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Northern New Jersey Draws Probers' Eyes; Many in Area Feel Wrongly Targeted

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The FBI investigation into the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon has led agents back to a familiar area: northern New Jersey.

It was there, in Jersey City, just across the Hudson River from Manhattan, that a Muslim cell plotted the 1993 bombing of the twin towers and sought to destroy other New York landmarks as part of an urban guerrilla war against the United States.

It is believed that 13 of those detained by federal authorities for questioning in its probe into the worst terrorist act in U.S. history are from northeastern New Jersey, some from the same Journal Square area where suspects in the 1993 bombing lived.

Teams of agents have also conducted myriad interviews and seized computer and paper records at apartment buildings, businesses, hotels and motels in at least 10 towns and cities in northern New Jersey -- from Weehawken to Wayne, and Fort Lee to Florham Park. Furthermore, FBI teams and state troopers have done the same at several flight training schools and charter businesses at small airports in the area, including the Morristown and Teeterboro airports.

At Morristown Municipal Airport, Tom O'Looney, president of Certified Flyers Inc., said investigators left him a 20-page FBI watch list containing the names of 300 people. Michael Glover, director of American Flyers at the Morristown airport, said authorities asked him about any foreign nationals who may have attended his flight school. But Glover said none were on his rolls.

Law enforcement officials said northeastern New Jersey could be potentially fertile ground as 4,000 FBI special agents search for accomplices, associates and ultimately further clues about last Tuesday's devastating terrorist strikes against symbols of American financial and military might.

In October 1995, Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman, an Egyptian cleric who delivered fiery sermons at a run-down mosque in Jersey City, was convicted of directing the conspiracy to blow up the United Nations, an FBI building, and three bridges and tunnels linking New York and New Jersey. He was also convicted of being part of a plot to kill Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Sayyid Nosair of Jersey City and Cliffside Park was also charged in the 1990 killing of Rabbi Meir Kahane in Manhattan. The Kahane murder was the beginning of a series of militant acts by the Muslim cell that was encouraged by Abdel-Rahman, the group's spiritual leader.

One such act was the Feb. 26, 1993 World Trade Center bombing, which killed six people, injured more than 1,000 and inflicted \$500 million worth of damage.

"The area in and around Jersey City has provided individuals in the past who were bent on terrorism. So I am sure that area is of great interest to investigators right now," said James K. Kallstrom, the former head of the FBI's New York office. "They are not knocking down any straw men at this point. I think now is the time when the broad spectrum of possibilities has to be looked at."

In Jersey City, an urban enclave of 240,055 people that is home to one of the largest Arab populations among U.S. cities, members of that Middle Eastern community said they are being unfairly targeted and misunderstood by the FBI.

"First of all, I think the people [convicted] of the bombing of the World Trade Center were innocent. . . . The Muslims are an easy way out, especially when you don't know who committed the act," said Essam Abouhamer, director of the Altawheed Islam Center. "The message of Islam is to be peaceful with yourself and others."

Hasam Ibrahim, 37, who came to the United States 16 years ago from Egypt and owns a limousine company in Jersey City, said he and others in similar circumstances moved here in search of better lives and are proud to be Americans.

"It is impossible," he said of suggestions that a terrorist cell in or around Jersey City may have helped plot the deadly attacks last week. "People here from the Middle East just want to work and have good lives. I love the United States. I eat in the United States. I earn money in the United States, and my children go to schools in the United States. A lot of people in this Arab community feel like me."

Investigators said at least two of the hijackers, Nawaq Al Hamzi and Salem Al Hamzi, are believed to have had addresses in Wayne and Fort Lee. They apparently rented a mail box in Fort Lee, at Mail Boxes Etc.

In Jersey City, within hours of two jetliners' plowing into the World Trade Center, law enforcement authorities detained and questioned a number of people who were allegedly seen celebrating the attacks and holding tailgate-style parties on rooftops while they watched the devastation on the other side of the river.

Over the weekend, authorities raided a small apartment building in Jersey City to search an apartment rented by

two men who were detained in Texas on Wednesday, on possible immigration violations. Mohammed Jaweed Azmath, 47, and Ayub Ali Khan, 51, both from India, were taken into custody Wednesday on an Amtrak train in Texas, carrying \$5,000 in cash, hair dye and box cutter knives -- weapons said to have been used by the hijackers. During the raids in Jersey City, authorities detained a third man, Abdoul Salam Achou, 37, whose visa application allegedly expired on Sept. 1.

Investigators also detained three men in Elizabeth, N.J., who were carrying a large amount of cash and a one-way ticket to Syria. The three men, Ahmad Kilfat, 45, Mohammad Mahmoud Al Raqqad, 37, and Nicholas Makrakis, 27, were in a red Pontiac that matched an FBI description of a vehicle connected with the attacks.

Yemina Barbosa, 46, who lives across the street from the three-story apartment house on Tulip Street in Passaic, N.J. -- a mostly black and Latino neighborhood where Kilfat and Al Raqqad were thought to live -- said expensive, "sporty" cars would often park in front of the house.

Neighbors said a car that they believed belongs to the two men was towed tonight from in front of the apartment house, after the vehicle was examined by a bomb squad.

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
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