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Al-Qaeda cleric exposed as an MI5 double agent

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Allies say warnings were ignored

ONE of al-Qaeda's most dangerous figures has been revealed as a double agent working for MI5, raising criticism from European governments, which repeatedly called for his arrest.

Britain ignored warnings — which began before the September 11 attacks — from half a dozen friendly governments about Abu Qatada's links with terrorist groups and refused to arrest him. Intelligence chiefs hid from European allies their intention to use the cleric as a key informer against Islamic militants in Britain.

Abu Qatada boasted to MI5 that he could prevent terrorist attacks and offered to expose dangerous extremists, while all along he was setting up a haven for his terror organisation in Britain.

Among the scores of young militants who came to visit him in London was the chief suspect in the Madrid train bombings. His followers also included people who wanted to be suicide bombers for al-Qaeda, such as Richard Reid, the shoe bomber.

A special tribunal that has investigated his operations in Britain described him as "a truly dangerous individual". A ruling by the Special Immigrations Appeals Commission revealed yesterday that there was evidence to show that Abu Qatada "has been concerned in the instigation of acts of international terrorism".

A security source in Madrid said yesterday: "Who knows how much violence and bloodshed could have been prevented if Britain had heeded the warnings about this man a long time ago."

With terrorism at the top of the agenda at the European Union summit today in Brussels, Tony Blair is bound to be asked about MI5's history with Abu Qatada and other militant clerics who have used Britain as their base.

Spain, France, Italy, Germany, the United States and Jordan all asked to question Abu Qatada about his links to al-Qaeda but were refused.

Instead, MI5 agents held three meetings with the cleric, who bragged of his influence among young Islamic militants and insisted that they were no risk to Britain's national security.

He pledged to MI5 that he would not "bite the hand that fed him".

He also promised to "report anyone damaging the interests of this country". Instead, he was recruiting for al-Qaeda training camps.

His continued liberty for years after international demands for his arrest was an embarrassment for Britain. When David Blunkett introduced his controversial Anti-terrorism Crime and Security Act, 2001, which allowed him to detain foreign suspects without trial, Abu Qatada claimed that the law "was enacted with him particularly in

He disappeared from his family home in West London just before the law came into force.

Indignant French officials accused MI5 of helping the cleric to abscond. While he remained on the run, one intelligence chief in Paris was quoted as saying: “British intelligence is saying they have no idea where he is, but we know where he is and, if we know, I’m quite sure they do.”

Almost a year later Abu Qatada was found hiding in a flat not far from Scotland Yard.

Abu Qatada was appealing against his continued detention in Belmarsh top security prison, but Mr Justice Collins ruled that the cleric was “at the centre in the UK of terrorist activities associated with al-Qaeda”.

He is a Jordanian national who arrived here with a forged United Arab Emirates passport in September 1993 claiming asylum.

Jordan told Britain that he had been convicted for terrorist attacks in Amman seven months before September 11.

Spanish investigators produced evidence that a militant they had in custody in Madrid — Abu Dahdah — had visited the cleric more than 25 times, bringing him money and new recruits.

Abu Qatada was banned by most mainstream mosques, so held his own meetings at the Four Feathers Club, near Baker Street in Central London. His lawyer says that he “entirely denies” any involvement with terrorism.

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