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The pious and clever young chemistry student who left Cairo's slums behind

By Anton La Guardia, Marco Giannangeli, Paul Stokes and Hugh Miles in Cairo

IN THE squalid, working-class Cairo district of Abu Breik, where donkeys piled high with merchandise trot through raw sewage, Magdy Elnashar is respected as the reserved, pious and clever young man who studied hard and made it to Britain to study for his PhD. The postgraduate biochemist, who has been detained in Cairo in connection with the London bombings, grew up in a tiny apartment on the first floor of a decrepit five-storey building a stone's throw from the local mosque. Elnashar's father, Mahmoud, now lives in a larger apartment nearby, but neighbours said he regularly came by to water the plants. "He was here about 15 days ago", said an elderly woman neighbour. "I haven't seen Magdy for two years, but Mahmoud promised me his son would stop by and greet me as soon as he had recovered from his trip. Then as soon as he came, the police kidnapped him." Elnashar's father, a retired engineer, expressed astonishment at the fate of his son. "I wasn't aware that the police were searching for him. It is impossible that my son could have planned such a terrible thing as that," he said. The elder Mr Elnashar worked for the Othman Ahmed Othman company, one of the largest Arab contracting firms in the Middle East, known among other things for constructing many missile bases. But after a back injury he retired early and started work as a welder. His workshop is on the ground floor, beneath the family house. Yesterday its shutters were closed. Elnashar gained a BSc in biochemistry at Cairo University in 1994, and obtained his masters in 1998. The following year he received a National Research Centre Scholarship to study biochemistry at Leeds University, but spent a semester studying chemical engineering at North Carolina State University. Before leaving Cairo, Elnashar, his younger brother Muhammad, and their father prayed at the mosque five times a day, including every dawn prayer. The former imam of the mosque said Elnashar used to offer free chemistry lessons to young students in his spare time. For many years Elnashar did not have a beard, although he had a zabiba, or indent on his forehead, from his constant prayer. His sister, Mona, wears a full face veil, which is unusual in Egypt. Like all of the three children, she was well-educated and a university graduate and is married to a local man. Those who knew Elnashar in Egypt insist

that although he was religiously devoted, he was no extremist. Hamdi Hamouda, the head of Cairo University's chemistry department, said: "Elnashar was one of Cairo University's top students. He was a quiet person, and I certainly do not remember him joining in any political activities, or student demonstrations of any kind." She was supported by another member of staff. "I remember him well from the time that he was doing his masters," said the female academic. "He certainly never seemed to possess any extreme ideas, and did not strike me as someone who had different or radical religious ideologies. I remember that he did not even wear a beard. He had a promising future ahead of him, and it is very difficult to believe he's behind the attacks. It must be a mistake by British police." A fellow post-graduate student, Tareq Mohammad, added: "He wasn't someone who had many friends, but that was the case with students who took their university studies very seriously and cared only about their performance. He was a bright person and he wasn't one of the students who talked about politics or religion in class." Leaders of the university's many Islamist associations said that Elnashar was never a member. "He was never part of our group - in fact, we weren't even aware of his existence until we heard his name in the news recently," said Mahmoud Abdel Qadar, a former head of the university's Islamist Movement group. Elnashar's doctorate at Leeds, on which he started research in October 2000, focused on the "development of a novel matrix for the immobilisation of enzymes for biotechnology". This is regarded as a "green" subject involving enzymes and chemically inactive substances with applications for food and environmental science. He submitted his work in February this year and was awarded his PhD on May 6. A spokesman for the university said: "We understand he was seeking a post-doctoral position in the UK and that his visa was updated by the Home Office early this year." Eight months ago, Elnashar was awarded a Bioscience Yorkshire Enterprise Fellowship, but he made no use of it. The funding was to assist his investigation into developing a new biocatalyst to market for industrial use. In a joint statement, Bioscience Yorkshire and the funding body Yorkshire Forward said: "As a fellow, Dr Magdy Elnashar was entitled to financial support of up to pounds 30,000. "However, none of this was accessed, and his only involvement with the scheme was his attendance at four workshops organised by the fellowship. The last of these was on Jan 24, 2005." It is not clear how the investigation into the London bombings took in Elnashar, who has not been seen on campus since the beginning of July. Reports have linked him to a two-bedroom, ground-floor flat in Alexandra Grove, in the Burley area of Leeds. This connection is believed to have been raised on Tuesday by police who entered five other properties, including the homes of three of the four suicide bombers, in West Yorkshire. Police say "materials" were found in the flat. This is believed to be a large quantity of acetone peroxide, the explosive that security sources said was used in the London bombs. It is made by mixing chemicals that are easily available, but the chemical is dangerously unstable. Six hundred surrounding homes were evacuated on Tuesday as Bomb Squad officers, explosives experts and scientists were called in. The flat is owned

by Leeds Federated Housing Association, which said it was currently unoccupied. It was providing police with details of its previous tenants. Elnashar is believed to have rented several properties in the Hyde Park area of Leeds during his time as a postgraduate student. One of them was being searched yesterday. News of his detention in Cairo emerged yesterday. According to Egyptian sources, he was not being held under anti-terror regulations. Egyptian officials expressed a willingness to extradite him to Britain if he is charged, but appeared to be giving him at least some benefit of the doubt. "He has denied any involvement in the London bombings," said an Interior Ministry official. "He said he had come back to Egypt for a month and a half holiday and was planning to go back to Britain to resume his studies and that all his belongings are still in his flat in Leeds."

