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Was Bomb The Work Of Iraq?

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Washington -- Two years after a terrorist bomb exploded at New York's World Trade Center, federal investigators believe they have most of the key perpetrators and a motive: anti-Western, anti-American Islamic extremism.

But what if the motive was something else: an act of revenge for the 1991 Persian Gulf war and the sanctions that have crippled Iraq ever since? And what if the guiding hand was not Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman, the blind Muslim firebrand, but Saddam Hussein?

This would make the bombing not just a terrorist act, but an act of war. It would put pressure on the Clinton administration both to retaliate in some way against Iraq and to adjust its theories about emerging post-Cold War security threats.

The recent capture of the alleged mastermind of the bombing, Ramzi Yousef, might open the way to clearing up the mystery. Was he a bomb expert who joined a conspiracy by religious extremists, or does he more closely fit the profile of a well-trained agent of **Iraqi intelligence**?

For much of the past two years, suspicion about Iraqi involvement in the World Trade Center bombing has mostly been fanned by just one person, a former Harvard teacher and Middle East expert at Washington think tanks named Laurie Mylroie.

Since mid-1993, she has argued that a Baghdad connection ought to be pursued in the bombing, which occurred close to the second anniversary of the gulf war. Now, she has buttressed her theory with a 242-page narrative that draws heavily from court records from the first New York trial of the bombers. These include records of numerous trans-Atlantic telephone calls between one of the perpetrators and Iraq.

Her case focuses on Mr. Yousef, who entered the United States on an Iraqi passport, and on his connections

to a region called Baluchistan, which straddles Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. As U.S. officials confirm, this area has a history of ties with Iraq. She believes that Mr. Yousef may himself be a Baluch, and may have fled there after the bombing.

Ms. Mylroie concludes that Iraq's intelligence network in Pakistan is key to the plot. She believes that Mr. Yousef, with Iraqi help, assumed the identity of a Pakistani, who may have been killed in Kuwait after the Iraqi invasion. A second Trade Center bombing suspect, Abdul Rahman **Yasin**, was seen by a journalist in Baghdad last June, she says.

Ms. Mylroie makes no claim to impartiality. Once sympathetic to Iraq, she has since become known as a single-minded advocate of a tough U.S. policy against Saddam Hussein's regime. But her research still commands respect in Washington. And while her case is analytical and circumstantial, the recent briefings she has given to national security officials and experts outside government have generated interest in her theory.

At a minimum, said one official who declined to be named, it has persuaded people to look at a possible Iraqi connection with a fresh eye.

James Fox, the former chief of the FBI's New York bureau who oversaw the agency's probe into the Trade Center bombing for 10 months, said: "Her analyses are pretty impressive to me." He has passed Ms. Mylroie's material to other longtime investigators, he says, and "when five or six veteran agents go through it and say it's impressive stuff, that then impresses me."

Peter W. Rodman, a former National Security Council and State Department official and a Middle East expert, said Ms. Mylroie's theory is "plausible and worthy of respect."

"She has done enough to shift the burden of proof onto the U.S. government," he said.

One reason this theory is only now gaining attention is the division between criminal investigations and government policy-makers. Investigators look for evidence against specific individuals and are not expected to think in global policy terms.

And because the bombing occurred on American soil, the Justice Department had the lead in the case. In the bombing of Pan American Flight 103 over Scotland, by contrast, U.S. intelligence agencies were given an early and important role in looking for state sponsorship.

In addition, both President Clinton and his secretary of state, Warren M. Christopher, are lawyers. Mr. Christopher is notably cautious, and believes policy decisions need to be based on the weight of the evidence, not theories or suspicions.

But in the course of the Justice Department's probe into New York- and New Jersey-based Muslim radicals, Ms. Mylroie says, "the whole question of state sponsorship has not been properly examined."

U.S. officials reject the idea that the administration has deliberately avoided coming to grips with Iraq's possible role. Mr. Clinton did order a missile attack on a Baghdad intelligence headquarters after being convinced that Iraq plotted to assassinate former President George Bush. And U.S. officials would like nothing better than to have solid evidence with which to campaign at the United Nations for maintaining sanctions against Iraq.

But the enormity of the Trade Center bombing might call for more than merely maintaining sanctions. The bombers apparently intended more than the destruction of one of the towers' lower levels; they hoped that one of the huge towers would topple onto the second. And the judge who presided over the first trial of the

bombers raised the possibility that poison cyanide gas could have been released and sucked into the north tower, killing all inside.

The implications are far-reaching. They suggest that far from being held in check by sanctions and U.S. and allied forces in the Persian Gulf, Mr. Hussein continues to plot revenge on America and its leaders and will resort to the most destructive scheme possible to achieve his aim.

``You can't understand Saddam without an understanding of what it is to be evil," says Ms. Mylroie. The case also suggests that the current focus of U.S. counterterrorism policy, aimed mostly at Iran, Sudan and their agents around the world, is misplaced, and that containing Iraq should get top priority.

``You don't go to war without having more than suspicion," said Mr. Rodman. ``But suspicion is enough to devote intelligence resources to check this out."

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