

CIA flights

Khadr, aged 22, from Al Qaeda to the CIA.

Coming from Kabul and Guantanamo, he stopped over in Santa Maria in 2003, on the way to Bosnia.

Abdurahman Khadr, son of a founder member of Al Qaeda. Photographed on 6 September 2006 in Canada

He was 17 when he was captured. He agreed to collaborate with the CIA in exchange for a promise of release. Portugal will always remain associated with this flight. Abdurahman Khadr left the Guantánamo base in Cuba on 6 November 2003 and landed on Portuguese territory at 3.08 on the following day, at Santa Maria airport, in the Azores, on a 19-seater Gulfstream 4 jet registered under the serial number N85VM and belonging to Richmore Aviation.

Khadr was not able to leave the aircraft but remembers the time spent in the Azores. 'I remember the humid weather, and the man wearing a coat who was waiting on the landing strip, got on to speak to the CIA agents and got off immediately afterwards, and the huge yellow "Santa Maria Airport" sign', he said to the Expresso. He was in transit, like many others, in this case on the way to Bosnia.

Stubbornness of a child

In Afghanistan, in 2001, he reacted with the stubbornness of a child, annoyed at being obliged by his father to train everyday in the Al Qaeda camps with the aim of becoming a suicide bomber. The destiny mapped out for him was to 'die young'. However, Abdurahman Khadr, the 'black sheep of Al Qaeda', wanted something quite different. Far from there, along the lines of what he had experienced as a child in Canada, where he was born in 1984 and which he had left with his family at the beginning of the 1990s to travel to the ill-fated Asian country and embark on the Jihad (holy war) adventure. He secretly drank coca cola, watched Western films and read American authors, all mortal sins for any guerilla fighter, which he was not. He was in fact the son of Ahmed Said Khadr, a founder member of the organisation and a close friend of Osama Bin Laden's. 'We would visit them, his children would play with us out in the street', said Khadr to the Expresso.

Parental authority could not be challenge and therefore, prevailed and there was no way that he could avoid his destiny. 'I will stay there for ever', he thought at that moment. One month after the 11 September attacks, when an international coalition led by the United States invaded Afghanistan, the by then 17-year-old was captured carrying a weapon. He struggled before being taken. His father was killed later that day. He then spent some time in prison: in the first few months at the Bagram airbase, in the Kabul suburbs, and then inevitably at Guantánamo prison. He had agreed meanwhile to collaborate with the CIA in exchange for his freedom and the kind of life which he had dreamt of. Portugal will remain forever associated with this change of direction owing to the stopover of the Gull Stream 4 jet in Santa Maria. Between 2001 and 2005 the same aircraft, one of the aircraft used by the CIA, made 80 flights to carry prisoners to various European, African and Asian countries. Italy, Germany, Romania, Switzerland, the

Czech Republic, Morocco, Afghanistan, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Japan are a few examples of these. Its serial number has since then changed to N227 SV.

The Expresso received confirmation of all these details from various MEPs involved in the drafting of a report on the subject within the European Parliament's Temporary Committee. Richmore Aviation has admitted that it was requisitioned on various occasions by the US secret services. The Members of the European Parliament maintain that it is merely a front company which in fact works exclusively for the CIA.

Stopover in the Azores

The quietness of this airport in the Azores remains engraved in Kahdr's memory, including the 'calm atmosphere and early air traffic'. No inspection was made of the aircraft. The Gulfstream jet in question is authorised to land in all North American military bases around the world. Although Lajes was nearby, it was decided to land at Santa Maria, a civil airport at which no authorisation is necessary to land. After refuelling, they left at 5.35 for the Tuzla military base in Bosnia. Abdurahman could look forward to the mission of his life, which would restore his freedom. After six days on arrival at Tuzla, he left for Sarajevo. His aim was to infiltrate the local Muslim community and identify an Al Qaeda recruiting agent, long wanted by the American secret services. He did what he had been ordered to do and returned to his native country. In Canada, he has daily nightmares based on his memories of Afghanistan – the dust, weapons, blood and war. Nevertheless, he says: 'May be I can die a little later'.

Ricardo Loureno, special envoy to Canada 14 terrorists in transit

On Wednesday, George W Bush announced that 14 'terrorists' held in secret CIA prisons would be transferred to Guantánamo, where they would be tried. The US President denied that any of them had been tortured and said that the CIA secret operations had been essential to prevent further attacks. Among the prisoners, Bush mentioned the names of four Al Qaeda leaders, accused of involvement in the 11 September attacks. These are Abu Zubaydah, Ramzi bin al Shibh, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, Majid Khan and two Jemaah Islamiya leaders, who were the 'brains' behind the Bali and Jakarta attacks, Zubair and Hambali. The other persons transferred include close collaborators of Osama Bin Laden, such as his former cook and former bodyguard.

N.G.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

International aviation rules of state and military flights

What are state flights?

Flights on behalf of a country. For instance, an aircraft leased to carry humanitarian aid or a presidential entourage. No tax is charged and there are no inspections.

Who authorises such flights?

The Foreign Ministry. The Defence Ministry is consulted in the case of a military aircraft. The only obligation is to inform the Portuguese and European air traffic control authorities.

Can the CIA lease an aircraft anonymously?

Yes, as an air taxi flight. Private flights from which no passengers disembark merely submit their flight plan (to the air traffic control bodies and the airport of destination) and indicate what is being taken on board. Confidentiality is guaranteed, but an inspection may take place in the event of a complaint.

Do refuelling stopovers required authorisation?

No. Because there is no disembarking of passengers or freight.

Can civil aircraft freely use a country's airspace?

This freedom is limited only for operators who do not duly respect security.

NUMBER

131. Almost 150 alleged CIA flights have been identified in Portugal, out of a total of 1080 identified around the world.