

A HUNT FOR 'THE PILOT'

The FBI says he's an 'imminent threat.' But where is he?

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN

INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

The global advisory issued by the FBI in late March gave no hint of the many twists and turns that led the bureau to Adnan Gulshair El Shukrijumah. But there was no doubting the urgency of the plea for help. Senior FBI officials tell *U.S. News* that they believe El Shukrijumah, 27, is a "grave danger" to the United States. As a result, the officials say, the FBI, the CIA, and several foreign intelligence services have begun a worldwide search for the elusive young man who once resided in South Florida and is known to carry multiple passports. "We are very worried," says a U.S. official. "Wherever he is in the world, we think he might be a key al Qaeda operative targeting U.S. interests."

On March 19, intelligence and law enforcement officials conclusively identified El Shukrijumah—described by one counterterrorism specialist as possibly the next Mohamed Atta, the lead 9/11 hijacker. Top-tier al Qaeda detainees, including the alleged key planner of the 9/11 attacks, Khalid Shaikh Mohammad, helped make the identification, government officials say. "We can't possibly overstate," a U.S. intelligence official said, "the value that Khalid Shaikh Mohammad has been to us."

A wide array of other intelligence information and sources indicate that El Shukrijumah may have been asked by al Qaeda to lead a new "suicide squad," like that led by Atta. The Saudi Arabia-born El Shukrijumah is also suspected of having ties to former Chicago gang member Jose Padilla, now being detained as an "enemy combatant" because authorities believe he wanted to detonate a "dirty bomb" on American soil. Law enforcement officials are not sure what exactly El Shukrijumah may be planning, but they say he could target gas stations, fuel trucks, subway systems, trains, or bridges. "Our No. 1 priority," Larry Meford, assistant director of the FBI's coun-

terterrorism division, told *U.S. News*, "is to find sleeper cells if they exist. If El Shukrijumah were to be in the U.S., he would possibly be in that category."

The story of the hunt for El Shukrijumah is a tale of cryptic tips, false leads, and wasted time and effort. But it also offers a rare glimpse into the twilight world of terrorists that law enforcement officials must penetrate in order to prevent another major attack on America.

The story starts in 2001. El Shukrijumah appeared as a blip on the FBI's intelligence radar screen in March of that year, after special agents in Miami used an informant to penetrate a local mosque. The agents were interested in a man named Imran Mandhai, who frequented the mosque. The informant record-

ed Mandhai repeatedly vowing to create a jihad cell, consisting of 25 or 30 men, including El Shukrijumah. The cell, Mandhai said, would target electric substations, Jewish institutions, a National Guard armory, even Mount Rushmore. "It was no secret that [El Shukrijumah] was pretty radical," says a federal law enforcement source, "and that Mandhai thought he would be interested in what they were doing."

But El Shukrijumah was suspicious. He declined to join the jihad plans, correctly surmising that the feds were on to Mandhai. But they were more worried about keeping tabs on Mandhai and his coconspirator, Shueyb Mossa Jokhan, than they were about El Shukrijumah. During this period, family members say, El Shukrijumah was attending Broward Community College and working as a freelance computer technician. The only thing the feds had on El Shukrijumah, sources say, was a lie on his green-card application regarding

a prior arrest. So his name went into a file, and that was that.

After September 11, the FBI intensified its pursuit of Mandhai and Jokhan. They were indicted in the spring of 2002. Mandhai was convicted of conspiracy to destroy U.S. property; Jokhan testified against him. Both are now serving multiyear sentences. The FBI agents had not forgotten about El Shukrijumah, however. Agents visited his family's home in a



Adnan Gulshair El Shukrijumah



SIGHTING? Fingerprint collection at a Tampa shop where a man resembling Adnan Gulshair El Shukrijumah was spotted

Fort Lauderdale suburb six times, but he was never there. Family members say he had left home in May 2001 for Trinidad, where his father once worked for the Saudi Arabian government. According to a federal law enforcement source, Mandhai told the feds he saw El Shukrijumah as late as July 2001.

Either way, he was nowhere to be found. Then, last May, U.S. intelligence and military officials began posing an urgent question to al Qaeda detainees who were being interrogated at foreign prisons and secret CIA and military facilities abroad. Whom, the officials asked, would al Qaeda pick to lead the next big attack against U.S. targets? Intelligence sources tell *U.S. News* that several of the detainees provided the same answer: "Jaffar Al-Tayyar." That's an al Qaeda nom de guerre. It translates roughly to "Jaffar the Pilot." The detainees said they had met "the Pilot" during al Qaeda training exercises in Afghanistan. Intelligence officers scrambled, showing the detainees photos of hundreds of suspected al Qaeda operatives. Several detainees identified a man who looked like El Shukrijumah. It wasn't—but it would take months before the FBI and CIA teams realized it. "We were pursuing a lead," says one official, "that in the end turned out to be a dead end. We found out we were after the wrong person."

Family affair. The hunt for El Shukrijumah didn't end, however. Given the detainees' information about Jaffar the Pilot, it only intensified. And slowly, strands of information began to filter into the FBI, the CIA, and other foreign intelligence agencies. They pointed in a new direction, allowing investigators to narrow the search. Two weeks ago, the search turned up a new name—and a new photograph. But investigators still were not sure. The crucial moment didn't come until Khalid Shaikh Mohammad corroborated the investigators' hunch. El Shukrijumah, he said after being shown a photograph, was Jaffar the Pilot. The FBI issued its "be on the lookout" warning for El Shukrijumah.

The bureau's counterterrorism specialists say they now see him in a dangerous new light but still have many questions. They want to know more about ties he may have to other convicted or alleged terrorists, including Padilla, the accused enemy combatant who used to live near Fort Lauderdale, not far from El Shukrijumah's family home. Padilla was arrested last May, about the same time investigators started asking detainees about other alleged al Qaeda operatives. Authorities are also curious

about El Shukrijumah's possible ties to Adham Amin Hassoun, a fellow mosquegoer who has been held under extreme secrecy in legal limbo on immigration violations at a federal detention facility near Miami since last June. An immigration judge found that Hassoun had plotted to commit an assassination, provided material support to terrorist groups, and was a member of an Islamic fundamentalist group whose leader, Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, was convicted of plotting to bomb key New York landmarks. The judge said Hassoun also tried to recruit Egyptian "jihad fighter" Mohammed Yousseff, a friend of Padilla's, and that Hassoun had ties to charitable groups with alleged links to terrorist groups like Hamas. Hassoun says he is innocent.

El Shukrijumah's family says *he* is also being wrongly accused. Zuhrah Abdu Ahmed says she urged her son to stay away after the September 11 attacks because she feared a backlash against Muslims. She tells *U.S. News* the family last heard from her son about six months ago, when he called to say he was teaching English in Morocco, had gotten married, and had a son. El Shukrijumah "doesn't hate America, and he doesn't hate Americans," says his mother. His father, Gulshair El Shukrijumah, 73, was fired last week as the imam of the mosque where his son and Mandhai prayed. The elderly man once was imam of a Brooklyn, N.Y., mosque where one of Abdel Rahman's coconspirators, Clement Hampton-el, prayed. The father says he testified—it's unclear in what capacity—during Hampton-el's pretrial hearings. He also provided Islamic tutoring to Mandhai, who, at 18, was a hafiz, someone who has memorized the Koran. U.S. officials say they have not yet completed a full security assessment of the father but stress that the intelligence they have led to the son, not his father.

Where the son might be now is anyone's guess. El Shukrijumah is believed to hold passports from Guyana, Saudi Arabia, Trinidad, and Canada. Last week, the FBI bulletin triggered numerous El Shukrijumah "sightings"—including one at a sandwich shop in south Tampa. The Tampa tip, like all the others thus far, turned out to be unfounded. ●

With Douglas Pasternak and Edward T. Pound in Washington, Arnold Markowitz in Miami, Rochelle Sharpe in Boston, and the U.S. News library staff

AL QAEDA'S MYSTERY WOMAN

Femme fatale?

Late last year, the FBI received information that al Qaeda had a female operative with ties to the United States. In March, after he was arrested in Pakistan, Khalid Shaikh Mohammad, the alleged mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, identified the woman, intelligence sources tell *U.S. News*. According to Mohammad, she is a Massachusetts Institute of Technology alumna, 31, named Aafia Siddiqui. The FBI put out an advisory on March 18, seeking information about Siddiqui and her estranged husband, Mohammed Khan, 33.

Intelligence sources say that Siddiqui is not a dangerous operative but may be more of a support person. It's unclear whether Khan—a resident at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston—is involved.

"The information that we have that links him to the al Qaeda network," one source says, "is not as strong as with her."

Siddiqui made several trips to Pakistan; the FBI wants to know why. She left on Sept. 19, 2001, and returned Jan. 5, 2002. She left again June 26 and returned on December 25. On Jan. 2, 2003, she left again.

Associates say suspicions are unfounded. "I just don't see them being involved," says Abdullah Faaruq, imam of Siddiqui's Roxbury, Mass., mosque, "in any direct way with terrorism."

FBI officials concede it's peculiar. Al Qaeda is a radical Muslim group not known to include women. Siddiqui also doesn't fit the typical terrorist profile, although, says the FBI's counterterrorism chief, Larry Mefford, "this is not the first time we've seen highly educated individuals drawn to al Qaeda's philosophy." —C.R., D.P., and R.S.



Aafia Siddiqui