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Prague Revisited

The evidence of an Iraq/al-Qaida connection hasn't gone away.

By Edward Jay Epstein

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Partners in crime?

This month, I went to Prague to meet with Czech officials who had directly handled the pre-9/11 expulsion of a senior Iraqi diplomat, a case that would become known as the [Prague Connection](#). Because it goes to the heart of the issue of whether Saddam Hussein might have played a role in the attack on the World Trade Center, this [controversy](#) has continued to rage, without any

Partners in crime?

satisfying conclusion, for more than two years.

The background: On April 21, 2001, the CIA's liaison officer at the U.S. Embassy in Prague was briefed by the Czech counterintelligence service (known by its Czech acronym, BIS) about an extraordinary development in a spy case that concerned both the United States and the Czech Republic. The subject of the briefing was Ahmad Khalil Ibrahim Samir al-Ani, the consul at Iraq's embassy in Prague.

The reason there had been joint Czech-American interest in the case traced back to the December 1998 when al-Ani's predecessor at the Iraq Embassy, Jabir Salim, defected from his post. In his debriefings, Salim said that he had been supplied with \$150,000 by Baghdad to prepare a car-bombing of an American target, the Prague headquarters of Radio Free Europe. (This bombing never took place because Salim could not recruit a bomber.)

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So when al-Ani replaced Salim at the Iraq Embassy in Prague in 1999, both the United States and the Czech Republic wanted him closely watched in case he had a similar assignment. The BIS handled the surveillance through its own full-time teams and its network of part-time "watchers" at hotels, restaurants, and other likely locations. Then, on April 8, 2001, a BIS watcher saw al-Ani meeting in a restaurant outside Prague with an Arab man in his 20s.

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This set off alarm bells because a BIS informant in the Arab community had provided information indicating that the person with whom al-Ani was meeting was a visiting "student" from Hamburg—and one who was potentially dangerous.

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On my trip, I spoke to Jan Kavan, who in 2001 was foreign minister and coordinator of intelligence. According to Kavan—who to my knowledge has not spoken publicly about this episode before—al-Ani had previously been spotted taking photos of the headquarters of Radio Free Europe. In this context, the restaurant meeting suggested that al-Ani might be recruiting someone to resume the bombing plot. Adding to the tension, the BIS lost track of the "student." So Kavan decided to act: He ordered al-Ani out of the Czech Republic.

During the next 48 hours, as al-Ani prepared his hasty departure, the CIA liaison called both the BIS liaison and the Czech National Security Office for further details about the expulsion, which presumably he then passed on to the FBI and other relevant parties. Kavan's able deputy, Hynek Kmonicek, arranged for al-Ani to exit via Vienna, Austria. As far as Kavan was concerned, the al-Ani problem was, if not resolved, then in the hands of American intelligence

The issue re-emerged three days after the 9/11 attack when the CIA intelligence liaison was told by the BIS that the Hamburg "student" who had met with al-Ani on April 8 had been tentatively identified as the 9/11 hijacker Mohamed Atta. Since al-Ani was an officer of Saddam Hussein's intelligence (and diplomatic) service, this identification raised the possibility that Saddam might have had a hand in the 9/11 attack. It could also be potentially embarrassing, as Kavan pointed out, "if American intelligence had failed before 9/11 to adequately appreciate the significance of the April meeting."

Kavan, in the newly created position of coordinator for intelligence, was in the center of the ensuing "crisis," as he termed it. He gave the FBI full access to the Czech side of the investigation. Two Czech-speaking FBI agents were allowed not only to sit in on the high-level task force evaluating the intelligence but to examine source material. If Atta was at the meeting, he could not have used his own passport to enter the Czech Republic, so the BIS assumed he had used a false identity and began checking through visa records for suspicious visitors in April, examining grainy videotapes from cameras at airports, bus stations, and game arcades. As the investigation was still in an early stage, the FBI had been asked to keep the identification of Atta secret, but within a week, the Prague connection was leaked to the press—from Washington. On Sept. 18, 2001, the Associated Press reported, "A U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the United States has received information from a foreign intelligence service that Mohamed Atta, a hijacker aboard one of the planes that slammed into the World Trade Center, met earlier this year in Europe with an Iraqi intelligence agent." CBS then reported that Atta had been seen with al-Ani.

In Washington, the FBI moved to quiet the Prague connection by telling journalists that it had car rentals and records that put Atta in Virginia Beach, Va., and Florida close to, if not during, the period

when he was supposed to be in Prague. The *New York Times*, citing information provided by "federal law enforcement officials," reported that Atta was in Virginia Beach on April 2, 2001, and by April 11, "Atta was back in Florida, renting a car." *Newsweek* reported that, "the FBI pointed out Atta was traveling at the time [in early April 2001] between Florida and Virginia Beach, Va.," adding, "The bureau had his rental car and hotel receipts." And intelligence expert James Bamford, after quoting FBI Director Robert Mueller as saying that the FBI "ran down literally hundreds of thousands of leads and checked every record we could get our hands on," reported in *USA Today*, "The records revealed that Atta was in Virginia Beach during the time he supposedly met the Iraqi in Prague."

All these reports attributed to the FBI were, as it turns out, erroneous. There were no car rental records in Virginia, Florida, or anywhere else in April 2001 for Mohamed Atta, since he had not yet obtained his Florida license. His international license was at his father's home in Cairo, Egypt (where his roommate Marwan al-Shehhi picked it up in late April). Nor were there other records in the hands of the FBI that put Atta in the United States at the time. Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet testified to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence in June 2002, "It is possible that Atta traveled under an unknown alias" to "meet with an Iraqi intelligence officer in Prague." Clearly, it was not beyond the capabilities of the 9/11 hijackers to use aliases.

But just because Atta could have been in Prague did not mean that he met al-Ani there on April 8, 2001. Eyewitness identification can often be mistaken. It was known, however, that Atta had business in Prague prior to the 9/11 attack. Kmonicek, the deputy foreign minister, had found a paper trail of passport records showing that Atta had applied for a visa to visit the Czech Republic on May 26, 2000 in Bonn, Germany. Atta must have had business there, since he could have transited through the Czech Republic on Czech Air without a visa.

Atta's business appeared to be extremely time sensitive and specific to May 30. When Atta learned in Hamburg that his Czech visa would not be ready until May 31, he nevertheless flew on May 30 to the Prague International Airport, where he would not be allowed to go beyond the transit lounge. Although a large part of this area is surveiled by cameras, he managed to spend all but a few minutes out of their range. After some six hours, he then caught a flight back to Hamburg. From this visaless round trip, Czech intelligence inferred that Atta had a meeting on May 30 that could not wait, even a day—and that whoever arranged it was probably familiar with the transit lounge's surveillance. Finally, the BIS determined that the Prague connection was not limited to a single appointment since Atta returned to Prague by bus on June 2 (now with visa BONN200005260024), and, after a brief wait in the bus station, disappeared for nearly 20 hours before catching a flight to the United States.

The Czechs reviewing these visits in retrospect further assumed that Atta's business in Prague was somehow related to his activities in the

United States, given that large sums of laundered funds began to flow to the 9/11 conspiracy in June 2000, after Atta left Prague. Even more ominous, if the BIS's subsequent identification of Atta in Prague was accurate, then some part of the mechanism behind the activities of hijacker-terrorists may have been based in Prague at least until mid April 2001.

Czech intelligence services could not solve this puzzle without access to crucial information about Atta's movements in the United States, Germany, and other countries in which the plot unfolded, but it soon became clear that such cooperation would not be forthcoming. Even after al-Ani was taken prisoner by U.S. forces in Iraq in July 2003 and presumably questioned about Atta, no report was furnished to the Czech side of the investigation. "It was anything but a two-way street," a top Czech government official overseeing the case explained. "The FBI wanted complete control. The FBI agents provided us with nothing from their side of the investigation."

Without those missing pieces—including cell phone logs, credit card charges, and interrogation records in the FBI's possession—the jigsaw puzzle remains incomplete.

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Edward Jay Epstein is the author of [Dossier: The Secret History of Armand Hammer](#) and other books about deception.

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Remarks from the Fray:

This is probably the best-written attempt to lay out this case we've yet read ... The info about the May 2000 visit does seem pretty good, and should prompt some other questions, as we'll go into below.

However, the sole reed of evidence linking this to Iraq is the April 2001 meeting. And that's where the problem hangs.

Since there is no official record of Atta entering the Czech Republic at that time, the sellers of the 9/11-Iraq link through this rely on the BIS/watchers id of Atta meeting with Al-Ani (who, by the way, is back in Iraq in U.S. custody now ... he could certainly confirm or deny this, or we could hear about it)...

Even if it was Atta, it would not justify the U.S. war, to us, unless you could also prove that:

- a) Atta and Al-Ani discussed 9/11 (whether he had fully formulated the plot at that time is still not known ... he had come up with the idea, it is believed, but only in early August did he get the go-ahead)
- b) Al-Ani passed this knowledge back to Baghdad, and it was taken seriously there...

Now, about May 30, 2000 ...

Obviously Epstein is right to suggest that, if his Czech sources aren't bullshitting him, that someone with some intelligence tradecraft was involved in scheduling that meeting. But that hardly means it was necessarily Iraqi.

Could it have been someone from another country? The big one just south of Iraq that the FBI under Bush has been so consistently steered away from? That would certainly explain why the FBI wanted to take over the entire case.

--SullyWatch

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maybe I didn't get Epstien's analysis correct, so don't jump all over me if I didn't understand this correctly....

Epstien is saying that because Atta had no driver's license, it is impossible to prove that he was in the United States at the time of the reported meeting. Since it is impossible to prove that he was in the US, it is impossible to prove that he wasn't in the Czech republic at that time, therefore he had to be in the Czech republic.

Furthermore since the Czech airport cameras were not comprehensive in the their coverage of the airport, and he did not show up on any of the cameras, then he must have been avoiding the cameras when he was there. Since he was avoiding the cameras at that time, then he must have been in the airport, since he could not have been avoiding the cameras if he wasn't in the airport.

Furthermore, since he talked to someone from Iraq when he was not in the US because we can't prove he was in the US and was in the

airport because we can't prove that he wasn't in the airport, he must have been talking to the person about funding from Saddam himself for the attack on the World Trade Center, since we don't know what he was talking to this person about.

I suppose that the fact that we can't find the NBC weapons where we said they were suppose to be proves catagorically that those weapons are somewhere where we haven't looked for them, and it is just a matter of time before we find them.

I think that is how that works.

--ejk_

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...Boil down this tripe, and we have this: Atta may have been in Prague at times OTHER than the date of the alleged meeting of an Iraqi diplomat/spy with GASP some Arab dude. We can't establish, as far as we know, where Atta was on the date of that meeting. Surely enough to prove nothing and nothing more.

The overriding question is this: what did Al Qaeda need Iraq for? They had money, organization, motive and opportunity. They've essentially taken credit. On the other hand, not one shred of evidence has been found in Iraq to support a link, on either this tenuous assertion, or any other. Does the author contend, even for a second, that US intelligence agencies have evidence linking Atta to Iraqi intelligence and just isn't sharing it? Pahlease...

--doodahman

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(11/19)

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