LONDON -- Babar Ahmad, a 31-year-old computer whiz and mechanical engineer, was hailed as a big catch by U.S. law enforcement officials when he was arrested here one year ago on charges that he ran a network of Web sites that served as a propaganda and fundraising front for Islamic extremists, including Chechen rebels, the Taliban militia and al Qaeda affiliates.

Since then, Ahmad has been locked up inside British prisons as he fights extradition to the United States. But the imprisonment has done little to silence the British native of Pakistani descent. Rather, it has given him an even bigger megaphone as he continues to churn out anti-American manifestos and post them on the Web, turning him into a minor celebrity in Britain.

His case shows how a well-educated engineer operating in London could allegedly use the Web to project a message of Islamic extremism to a global audience. While an earlier generation of radicals might have led protest rallies, Ahmad found a way to make the Internet his bully pulpit, magnifying al Qaeda's reach far beyond the handful of radical mosques that had previously propagated Osama bin Laden's message.

Since his arrest, Ahmad, working through relatives and other supporters outside prison, has created a simple but polished Web site, www.freebabarahmad.com/, to drum up publicity. According to the site, more than 10,000 people have signed an online petition calling on the British government to block his extradition. Hundreds have appeared at public rallies. The BBC aired an entire documentary about efforts by Ahmad's elderly father to secure his release, titling the show, "A Terror Suspect's Dad."

In his bid to avoid prosecution, Ahmad has relied on the technical and communications skills that U.S. prosecutors said he honed for a decade as a pioneering webmaster for Islamic extremist causes. He has also cultivated the support of others who see the Internet as a potential equalizer in what they describe as a battle between Muslims and the West.

"The war is not just a legal war or a military war, but it's an information war and you've got to fight it through the press and the Web as much as anything else," said Bilal Patel, a spokesman for a British Web site called Stoppoliticalterror.com, which has publicized Ahmad's case and worked on his behalf. "The most effective military jihad these days is to use the Internet to spread your ideas, and to use the power of words."

Today, portraying himself as an innocent victim, Ahmad has generated sympathy by arguing that extradition to the United States would violate his rights as a British citizen. Playing to widespread misgivings over the Bush administration's tactics in its self-proclaimed "war on terrorism," he has predicted that he will wind up at Guantanamo Bay or on death row if he is handed over to the Americans, even though the U.S.
government has pledged otherwise.

"I know, and God knows, that I am not a terrorist and that I have not done anything wrong or illegal," he wrote in January. "We live in an era where countries go to war, destroy homes, create orphans and kill thousands of people, based on reasons that turn out to be lies. Do you think that it is beyond such people to imprison a handful of individuals based on lies? They are capable of anything."

A Savvy Recruitment Tool

In late 1996, while a 22-year-old undergraduate at Imperial College in London, Ahmad launched a Web site dedicated to promoting Islamic fighters in Bosnia, Chechnya and Afghanistan, according to U.S. federal prosecutors. Dubbed Azzam.com, in honor of Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian who served as bin Laden's spiritual mentor, the Web site rapidly became a prominent and influential English-language platform for Islamic militants.

According to U.S. prosecutors and terrorism analysts, Ahmad enabled radical jihadists to deliver their message to a global audience by connecting to Azzam.com and several of his sister Web sites, including Qoqaz.net and Waaqiah.com. Although the sites were shut down in 2001 and 2002, in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, hijackings in the United States, Justice Department officials trumpeted his arrest by British police last August as a major victory in their efforts to target tech-savvy Islamic extremists.

Ahmad's azzam.com catered to English speakers, featured snazzy graphics and couched its radical politics in a moderate tone by posting firsthand news reports from amateur correspondents around the world. International news organizations, including the BBC, often cited dispatches from Azzam.com and its sister Web sites when reporting on events in Chechnya and Afghanistan.

In contrast, many other Web sites sponsored by Islamic extremists in those days were technologically primitive and often published in Arabic, limiting their audience. Azzam.com represented a breakthrough, allowing militant groups to spread their message worldwide and recruit new followers.

"It was the very first real al Qaeda Web site," said Evan Kohlmann, a New York-based terrorism researcher who has tracked Azzam.com since the late 1990s. "It taught an entire generation about jihad. Even in its nascency, it was professional. It wasn't technically sophisticated, but it was professional looking, definitely more professional than any other jihadi Web sites out there."

According to a U.S. indictment filed in October, Ahmad used Azzam.com to solicit donations for Chechen rebels and the Taliban, and arranged for the training and transportation of Islamic fighters. Among the specific charges is one alleging that Azzam.com posted messages in early 2001 containing specific instructions for supporters to deliver cash payments of up to $20,000 to Taliban officials in Pakistan.

In addition, the indictment states, Ahmad and unnamed co-conspirators bought camouflage suits, global positioning equipment and gas masks for Islamic militants.

While federal prosecutors described Ahmad's material support for terrorist groups as significant, they said the primary threat posed by his Web sites was their power to spread dangerous ideas by exhorting people around the world to take up arms and become Islamic fighters themselves.

Kohlmann, the terrorism researcher, said Azzam.com made its reputation in part by hawking some of the
earliest English-language videotapes to glorify Islamic fighters. One top-selling video, titled "Martyrs of Bosnia," was produced in 1997 and featured a masked narrator -- thought to be Ahmad -- waving an automatic rifle and urging Muslims to go to the Balkans to kill nonbelievers.

After the Sept. 11 attacks, Azzam.com printed a lengthy article in praise of the "Nineteen Lions," a reference to the 19 hijackers who crashed airplanes into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a field in Pennsylvania.

"The attacks on September 11 2001, which saw the WTC turned to rubble and destroyed an entire section of the Pentagon, were the single most courageous and momentous act of Modern History, sending shockwaves throughout the World, which are still palpable today," read the article, signed by a person who identified himself as Muadh bin Abdullah Al-Madani, from Uruzgan, Afghanistan. "Without doubt, it was the defining moment in the battle between those who wish to destroy Islam and those who wish to make the Name of Allah Most High."

Mounting a Defense

U.S. prosecutors have outlined their case against Ahmad in an indictment and a supporting affidavit filed last year in U.S. District Court in Connecticut, which is where the Briton will face trial if he is extradited. The British government is scheduled to decide in September whether to approve Ahmad's transfer, although both sides expect the case will be appealed to the British High Court.

Ahmad was first arrested in December 2003 by British police on suspicion of terrorist activities, but they released him after a week and declined to file charges. U.S. prosecutors pressed their own charges nine months later, claiming jurisdiction because he allegedly used Internet service providers in Connecticut and Nevada.

During a series of extradition hearings in London since then, U.S. government officials have made other allegations against Ahmad, accusing him of attempting to organize a training camp for Islamic militants in Arizona in 1998 and meeting people near Phoenix who had access to bin Laden. Lawyers representing the U.S. government during the extradition hearings have also said that Ahmad tried to buy 5,000 tons of sulfur phosphate, allegedly for mixing explosives, in 1997 and 1998.

Although London earned a reputation in the 1990s as a haven for Islamic extremists and radical clerics who took advantage of free speech protections to advocate violence and the overthrow of governments, Ahmad did his work secretly and went to considerable lengths to conceal his identity as the sponsor of Azzam.com, according to the indictment.

Ahmad's relatives dismissed the charges as "rubbish" and said he was being unfairly targeted because he filed a brutality complaint against British police after he was arrested in 2003. Neither he nor his family have responded in detail to the charges against him.

"As far as the allegations, we're not going to talk about them," his wife, Maryam Ahmad, said in an interview. "If they are the ones giving the allegations, let them prove it."

Family members said it is telling that British authorities have not filed their own charges against Ahmad, given that he allegedly operated Azzam.com while living in London.
"If you think he is guilty, why not give him a fair trial in this country?" Maryam Ahmad said. "For us to mount a defense for Babar would be very, very easy. Their case would crumble. If it did come to trial, we could form a very solid defense. That's undisputed."

Declining to address the facts of the case, or to discuss his political and religious views, Ahmad and his family have instead focused on portraying him as a normal, middle-class British professional.

His Web site features a black-and-white photo of him as a smooth-faced toddler, eschewing adult pictures that would reveal his full beard, a suggestion of strict Islamic faith. The site describes in detail how as a child he was kind to animals, and includes dozens of testimonials from friends and colleagues. It also asserts that he never had any scrapes with the law, not even a parking ticket, before his arrest.

Ahmad's most outspoken supporters in Britain include luminaries such as actress Vanessa Redgrave and several members of Parliament. With Redgrave's backing, Ahmad ran for Parliament in May on a platform of overhauling Britain's anti-terrorism laws.

Confined to his prison cell during the campaign, he received only 685 votes, or about 2 percent of the total cast in his district. But he managed to stir debate over a new treaty that provides for the speedier extradition of British terrorism suspects, such as himself, to the United States. The treaty allows the United States to seek extradition of Britons without submitting specific evidence of their guilt, and even if they do not face criminal charges at home, but the extraditable offense must be punishable by the laws of both states.

"Electing Babar would be the most powerful message on human rights and justice that could be given," the actor Corin Redgrave, Vanessa's brother, said at a campaign event in April, when he announced that he had recruited Ahmad to run for Parliament as a member of the antiwar Peace and Progress Party. "Just let the Americans try to say that an elected MP should be extradited."

**Tracking a Cyber-Activist**

U.S. law enforcement officials have said Ahmad secretly operated the Azzam.com and its sister Web sites while studying and working at Imperial College, a science, technology and engineering school in central London.

After receiving a master's degree in mechanical engineering six years ago, Ahmad landed a job at Imperial as a computing and networking specialist and worked there full time until his arrest in August 2004. U.S. prosecutors allege that he ran his Web site in part by relying on college networks; British police raided his campus office when he was first arrested in 2003. Imperial College officials did not respond to phone calls and e-mails seeking comment.

Friends and colleagues at Imperial said they had no inkling of Ahmad's Internet activities. Although he was active in the campus Islamic Society, they said he was seen as a voice of moderation, not extremism.

When a controversial Islamic sect tried to establish a presence at Imperial a few years ago, Ahmad was outspoken in opposing the group but also tried to calm tensions by building consensus among Muslim students, said Mustafa Arif, the president of the Imperial College student union.

"He was the father figure in that debate," said Arif, who has known Ahmad for six years. "A lot of the vitriolic talk he was opposed to. He was one of those Muslims whose views were that Muslims need to sort
themselves out before they can deal with who they think their oppressors are. That's why it was such a shock when he was arrested. It just went counter to everything we knew about him."

British and U.S. officials started paying close attention to Ahmad after the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States. U.S. Homeland Security agents said in court papers that they began investigating Ahmad and Azzam.com four years ago.

In an interview for a BBC documentary last month, Andrew Ramsey, a friend of Ahmad, said he was approached a few years ago by the British domestic intelligence service, MI5, and offered money to spy on the webmaster. Ramsey said he declined.

Ramsey said he converted to Islam largely because of Ahmad's influence. He said Ahmad introduced him to Azzam.com, which persuaded him to travel to Afghanistan to help the Taliban before the militia was removed from power during the U.S.-led invasion of the country.

"Azzam was an English Web site for a start. That made a lot of impact," Ramsey said. "An English Web site that covered a controversial issue, which is the issue of jihad. When the first set of images started coming through -- murdered children, murdered women, murdered men -- it has that kind of shock effect, like, 'Wow!' "

Azzam.com struggled to remain on the Internet after Sept. 11, as the U.S. government and private groups pressured its Web service providers to yank the site because of its content. Azzam.com vanished and reappeared several times in different formats over the next several months, before giving up for good in late 2002, although other Web sites still carry some of its original postings, pamphlets and videos.

It is unclear why U.S. prosecutors waited until last summer to file charges against Ahmad. Virtually all of the crimes described in the indictment against him occurred before 2002, and he is not alleged to have attempted to rebuild his Web sites in recent years.

One possible explanation can be traced to the arrest in July 2004 of an accused al Qaeda operative in Pakistan, Muhammad Naeem Noor Khan. A British citizen, Khan was caught with laptops that allegedly contained detailed surveillance information on financial targets in the United States, including the World Bank headquarters in Washington, according to U.S. and Pakistani officials.

U.S. intelligence officials said Khan is also Ahmad's cousin. Although they declined to comment on whether their cases are related, Khan reportedly cooperated with Pakistani and U.S. investigators after his arrest, agreeing to send e-mails to other al Qaeda figures in an attempt to entrap them.

Staff researcher Julie Tate in Washington contributed to this report.
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