneider was unemployed after having served in the military.

The jihadist carrying the unlikely name “Fritz,” characterized as the leader of the terrorist cell, was born in Munich and grew up in the southern German city of Ulm. By German standards, he hails from an ordinary middle class family. His father is an engineer, running a firm developing solar energy technology, and his mother is a medical doctor. His parents divorced when Fritz was a teenager. Former schoolmates say the divorce was a hard blow for the teenager, and some suggest that he turned to religion as a way of dealing with disappointment. His brother also converted to Islam, but, according to German authorities, he has never been involved with extremism.<sup>8</sup>

Gelowicz enrolled to study engineering at Ulm University, where he became a member of an extremist Islamic study circle. During regular meetings at “Cafe Istanbul,” members of the group legitimized the killing of Christians, Jews and infidels. Gelowicz also became part of the “extremist scene” at the Multikultur Haus in Neu-Ulm. He befriended Yehia Yousif, a medical doctor, who acted as a charismatic imam, leader and fiery Islamist activist within this community. Under the influence of Yousif, Multikultur Haus became a magnet for Islamists from all over Germany. After German authorities launched an investigation into the activities of the preacher, Yousif fled the country.<sup>9</sup>

1 Lorenzo Vidino, “Current Trends in Jihadi Networks in Europe,” *Terrorism Monitor* 5:20 (2007).

2 For an analysis of the training practices of Europe’s mujahidin, see Petter Nesser, “How Did Europe’s Gobar Jihadis Obtain Training for Their Militant Causes?” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20:2 (2008).

3 Marcel Rosenbach and Holger Stark, “Aladin’s Stories,” *Spiegel Online*, October 8, 2007.

4 Simone Kaiser, Marcel Rosenbach and Holger Stark, “Operation Alberich, How the CIA Helped Germany Foil Terror Plot,” *Spiegel Online*, September 10, 2007.

5 Martin Knobbe, “Terrorverdächtiger Fritz Gelowicz; Interview Mit Einem Gefährder,” *Stern*, September 13, 2007.

6 Holger Stark, “Suspect in German Bomb Plot Tells His Story,” *Spiegel Online*, November 15, 2007.

7 Kaiser, Rosenbach and Stark, “Operation Alberich, How the CIA Helped Germany Foil Terror Plot.”

8 Ibid.

9 Nicholas Kulish and Souad Mekhennet, “In Plot Sus-

Gelowicz lost interest in his studies and became increasingly absorbed into extreme and militant Islamism. During the winter of 2003-2004, he took some exams and achieved varying results, after which he took a leave of absence from the university, which would last for 18 months. During this period, he enrolled in Arabic language courses in Egypt and Syria and undertook religious studies in Saudi Arabia. He also undertook the hajj to Mecca during this time, together with the two other main suspects of the terrorist conspiracy. According to U.S. intelligence, in March 2006 Gelowicz and his two closest accomplices spent time in a training camp belonging to the IJU in Pakistan's tribal areas.<sup>10</sup>

#### Motivations and Connections to the IJU

Gelowicz and his associates were driven mainly by fierce anti-Americanism nurtured by contacts and interaction with extremists inside Germany, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Their radicalization appears to have accelerated after the 2003 invasion of Iraq.<sup>11</sup> Several incidents illustrate their strong hatred toward Americans. German agents, for example, observed one of the suspects and his friends trying to provoke fistfights outside a nightclub frequented by U.S. soldiers stationed in Darmstadt. When they failed to provoke any response, they slit the tires of American-made cars in the area. In a bugged conversation in a car, the suspects discussed potential terrorist attacks that only included U.S. targets. They talked about attacking airports and U.S. military barracks, and a disco with "American whores."

Gelowicz and his cell received support from the IJU. The IJU was established in 2002 as a militant offshoot from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), allegedly with support from al-Qa`ida.<sup>12</sup>

pect, Germany Sees Familiar Face," *New York Times*, September 7, 2007.

10 Several militant groups linked to al-Qa`ida and the Taliban run training activities in the area. Members of high-profile British-Pakistani terrorist cells operating in Europe are believed to have obtained training in Waziristan and the North-West Frontier Province; see, for example, Kulish and Mekhennet, "In Plot Suspect, Germany Sees Familiar Face."

11 Some sources suggest that the terrorists also wanted to strike Uzbek representations in Germany; see, for example, Cerwyn Moore, "Uzbek Terror Networks: Germany, Jamoat and the IJU," *Terrorism Monitor* 5:21 (2007).

12 The group's leader said that "many brothers" con-

The original aim of the group was to fight against "infidels" in Uzbekistan, implying the regime of Islam Karimov. Soon, and probably as a consequence of its association with global jihadist networks, the group also started to focus on international targets inside Uzbekistan. In 2004, members of the IJU executed terrorist attacks against

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U.S. and Israeli representations in Tashkent. In recent years, the IJU has recruited fighters outside Uzbekistan (predominately Europeans and North Africans) offering training in Mir Ali, Waziristan.<sup>13</sup> The group's leader, Abu Yahya Muhammad Fatih, has claimed that the IJU is multinational, consisting of "believers from all over the world."<sup>14</sup> In an April 2007 statement, the IJU leadership announced that the group would step up attacks internationally.<sup>15</sup>

Contacts among the German cell and the IJU appear to have been frequent, direct and enduring. The organization trained the activists, supplied them with bomb-making manuals and gave instructions on the timing of the attacks.<sup>16</sup> The IJU claimed responsibility for the attempted

tributed with "financial, moral, scientific and operational" support, but without specifying whether or not the "brothers" included al-Qa`ida members; see "A Chat with the Commander of Islamic Jihad Union Ebu Yahya Muhammed Fatih," *Shadet Vakti*, May 31, 2007.

13 Dirk Laabs and Sebastian Rotella, "Terrorists in Training Head to Pakistan," *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 2007.

14 "A Chat with the Commander of Islamic Jihad Union Ebu Yahya Muhammed Fatih."

15 Moore, "Uzbek Terror Networks: Germany, Jamoat and the IJU."

16 Members of the organization communicated with the cell in Germany via phone and internet, and they contributed with bomb manuals that showed how hydrogen peroxide of low concentration (35% in this case) could be "enriched" using flour. The suspects had purchased large quantities of flour and stored it in the cabin in Sauerland. For more information, see Kaiser, Rosenbach and Stark, "Operation Alberich, How the CIA Helped Germany Foil Terror Plot."

operation in Germany in a communiqué posted on a Turkish language web forum.<sup>17</sup>

#### The IJU Cell: Between Homegrown and International Jihadism

It is difficult to situate the German cell within past and current patterns of jihadism in Europe. On the one hand, cell members could be considered "homegrown" because they were German citizens who became radicalized within Germany's jihadist communities. On the other hand, the activists connected with an Uzbek organization in Pakistan that trained them and exerted a significant level of control over their activities. In terms of motivation, focus on American targets and other signs of fierce anti-Americanism suggest that the activists emphasized the international or global dimension of jihadism (such as the U.S. military presence in the Muslim world, whether it was U.S. support for Karimov's regime in Uzbekistan, or military operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan).

There has never been a clear distinction, however, between international and "homegrown" jihadism in Europe. When the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) terrorized France in the mid-1990s, they recruited from disaffected Maghreb immigrants in French suburbs. The GIA mobilized around French interference in Algerian affairs, but also exploited growing frustrations among immigrants who found themselves stuck at the bottom of French society. When al-Qa`ida started to utilize Europe as an arena for attacks on U.S. interests around the turn of the millennium, the organization's recruiters also targeted frustrated immigrant youths, whom they cultured and trained in paramilitary camps in Kandahar, Khost and Jalalabad.

In general, Europe's "homegrown" terrorist cells have differed from cells controlled by the GIA and al-Qa`ida. The cells have been more "European" in terms of their sociology and motivations (cell members were second generation immigrants and converts, and, relatively speaking, were more concerned with local European policies

17 Yassin Musharbash and Matthias Gebauer, "Islamic Jihad Union Threatens Attacks Outside Germany," *Spiegel Online*, September 12, 2007.

affecting Muslims). Yet, while there are examples that jihadist terrorists justified operations in Europe with reference to European immigration policies (The Hofstad Group in the Netherlands) and the mocking of the Prophet Muhammad (the Danish caricatures), the global dimension, and especially European military contributions in Afghanistan and Iraq, always appeared to be the most important motivational driver.

An important distinguishing feature of “homegrown” cells is that they involved “bottom-up” patterns of recruitment, in the sense that the activists themselves—inspired and radicalized by militant preachers and audio-visual propaganda—took the initiative to link up with organized militant networks for additional guidance and training.

### Conclusion

The German case seems to be consistent with “bottom-up” processes of recruitment to a certain extent, but at the same time it involved a strong element of command and control by an organized global jihadist group. This aspect of the case might indicate that jihadist organizations based in the Muslim world have regained capabilities to run operations inside Europe “hands on.”

Another lesson learned from the Gelowicz affair is that despite possibilities for recruitment, radicalization and training via the increasingly sophisticated jihadist “internet infrastructure,” personal, face-to-face interaction between recruits and experienced activists still plays an important role in radicalization processes.<sup>18</sup> Even though the activists had the opportunity to download a “terrorist start kit” from the internet, they still took the risk of mingling with Germany’s jihadist crowd and international networks in the period leading up to the alleged

time of the attacks. They conducted extensive travel, attending language courses and religious training, and they consulted and trained with experienced mujahidin.

From a counter-terrorism perspective, the German case shows that despite the complexity of the threat, the security services have become better equipped to monitor and intercept jihadists through increased surveillance of travel and internet communications, in addition to monitoring Europe’s extremist communities more closely. As a result, the terrorists acquire more limited levels of training and are unable to obtain high levels of professionalism. The fact that jihadists travel despite the security risks is in itself an indicator that the internet alone does not presently provide sufficient levels of training. The interception of the IJU cell also shows that the security services have improved international cooperation and the capacity to deal with transnational networks. Accordingly, “homegrown” terrorism constitutes a lesser threat today than it did just a few years ago because the element of surprise represented by the mujahidin that attacked Madrid and London, and the killing of Dutch artist Theo Van Gogh, no longer exists. The irony of it all is that it looks as if the weakness of “homegrown cells” is that they are not “homegrown” enough, but still dependent on international contacts and support.<sup>19</sup>

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18 When the internet started to be used widely, Islamist activists established a substantial “infrastructure” on the web through which they can communicate, spread propaganda, ideological material, strategic texts, tactical advice, among other activities. Several jihadist terrorist cells in Europe have utilized the internet when preparing for terrorism, the most prominent example being the Madrid cell. For an examination of the structure of online jihadism, consult Brynjar Lia, “Al-Qaeda Online: Understanding Jihadist Internet Infrastructure,” *Jane's Intelligence Review* 18:1 (2006).

19 For a more thorough examination of the dilemma, see Nesser, “How Did Europe’s Global Jihadis Obtain Training for Their Militant Causes?”