

PUBLICATION: GLOBE AND MAIL

IDN: 081190019

DATE: 2008.04.28

PAGE: A10

BYLINE: PAUL KORING

SECTION: National News

EDITION: Metro

WORDS: 703

WORD COUNT: 639

MURKY WORLD OF COUNTERTERRORISM

Hapless victim or terrorist threat? The evidence is unclear

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In the furtive world of Islamic jihad and among the shadowy government counterterrorist agents seeking to track and destroy groups such as al-Qaeda, he is known as Djolaida the Sudanese.

His real name, maybe, is Abousfian Abdelrazik. Or maybe the allegations are false or the man with so many aliases isn't the same as the former refugee granted political asylum and later Canadian citizenship.

Whether the man who lived in Montreal is a threat to Western civilization or another hapless victim of mistaken identity and guilt by association remains unclear.

Not a shred of publicly available evidence implicates him in any plot, yet Canadian, French and U.S. spy agencies claim he is dangerous.

Long before Sept. 11, 2001, the Sudanese-Canadian with a string of aliases was alleged to be key player in Islamic terrorism.

To read the terse summaries prepared by counterterrorism agencies is chilling.

Abousfian Abdelrazik is named as a "close associate" of Abu Zubaydah, the al-Qaeda mastermind who helped plan the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and set up the network of training camps in Afghanistan for Islamic extremists seeking to attack the West. Mr. Zubaydah is regarded as one of the

highest-ranking al-Qaeda members in U.S. custody and is currently held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. He was an early follower of Osama bin Laden.

According to the limited summaries made public by U.S. authorities, Mr. Abdelrazik was a key figure in the Montreal al-Qaeda cell that sent Ahmed Ressaym across the U.S. border with the makings of a bomb intended to blow up the Los Angeles airport around New Year's Day, 2000.

The summaries say Mr. Abdelrazik recruited and sent jihadists to al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan for terrorist training as early as 1996. According to jihadists subsequently captured and interrogated by U.S. agents, Mr. Abdelrazik dealt personally with Mr. bin Laden and has also trained in the notorious Khalden camp in Afghanistan.

He is known to have prayed at the mosque in Montreal where others - now alleged to be terrorists - prayed.

Canada's own counterterrorism agents were following Mr. Abdelrazik in the late 1990s.

France labelled him an "important Islamic activist of international jihad and a confidant of Abu Zubaydah." Canadian government documents, marked secret, were prepared for ministers to explain why Mr. Abdelrazik was considered a security risk.

"The Federal Court of Canada has accepted evidence which the Government of Canada introduced that Mr. Abdelrazik presents a valid security concern because of his association with persons linked to terrorism," was the suggested line.

The UN Security Council has put him on the most-wanted list of terrorist suspects, which is based on files submitted by Canadian, British, American, French, German, Italian and other counterterrorism agencies. In the murky world of fingering terrorist suspects, it remains unclear whether any of the allegations levelled against the hundreds named on the list are substantiated or whether there is any ongoing review.

For instance, on the watch list circulated by the UN and Interpol, and used by central banks from the Philippines to Peru to seize assets, the number of Mr. Abdelrazik's expired Canadian passport is correctly listed but his birth date is wrong.

Helpfully, a long string of aliases is provided, including: Abd Al-Razziq; Abu Sufian Al-salamabi Muhammed Ahmed; Abdelrazek; Abou el Layth; Aboulai; Abousfian Salman Adbrzik; Abousofian; Aabu Juiriah; Abu Sufian; Abud Sufian al Razeq; Abulail; Djolaiba the Sudanese; Jolaiba; Oul el Sayeigh; Sofian Abdelrazik.

There is no mention that Mr. Abdelrazik doesn't face any charges in any country - or at least no charges that have been made public. In Canada, no security certificate has been issued naming him.

The evidence filed with the Federal Court - unless some remains sealed - amounts to an affidavit that says Mr. Abdelrazik knew some of those now alleged to be Islamic extremists.

Mr. Abdelrazik freely admits as much. "I knew Ahmed Ressam," he said, adding he never saw him after Mr. Ressam left Montreal.

In fact, Mr. Abdelrazik voluntarily testified, by video-link, at Mr. Ressam's trial in October of 2000, saying little more than he had met the accused a little but knew nothing of the plot.