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NATION AMERICA ON ALERT

The Next Wave

Dirty-bomb, car-bomb, boat-bomb, bomb plots—meet the new al-Qaeda men, less polished than the 9/11 crew, but any less lethal?

BY [MICHAEL ELLIOTT](#)

CHRIS HONDROS/GETTY IMAGES

A terrorist's manual from Afghanistan

Bay, Cuba. The detainees no longer have to relieve themselves into plastic bags. Bensayah Belkacem, an Algerian who is suspected of plotting to blow up the American embassy in Sarajevo, Bosnia, shared the news in a recent letter to his wife. Anela Kobilica told Time last week that her husband detailed Gitmo's new sanitary arrangements. Delta's 612 cells—metal boxes about 8 ft. square—are now equipped with flushable toilets and knee-high sinks in which devout Muslims can perform their ritual ablutions. Air-conditioning is still provided only by the breeze off the Caribbean Sea.

Gitmo is no place for a vacation. Sources tell Time that U.S. interrogators have developed a technique to pry information out of some detainees. Targeted prisoners are isolated from contact with others until they become dependent on their questioners. It takes time, but, as a source says, "When you sit there staring at the ocean and you see how far you are from home and you're never going to get there, that all works on your mind." Meanwhile, at a secret location, CIA officers continue to question Abu Zubaydah, the suspected al-Qaeda operations chief who was captured after a March gunfight in Faisalabad, Pakistan. Abu Zubaydah, say CIA and other U.S. government sources, is not being tortured, but a variety of methods are being used to encourage him to talk. Typical military interrogation tactics would include depriving him of sleep, changing the temperature of his cell and "modulating caloric intakes"—spookspeak for withholding food and then providing it as a reward.

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There's good news for the 434 suspected members of al-Qaeda and the Taliban now being held in Camp Delta at Guantanamo



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 Why is the U.S. government holding Jose Padilla without charging him with a crime? The White House says it's necessary, but critics aren't so sure

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Abu Zubaydah's information needs to be taken with a pinch of salt; not all of it has checked out. But U.S. officials have a reason for publicly attributing to him many of their leads, whether they originate with him or not. "It declares to his old friends that he's turned colors and come over to our side," says one. "That means he's toast, and he knows it."

He doesn't have any friends back home, so he might as well make some here." The ploy may or may not work, but it seems that the Gitmo interrogations, at least, are bearing fruit.

The proof came two weeks ago, when Moroccan police in Casablanca announced the arrest of three Saudis—Zuher al-Tbaiti, Abdullah al-Ghamdi and Hilal Alissiri—on suspicion of plotting an attack on an American or British warship in the Strait of Gibraltar. (The group had been planning to buy a Zodiac motorized skiff, which could have been used for an attack like the one on the U.S.S. Cole in 2000.) Moroccan officials tell Time that they started tailing the group after a tip from the U.S., which had been questioning Moroccan al-Qaeda detainees in Cuba. The detainees told the Americans they had been recruited by a Saudi they knew only as Zuher, whose first wife was a Moroccan who had been killed in the American bombing campaign in Afghanistan. One detainee knew her name. Using that piece of information, Moroccan authorities traced her family, identified al-Tbaiti and put him under surveillance. A month later, he was in custody.

The breakup of the Morocco plot was just one among a wave of developments last week that confirmed the continuing danger posed by al-Qaeda. Attorney General John Ashcroft announced the capture in Chicago of Jose Padilla, an American citizen now calling himself Abdullah al-Muhajir. Ashcroft said Padilla was exploring a plan to build and detonate a radiological dispersion device, or "dirty bomb," in the U.S. In Bosnia, American and local officials are continuing investigations into Islamic charities suspected of money laundering for al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. And French authorities picked up five men for questioning in the case of Richard Reid, the would-be shoe bomber, who is now in U.S. custody. In Sudan police arrested a man suspected of leading an al-Qaeda cell responsible for firing a surface-to-air missile at an American warplane in Saudi Arabia. Most frightening of all, on Friday a car bomb exploded outside the U.S. consulate in Karachi, Pakistan; 11 Pakistanis were killed, and at least 45 other people were injured, including one U.S. Marine.

Inevitably, the attack called to mind the 1998 bombings of American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam—for most Americans, the first time they heard the name Osama bin Laden. A previously unknown group called al-Qanoon claimed responsibility for the Karachi bombing, but State Department officials in Washington said they believed that al-Qaeda was responsible. At least the Karachi consulate was better

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protected than the embassies in Africa. The building is like a fortress, with thick walls, concrete bunkers and bulletproof glass; the vehicle exploded next to a guard post outside. But the bomb left a crater 5 ft. deep and blew charred body parts into a park hundreds of yards away. Windows were blown out of the consulate and the neighboring Marriott hotel. If anyone had missed the week's message, a top U.S. counterterrorism official underscored it. The terrorists, he said, "are still out there, and there's still an army of followers they can call upon."

That sounds scary, but there's another way of reading the news. Just possibly, the good guys may be winning. Many of those in the hard core of al-Qaeda have been captured; Pakistani officials claim to have detained 378 foreigners linked to al-Qaeda this year. Many more have been dispersed around the globe, their communication systems compromised and their supply lines stretched thin. The Saudis detained in Morocco, for example, had fled Afghanistan after the American bombing campaign; instead of being able to plan attacks from the safety of the terrorist camps, they were forced to use Internet cafes to communicate with al-Qaeda superiors. For substantial periods, Moroccan sources say, the Saudis were out of contact with their commanders. Left to their own devices, the gang started to plan attacks on American and Jewish targets, possibly diplomatic facilities and synagogues, precisely the sort of places that the Moroccan authorities had under surveillance.

In a similar vein, the arrest of Padilla, for all the frightening claims that Ashcroft made for his plot, may reveal a weakness in al-Qaeda's position rather than a strength. Al-Qaeda appears to be relying on irregulars—inexperienced, unsophisticated operatives like Padilla and, for that matter, Reid—rather than the highly trained, disciplined jihadis who carried out the Sept. 11 attacks. In the view of many experts on Islamic terrorism, converts to Islam who grew up in the West sometimes lack the deep conviction of those born into the faith who grew up in its Arab heartlands, as the 19 hijackers did.

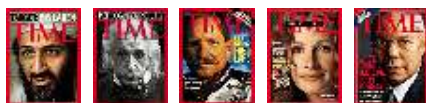
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