

Omar Sheikh's Pak handler Ilyas Kashmiri also handled Headley

New Delhi In late 1994, a milkman knocked on the door of a Ghaziabad house. As the door opened, he noticed men with guns inside, but he still delivered the milk. He then tipped off police who raided the place and rescued several foreign hostages being held by a group of terrorists, seeking the release of some arrested militant leaders including Maulana Masood Azhar. Azhar had been arrested in February that year.

When the police reached there, the commander of the terrorist group that called itself Al-Hadid — essentially it was a Harkat-ul Ansar-Harkat-ul Jihad-al-Islami operation — had just stepped out with his trusted lieutenant Omar Saeed Sheikh. The police confronted them as they returned and, in the gunbattle that ensued, Sheikh was injured and arrested but the commander escaped. He was none other than Ilyas Kashmiri. Omar Sheikh was later released in exchange for passengers aboard the hijacked IC-814 at Kandahar.

Kashmiri is the common thread that runs between Sheikh and David Coleman Headley, arrested by FBI for plotting terror attacks on India at the behest of the Lashkar-e-Toiba. Both were Pakistan-born anglicized youth, equally committed and skilled in understanding and adapting to the ways of the West. They did not fit the traditional description of a jihadi terrorist, yet were very effective in

planning attacks.

Kashmiri, who was once the head of the infamous **313 brigade** and the HuJI that carried out attacks in Kashmir, always looked for recruits with such attributes that allowed them to move under the radar, contributing to his terror missions abroad.

Headley or Daood Gilani was no exception. The FBI believes he is an alumnus of the Cadet College in Hassan Abdal, Pakistan which is very much like India's military schools that train young children to join the Army. But Gilani moved to the US and then changed his identity in 2006. His cover for travels abroad was that of a representative of First Immigration Services, a company run by co-accused Tahawwur Hussain Rana.

Headley used "doctor" and "Pir Sahib" as the codewords for his patron-in-chief Ilyas Kashmiri. On September 13, amid press reports of Kashmiri's death in a drone attack, he spoke to his contact in Pakistan who informed him that the "doctor may have got married there". A distraught Headley shot back, "so it means our company has gone into bankruptcy then".

FBI investigators believe that "getting married" was coded language for dying or having achieved martyrdom. This 13-minute phone call, according to the FBI, ended at 5.09 pm Chicago time and at 5.12 pm Headley did a Google search for Ilyas Kashmiri to read the latest reports. He repeated the search three days later on September 16 at 7.29 pm and accessed reports on Kashmiri's alleged death.

The next day he again spoke to his Pakistan contact and said: “It is everywhere now... their marriage has been confirmed”. In the same conversation, a shaken Headley wanted to even fold up their activities. “But now there is nothing to do there. Now let us collect unemployment from the company... when a company lays off in case of bankruptcy, it discharges employees”. When his contact tried to console him that this was not a big loss to their effort, Headley replied: “No, it’s not a small loss, it is a major loss.”

On September 19, he spoke to a “family member” close to Kashmiri and said, “He was our Pir Sahib where you and I went... and we did baiat (oath of allegiance)” he just had a heart attack. It has made me very sad”. But on September 21, he got a call from his first Pakistani contact, who tells him that fresh reports indicate that Kashmiri is still alive. Headley could not control his emotions, “Buddy if this is true, then I will say a 100 prayers, a 100 prayers.”

It was not until September 30 that Headley got final confirmation of Kashmiri being alive. Excited, he made his contact swear several times on the veracity of the information and remarks, “So, he does not get married... so I will be able to meet him upon returning (to Pakistan)”. The reply is in the positive: “Absolutely right, he just today was asking about you”.

On October 3, Headley was off to Chicago’s O’ Hare International airport to board a flight for Philadelphia on his way to Pakistan — it was then that the FBI nabbed

him, fearing he may not return for long or they may lose track of him.

Indian investigators believe that Headley, who had spent considerable amount of time and energy surveying targets in Copenhagen was under instructions to put the plan on hold and would have received fresh orders to go to India for attacks there. The Lashkar-e-Toiba member, who was in touch with Headley, had been persuading him to focus on India but FBI investigations suggest Headley was more keen on going ahead with Copenhagen, what he described as the “northern project” and the “mickey mouse project”.

This conflict comes to fore during that week in September when Headley is distraught by news of Kashmiri’s death. His undisclosed Pakistani contact, who is known to Kashmiri as well as the LeT, asks Headley to now reach out to his LeT contact. In that conversation, Headley complains that LeT’s eyes are “again in that direction”. This is important because the LeT contact, as recorded in FBI’s affidavits, had spoken last to Headley about revisiting “Rahul’s city”, a pointer to targeting India.

Headley also did not have a high opinion of his LeT contact, describing him as a person with “rotten guts” in the same conversation with his Pakistani contact, who does not disagree and says, “They do not want to take risks and want to be praised also”. To this, Headley responds: “Then there will be no profit because when you have high aims, as much as an investment will be risky as much is the chance of profits and at the same time there

is chance of loss.”

Talk about a fresh attack on India figured first on July 3 when Headley’s LeT contact sent him an email inquiring about “new investment plans” even as Headley was working on the Copenhagen plan. He then asked Headley to revisit “Rahul’s city”, adding that “matters were good enough to move forward”. Headley asks a clarification on whether moving forward meant “towards Rahul” to the North. The reply came: “towards Rahul”.

Headley then asks a few pointed questions about the purpose of the visit and then whether the “northern project” was postponed. He never got a clear answer though he repeatedly asked the question in the email exchange that continued until August-end. At that point, FBI believes, the LeT contact was kept out of the Copenhagen plan. But Headley did tell his LeT contact that he will discuss the plans about “Rahul’s city” when they meet September-end.

While Indian investigators are moving on the assumption that Headley was a LeT member, the best understanding of Headley’s role comes from Headley himself in a September 20 conversation in coded language with one of Kashmiri’s “family members” when it was believed that Kashmiri was dead and Headley was gradually overcoming the “grief”.

“The main thing is business must go on. Main thing is I have some income... make some money. I don’t care if I am working for Microsoft or I am working for a GE or Philips, I don’t care. As long as I am making money, I

don't give a shit," said Headley, leading FBI to conclude that in the end it did not matter to him whether he was working for Kashmiri's group or the LeT.