

Yousef To Stand Trial For World Trade Center Bombing

Npr, News; Domestic
September 12, 1996
MELISSA BLOCK;
1258 words

Does Ramzi **Yousef** have a political agenda or is he a killer-for-hire? Investigators want to know who he is, whether he is sponsored by a foreign government, and what his connections are.

Yousef to Stand Trial for World Trade Center Bombing BOB EDWARDS, Host: This is Morning Edition; I'm Bob Edwards.

After a three-month trial, there are still questions about the man who prosecutors say masterminded the World Trade Center explosion and conspired to blow up U.S. airliners.

Ramzi Ahmed **Yousef** is one of three men convicted last week of terrorist conspiracy to blow up a dozen U.S. planes flying from Asia. It was the third conviction in two years in a series of interconnected plots that began with the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993. Investigators want to know just who **Yousef** is and who may have sponsored his terrorist activities.

From New York, **NPR's** Melissa Block reports.

MELISSA BLOCK, Reporter: This much is known - Ramzi Ahmed **Yousef** arrived at New York's Kennedy International Airport on September 1st, 1992. He presented an Iraqi passport, said he was fleeing persecution and requested asylum. At that time, **Yousef's** name wasn't even known to the government. He wasn't on the watch list of suspected terrorists and he was allowed to enter the country.

Less than six months later, prosecutors say **Yousef** packed a 1,200-pound bomb inside a van that was driven beneath the World Trade Center. The resulting explosion killed six and injured more than a thousand. Later that same night, **Yousef** was on a flight to Pakistan.

Within half a year, Ramzi **Yousef** had gone from being waved in at the border to being a fugitive on the FBI's top-ten, most-wanted list. And that, according to FBI Assistant Director James Kallstrom, doesn't add up. JAMES KALLSTROM, Ass't. FBI Director: The notion that someone, you know, would just sort of come here and start from zero and then get to 100 percent or 90 percent - you know, that just isn't the way things happen anymore. So, certainly, he came here with- with certain relationships and associations and- and plans - we're certain of that. MELISSA BLOCK: But a lot more remains uncertain - for example, where Ramzi **Yousef** is from, what his real name is, who may have bankrolled or directed his activities, and what network of relationships or sponsors enabled him to elude capture for two years and, in that time, to craft the airline-bombing plot.

In an interview in his New York office, the FBI's James Kallstrom confirmed that while the airline bombing trial is over, the investigation continues into **Yousef's** connections. JAMES KALLSTROM: We want to know what's behind this type of mentality. We want to know who the other co-conspirators are, we want to know who the other members of the rooting section certainly are, we want to know where the money comes from, we want to know all these things. MELISSA BLOCK: The likelihood that **Yousef's** accomplices are still at large, capable of further destruction, means his conviction is not an end point. The FBI is seeking the capture of one man indicted as a co-conspirator. He's Abdul Rahman Yasin, indicted with **Yousef** for the World Trade Center bombing who fled and is now living in Baghdad.

Again, the FBI's James Kallstrom. JAMES KALLSTROM: We talked about him quite a bit because we do want to bring him in. I can't really share with you where we're at, as far as what day that'll be or when that's gonna happen, but it certainly is something that we think about all the time, as we do about the conspirators that did the Pan Am 103 and- and all the other terrorist acts that are yet unsolved.

MELISSA BLOCK: The pictures of the men charged with blowing up Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie hang on the wall outside Kallstrom's office, a visual reminder of the ones who got away. The FBI says the two men responsible for that bombing are Libyan intelligence officers, and many terrorism experts say it's likely that Ramzi **Yousef** also was sponsored by a foreign government. They strongly doubt that he acted independently.

Vincent Canistraro [sp], former chief of counter-terrorism operations with the CIA, is among those who believe **Yousef** was part of a well-organized group, probably acting on behalf of a state. VINCENT

CANISTRARO, Fmr. CIA Chief of Counter-Terrorism Operations: Ramzi **Yousef** doesn't seem to have any particular ideology of his own. It's not clear that he had a political agenda and moreover, it's not clear that he was a religious militant - so his actions indicate that he's a cold-blooded killer. In other words, he's a- he's a murderer. MELISSA BLOCK: A murderer for hire, Canistraro adds, with the most likely state sponsor being Iraq. If state sponsorship is ever proved, then convictions in court are not enough. Economic or diplomatic sanctions could be ordered, or military retaliation.

Brian Jenkins [sp] is an authority on terrorism with the investigative firm Crowell Associates [sp]. He says the use of trial is, by no means, the final word. BRIAN JENKINS, Terrorism Specialist, Crowell Assoc.: You always derive some satisfaction from a victory by the legal system. It is much less satisfying as a blow against terrorism. We're not running short of terrorists, to be sure. I mean, if we're talking about skillful people with lots of connections, there's not an inexhaustible supply of Ramzi **Yousefs** but, certainly, there is a large reservoir of future potential Ramzi **Yousefs**. MELISSA BLOCK: At the height of the Ramzi **Yousef** trial, as prosecutors were describing plans to blow up a dozen jumbo jets over the Pacific Ocean, killing thousands of passengers, TWA Flight 800 exploded over the Atlantic - 230 people were killed.

FBI Assistant Director James Kallstrom says the coincidence couldn't be ignored. JAMES KALLSTROM: Well, there's certainly a lot of parallels. I mean, their- their conspiracy was to bomb all these airliners and we have an airliner that's- 30 percent of which is still sitting in the ocean. We don't know yet exactly what happened. I'll say for the record it's- it's either a bomb or a missile or it's mechanical or electrical failure of some sort. We don't know the answer yet. I suspect we will know the answer in the next two or three weeks. I hope we will. And then we'll have the challenge to find out, you know, who did it and why they did it and if there are any relationships or parallels or conspiracies involving any of the known terrorist groups, including the three people that we convicted. MELISSA BLOCK: For now, Kallstrom says, the FBI is investigating any group that has committed terrorism in the past. In his words, "Any group with a propensity to blow things up."

The mystery surrounding Ramzi **Yousef** remains nearly as deep now as it was when his case came to trial. More answers may come next year when **Yousef** stands trial on charges he was the architect of the World Trade Center bombing.

In New York, I'm Melissa Block reporting. [This program has been professionally transcribed by Journal Graphics. JG has used its best efforts to assure the transcript accurately reflects **NPR's** original broadcast, but makes no guarantees or representations that the transcription is identical to the original **NPR** broadcast. The official record of an **NPR** broadcast is the audio tape of the original broadcast.]

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