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## Terrorism Probe Points to Reach Of Web Networks

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In April 2005, police swarmed the U.S. Capitol to confront an erratic Australian man, carrying two suitcases, who they feared was a suicide bomber. After blowing up one of the bags, officers realized he was harmless.

The police never noticed the two nervous young men on a nearby sidewalk filming the Capitol during the standoff. But they might have been the real threat, according to newly released documents.

The men, ultraconservative Muslims from [Georgia](#), were making surveillance videos that could help extremists plan "some kind of terrorist attack," as one man later acknowledged, according to court documents disclosed last week. One of their videos was sent to a notorious [al-Qaeda](#) publicist in [London](#), authorities said.

New details about the videos -- featuring such sites as the [World Bank](#) headquarters, [the Pentagon](#), fuel tanks and the [George Washington](#) Masonic Memorial in [Alexandria](#) -- emerged in pretrial hearings in [Atlanta](#). The pair are charged with providing support to foreign terrorists and could be sentenced to 60 years in prison if convicted. They have pleaded not guilty.

The two men were detained in 2006, before they reached "the point that they posed an imminent threat to the United States," according to a statement by U.S. Attorney David E. Nahmias in Atlanta. But the case underlines the continued appeal of Washington as a terrorist target.

Analysts said it also provides a glimpse of the growing threat posed by radical networks that have sprung up as a result of the Internet. One of the men, Syed Haris Ahmed, told authorities that they got to know extremists through Web forums and chat rooms, and they uploaded their D.C. surveillance video to "Jihadi people" online.

For a terrorist organization, "it doesn't matter anymore where your location is, and how many visa requirements" a country has, said Rita Katz, director of the SITE Intelligence Group, which researches Muslim extremists and their online activity. "Being on the virtual network, [terrorists] have people virtually all over the world."

Ahmed, 23, who immigrated to the United States from [Pakistan](#) a decade ago with his parents, was an engineering student at [Georgia Tech](#) at the time of the Washington trip. He met his co-defendant, Ehsanul Islam Sadequee, 21, at a mosque near the school. Sadequee was born in [Fairfax](#) to Bangladeshi immigrants, but the family left [Virginia](#) when he was a toddler.

The heart of the government's case became clear last week: 12 hours of [FBI](#) interviews with Ahmed.

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During the questioning, agents informed Ahmed that they had e-mails, videos and other materials linking him to suspicious activity, according to transcripts released in court. The Pakistani-American college student acknowledged that he and his friend had been in contact with foreign extremists and had discussed attacking targets in the D.C. area and elsewhere, transcripts of the interviews revealed.

Ahmed's attorney, Jack Martin, has asked a federal judge to throw out the lengthy statements his client made to the FBI shortly before his arrest, or drop the charges. Martin argued that FBI agents promised the student that he would not get into trouble if he cooperated. The FBI says Ahmed's statements were voluntary. Martin did not return a call for comment.

Ahmed told the FBI agents that his actions amounted to foolish mistakes that did not harm anyone. He dismissed the videos as being of poor quality.

"There is nothing to be worried about," he said, according to the transcripts. "We are just stupid, childish . . . We went and took a video, but in reality it means nothing."

But he acknowledged that the videos were intended to impress people associated with radical Web sites who could help him get into a militant training camp in Pakistan.

"You have to prove to them you are willing to take some risk," Ahmed told the FBI.

According to the indictment, Sadequee sent one of the videos to Younis Tsouli, a London resident considered an online recruiter for [al-Qaeda in Iraq](#). Tsouli is serving a 10-year prison sentence for inciting murder on the Internet. A copy of the video also wound up with another of the men's Internet contacts, Abid Hussain Khan, who faces terrorism charges in [England](#).

For Ahmed and Sadequee, the Internet provided access to a world of militant Muslims that transcended borders. At least five of the acquaintances the men made on the Internet have subsequently been charged in terrorism cases in the United States and abroad.

Among their online friends were a group of Canadian Muslims whom the Georgia men visited in March 2005, according to Ahmed's account. They discussed vague ideas for terrorist attacks on oil installations and satellites, Ahmed told the FBI. At least two of the Canadians were part of an alleged al-Qaeda-inspired cell whose members were arrested in 2006 for plotting to set off truck bombs and storm the country's Parliament.

Ahmed told the FBI he was not initially "into that . . . al-Qaeda or thing like that." His goal, he said, was to seek military-style training to help oppressed Muslims in places such as [Kashmir](#), on the Pakistan-[India](#) border.

But he said that he and Sadequee were "brainwashed from the reading online." While expressing ambivalence about whether he could ever carry out an attack on U.S. soil, Ahmed said he was influenced by Internet radicals urging Muslims to "do something."

So the men undertook their trip to Washington. It was an opportunity "to be spies for the people over there," Ahmed said, apparently referring to militant Muslims abroad.

He described the Washington trip as an adventure, with the two men setting out from the Atlanta area on a Sunday morning in his Ford pickup truck, stopping to shave off the beards they wore as religious Muslims.

"It's like, uh, thrilling to be undercover and stuff like that," the transcript quotes Ahmed as saying.

That evening, they reached the Pentagon. The men filmed the building, according to a video made public for the first time last week in court. "This is where our brothers attacked the Pentagon," says Sadequee's voice.

"Allah Akhbar," Ahmed chants. God is great.

The men were not exactly experienced operatives; they went to spend the night in a Super 8 Motel in the Virginia suburbs, only to discover it was too expensive.

"Like \$79 per night," Ahmed told the FBI.

So they slept in the pickup. The next day, using Ahmed's father's digital video camera, they shot images in [Northern Virginia](#) and the District -- the "casing videos," prosecutors said.

They had previously discussed the idea of attacking the Masonic temple in Alexandria. "We had been told they worship the devil or whatever," Ahmed told the FBI. But they never did any planning, he said.

By midday, the men were at the Capitol, when suddenly police swooped in to confront the Australian tourist. Ahmed's heart raced, but he was also thrilled by the action, he recounted. He shot video of a hazmat truck racing by, he recalled.

"That was pretty cool, don't you think?" Ahmed told the FBI.

But for all his boyish enthusiasm, Ahmed acknowledged that his actions could have deadly consequences. Asked whether he knew his video could be used by radicals to plan an attack on the Washington region, Ahmed told the FBI: "You could say that, yeah."

He never explained why the men filmed the fuel storage tanks on Interstate 95, near Lorton. But, he told the FBI, he had talked to Sadequee about attacking an oil installation somewhere in America. Oil is "Muslim property and it's being stolen," Ahmed explained. An attack would "raise the prices so that people over there will get more money," he said.

Three months after his Washington trip, Ahmed went to Pakistan. He told the FBI he had hoped to train in the camps of the Kashmiri group Lashkar-e-Taiba, which is designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. government.

But his cousins and some Islamic teachers in Pakistan talked Ahmed out of the idea, telling him he had been brainwashed, he said.

"They, like, put some sense into me," he recounted. Ahmed returned home the next month, August 2005.

But a few weeks later, according to the indictment, he did research on powerful explosives. And over the next few months, the indictment says, Ahmed told two friends he wanted to go back abroad "to train for and engage in violent jihad."

*Staff writer Susan Schmidt and staff researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.*

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