

ALL IN THE FAMILY

A missing mom, an estranged husband—and al Qaeda?

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INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

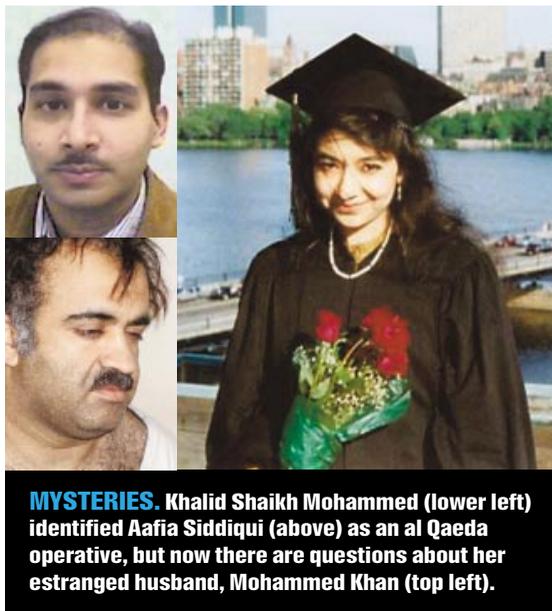
Terrorist, victim, or something in between? Late last week, no one—including the Federal Bureau of Investigation—seemed quite sure what to make of a missing Pakistani woman named Aafia Siddiqui. That was quite a contrast with the picture that emerged just a few weeks ago. On March 18, the FBI put out alerts seeking information on Siddiqui and her estranged husband, Mohammed Khan, who's also missing. The FBI issued its alerts after Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the captured planner of the 9/11 attacks, allegedly fingered Siddiqui as someone who provided logistical support to al Qaeda.

But Siddiqui's family is painting a very different portrait. They say she is an innocent victim of Khan's. FBI officials assert that their primary focus is still Siddiqui, but they now admit that both Siddiqui and Khan popped up on their radar screens about a year ago. The Siddiqui investigation reveals how difficult it is for the FBI to winnow the truth from many different pieces of intelligence, and how wrenching that process can be for families of those targeted. And yet, without aggressive investigation, the FBI fears that it might miss that one tip or lead that could prevent another attack.

Disputes. Siddiqui, 31, a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, hardly seems to match the terrorist profile. The former resident of a Boston high-rise apartment, she comes from an educated Karachi family, was a dedicated social worker, and is the mother of three young children, including an infant. She filed for divorce from Khan, 33, in Karachi last year, her brother and sister told the FBI, because she was being abused. The brother and sister informed the FBI that Khan, a Boston anesthesiologist, beat Siddiqui and the children. Siddiqui's sister and brother further alleged that Khan always used Siddiqui's

E-mail address in order to conceal his suspicious behavior. His father and brother, reached in Karachi, deny that Khan mistreated the children and say he has done nothing wrong.

In March, the FBI issued an alert for Khan, but officials have maintained there is greater interest in Siddiqui. Now, though, things aren't quite so clear. Law enforcement officials say they are aware of the domestic violence allegations but haven't been able to corroborate them.



MYSTERIES. Khalid Shaikh Mohammed (lower left) identified Aafia Siddiqui (above) as an al Qaeda operative, but now there are questions about her estranged husband, Mohammed Khan (top left).

“There's information on both sides of the argument,” says one official. “There's a distinct possibility she was just a victim.” But, added this official, “some of the intelligence we have about her is more sinister than that.”

U.S. News has learned that the FBI's Boston field office first became interested in Khan and Siddiqui last spring. Annette Lamoreaux, an American Civil Liberties Union attorney in Houston who is representing Siddiqui's brother—and sat in on FBI interviews with him—told *U.S. News* that the FBI questioned Khan at least twice. FBI agents wanted to know why Khan used the Internet to purchase night-vision goggles and books about bomb-making, using Siddiqui's E-mail ad-

dress, Lamoreaux says. The bureau also questioned Siddiqui at least once last spring, about the Boston-based Dawah Resource Center, through which she distributed religious books to students and Muslim prison inmates. But, Lamoreaux says, Siddiqui doesn't fit the profile. “A woman with children, wearing a *hijab*, driving a Volvo,” scoffs Lamoreaux. “Is that how al Qaeda is recruiting, now, at playgrounds?”

The FBI says the information from those early investigations is classified. Siddiqui made several trips to Karachi after 9/11. She left on September 19, because, Lamoreaux says, she was fearful of harassment; she returned on Jan. 5, 2002. Siddiqui went back to Pakistan on June 26, 2002, Lamoreaux says, to care for her sick father and have a baby. She then filed for divorce and returned to the United States on December 25, apparently for job interviews. She stayed a week, before departing on January 2, back to Karachi, after visiting cousins in Gaithersburg, Md.

The FBI's sporadic interest in Siddiqui intensified in March of this year; Siddiqui's brother, Muhammad, and her sister, Fowzia, were both questioned about her whereabouts. Lamoreaux says Muhammad told the FBI that Siddiqui was not a terrorist but was in fact *terrorized*, by Khan. Khan's father and brother blame Siddiqui for the marital rift, but despite their anger, they say, the FBI's claim that Siddiqui has ties to terrorism is “ridiculous.”

Still, there remains a raft of unanswered questions. Where is Khan? Where is Siddiqui? Where are the children? Why did Siddiqui have a post office box in her name in Gaithersburg? “The FBI often fans sparks into flames,” says Lamoreaux. “But it looks to me like Khalid Shaikh Mohammed knew enough about her to know her name. It wasn't Jane Doe or Jane Smith. That *does* strike me as odd.” ●

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With Douglas Pasternak in Washington, Rochelle Sharpe in Boston, and Aamir Latif in Karachi