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On Feb. 26, 1993, the most ambitious terrorist strike ever on US soil was undertaken -- a 1,500-pound bomb exploded at the base of New York City's World Trade Center, leaving six dead, nearly 1,000 injured and a profound sense that America was not immune to terrorism. Now, as the second trial in the World Trade Center case gets under way this month, prosecutors are expected to argue that a fiery, blind Egyptian cleric led a small group of Arabic-speaking immigrants in a "war of urban terrorism" that encompassed not only the bombing of the twin towers but a foiled plot to strike at other New York landmarks, including the United Nations.

But while attention is focused on the courtroom, experts on terrorism and a growing number of past and present government officials with direct knowledge of the case say that the prosecution may be focused too narrowly on the radical Egyptian cleric, Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, and his cohorts. They say that the planning and sponsorship of the World Trade Center bombing go far beyond Rahman's coterie of Islamic fundamentalists. In interviews with *The Boston Globe*, these officials and experts say they believe there is compelling evidence suggesting the planning and execution of the bombing were sponsored by the Iraqi government -- and that in recent months new information has been brought to light to support that belief.

"I believe the totality of the evidence points toward Iraqi involvement," said James Fox, former special agent in charge of the FBI's New York office and the man credited with solving the bombing case.

"I should say, I arrived at that conclusion after not believing it at first," added Fox, who is now executive vice president of Mutual of America. Fox explained that an eight-page State Department analysis that was classified but made available to him last fall suggested that Iraqi sponsorship of the World Trade Center bombing was the "most likely scenario."

Jesse Clear, a State Department official working on counter-terrorism with the Pentagon, said officials from the two agencies will gather this week to discuss new evidence pointing toward an Iraqi connection.

Clear cautioned that "Iraq is everyone's favorite devil" and that facts still need to be carefully established. But he added, "There is a web of circumstantial evidence that is convincing. . . . We are looking at it closely."

She notes, for example, that the United States has not bothered to seek the extradition of Yasin. Marvin Smilon, a spokesman for the US Attorney's office in New York, declined comment on why the government has not sought Yasin's extradition. But some officials have noted that any extradition agreements would be in question because of the tense relations between the United States and Iraq.

"I think they have tried to make us comfortable with the assumption that the terrorists are all in jail and that the good guys won," said Mylroie. "But I think the American public has a right to know that there are many facts that indicate otherwise."

The more obvious information that points to Iraqi involvement, begins with a simple fact: The only two fugitives in the case entered the United States on Iraqi passports and at least one has reportedly been seen in Baghdad since the bombing. Certainly, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had a motive for the bombing -- to avenge his humiliation in the Gulf War. And Fox and others note that the World Trade bombings occurred on the anniversary of the defeat in Kuwait.

But the trail of evidence brought to light more recently is more complex and more compelling, according to Laurie Mylroie, a former assistant professor at Harvard University and an expert on Iraq who is writing a book on the bombing. After poring over thousands of pages of documents, Mylroie says the Iraqi connection lies in a web of circumstantial evidence ranging from telephone records of a key suspect's repeated calls to

telephone numbers in Iraq, to a link between fugitive Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, the alleged "mastermind" of the bombing, and an Iraqi-sponsored group of rebels in Baluchistan, a desolate territory straddling Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. In a series of recent briefings attended by Pentagon, CIA, and State Department officials, Mylroie has laid out her theory of the case.

In the nearly two years since the bombing, prosecutors and police have kept their focus on the crime scene in this country, and on convicting the defendants in US courts, rather than attempting to probe the wider international questions raised by the case, such as state sponsorship.

So far, that has been a successful strategy. Four of the defendants in the first World Trade Center bombing trial were convicted in federal court in Manhattan and sentenced last May to life in prison. Twelve more defendants are facing trial -- with jury selection still underway -- in the second so-called conspiracy trial, in which prosecutors have invoked a Civil War-era sedition law to try the alleged terrorists.

In this trial, the prosecution has outlined a case against what they call a "jihad organization" for which "training began in the late 1980s and continued through the arrests on June 23, 1993." It contends the conspirators in this movement, according to court documents, operated under the spiritual guidance of the blind Egyptian cleric and trained at secret camps in the United States. It alleges they plotted and executed the World Trade Center bombing, carried out the 1990 assassination of Rabbi Meir Kahane and were foiled in plans to bomb the Lincoln and Holland tunnels, a federal building in downtown Manhattan and the United Nations. But the prosecution's case seems to stop there. There is little in court documents that explores the international connections that may have funded and facilitated the plots.

Most of the defendants in the two trials are immigrants from Egypt and the Sudan and other Arabic-speaking countries. They lived in crowded apartments in Brooklyn and Jersey City, working as taxi drivers and construction workers, and were drawn to the fiery sermons of Sheik Rahman, who spoke at a network of small mosques in New York and New Jersey. It has always been puzzling to terrorism experts how this seemingly ragtag group could have successfully pulled off the construction of what experts believe is the largest terrorist bomb ever, one which came frighteningly close to accomplishing its purported goal: the toppling of the towers and the simultaneous emission of deadly cyanide gas.

If there is, in fact, an Iraqi connection to the bombing, it would shatter the more comforting assumption -- put forth by authorities to date and reported by the media -- that it was merely this small group of Islamic fundamentalists inspired by Sheik Rahman who placed the bomb and that when they were apprehended, the threat to national security was thwarted.

"If you've got the sheik and his group, it makes a clean fit," Clear said. "There is a hesitancy to go further, but the truth is usually not so clear."

A question persists: If there are indications of state sponsorship, and consequently an existing threat -- why has US government appeared so reluctant to pursue them?

Fox suggests the State Department and other federal agencies may have been "reticent" because it could have resulted in the need for military retaliation -- an action that during early 1993 would have been politically sensitive in the wake of the Gulf War and the transition between the Bush and Clinton presidencies.

"There was a tendency by law enforcement to say, 'We got the perpetrators,' and little interest in following state sponsorship," said Vince Cannistraro, former head of the CIA's counter-terrorism unit. After two years of studying the World Trade Center case and doubting an Iraqi connection, Cannistraro has slowly come to the conclusion that many facts point to a connection.

He notes that the case was handled mostly by the FBI and the New York Police Department, which do not

have the expertise on Middle East terrorism needed to trace leads back to a possible international connection. Consequently, "little investigative work was put into figuring it out," he said.

David Christian, spokesman for the CIA, declined comment on specifics of the case, but said, "When it is a domestic question, even though it might have foreign tie-ins, it's treated as a law enforcement matter. The World Trade Center is purely the FBI's province. In addition to turf, there is a lot of sensitivity to sources and methodology. Whenever there is a trial, the public release of information is very carefully done."

Clear said he believes the State Department may have shown a "hesitancy" to dig deeper into this case as part of a desire to "reassure the American public" that the culprits were captured and that, as President Clinton said after the convictions of the four suspects in the first trial, a clear message had been sent that terrorists on US soil will "have the full weight of law enforcement brought against them."

Clear said, "Sometimes the truth is not reassuring."

The trail of evidence that points to an Iraqi connection begins with the fugitive Yousef, says Myroie. The government contends that the lean, darkly bearded Yousef is skilled both in the construction of enormous bombs built from scratch and in ways to elude and circumvent customs officials.

"If there was ever a mastermind in this case, it is Yousef," Fox says.

The State Department is offering a \$2 million reward for Yousef and another fugitive, Abdul Rahman Yasin, an Iraqi who authorities believe was involved in the bombing plot.

Officials say they still don't know for certain whether Yousef is an Iraqi national or a Baluchi from Pakistan who represented himself as an Iraqi among his associates in Jersey City. But one thing is clear: Yousef's trip to New York began in Iraq. In April 1992, using an Iraqi passport, he obtained a visa for Pakistan at the Pakistani Embassy in Baghdad, according to court documents.

That summer, Sheik Rahman was exhorting a small group of Islamic fundamentalists at mosques in Brooklyn and Jersey City. According to court documents, he was railing against the United States as a land of "infidels" and calling for jihad, or holy war, against all enemies of Islam and for the overthrow of the government of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Emad Salem, an FBI informant who is expected to be the government's star witness in the upcoming trial, was penetrating the small band of militants who surrounded the sheik. But the FBI, impatient with the slow progress of the investigation, dropped Salem as a \$500-a-week informant that summer -- just before Yousef and Yasin arrived in the United States, records show.

Meanwhile, Mohammed Salameh, the Palestinian who was convicted in the first bombing trial, was making a lot of phone calls. Salameh's phone bill jumped from \$128 in May to \$1,401 in June and \$2,500 in July, according to phone records entered as evidence. Among the calls Salameh made were 46 calls to Iraq, most of them to his uncle, Kadri Abu Bakr, who had worked as a military officer for the Palestine Liberation Organization before landing in Baghdad.

One telephone call on Salameh's bill that could shed new light on the case is a Baghdad number that was listed by Yasin as his home phone number on his application for a US passport, dated June 21, at the US Embassy in Jordan. Yasin was born in Bloomington, Ind., but raised in Baghdad. Just five days earlier, on June 16, Salameh had called Yasin's number from his Jersey City apartment and spoke with a party on that line for 12 minutes, according to the phone records, which are included in the court file on the case.

Myroie and others investigating a possible Iraqi role in the conspiracy believe that call could establish the

first direct link between one of the convicted bombers and Yasin in Iraq.

In September 1992 Yasin and Yousef landed in Jersey City and moved into the same apartment.

Yousef arrived in the United States via Pakistan, where he met a Palestinian named Ahmad Ajaj, a defendant convicted in the first trial. Yousef bought first-class tickets for the two of them to fly to New York. Ajaj presented a fake passport, crudely put together, and was immediately arrested, which Mylroie interprets as a ploy to draw attention away from Yousef. Waiting just after Ajaj in line at customs, Yousef produced an Iraqi passport and immediately requested political asylum, a move that allowed him to be released pending a court date on the asylum request. He went straight to Jersey City and joined up with Salameh, the government contends, and began building the bomb.

Immediately following the arrest of Salameh in the bombing, the FBI detained Yasin for questioning but he was ultimately able to escape. He told the FBI he knew Salameh, even that he had taught him how to drive the van that carried the bomb, according to court papers. He led them to a safe house where the chemicals had been mixed and gave agents the impression he was going to cooperate in the case.

FBI officials did not take even rudimentary precautions to prevent him from fleeing, such as taking his passport or alerting airlines of his identity, Mylroie contends. An FBI spokesman said he could not comment on how Yasin left the country because the case is still under investigation.

The day after his questioning, Yasin flew to Jordan, and from there traveled to Baghdad, where Newsweek and ABC News have reported that he was last seen.

Yousef planned his escape far in advance, according to court records. He convinced the Pakistani Consulate in New York that he had lost his passport and was able to get a new one under an alias by presenting photocopies of a Pakistani passport in the name of Abdul Basit. Thirteen days before the bombing, he booked his flight out of New York. The ticket indicated he was headed for Baluchistan, a lawless and desolate land where Saddam Hussein's intelligence operation has funded a rebel group and where Mylroie has, through tracing Yousef's phone calls, established an escape route that would suggest he was assisted by contacts in the area where Iraqi intelligence had well-established ties.

Some Middle East experts have doubted Iraqi sponsorship of the bombing because of Saddam Hussein's long-held distrust of Islamic fundamentalists. Sheik Rahman was even criticized by some of his fundamentalist followers -- many of whom have closer ties to Hamas and Iran and have traditionally viewed Iraq as an enemy -- for supporting Saddam Hussein in the war against the United States. But the Baluchistan connection, Mylroie believes, would suggest a natural alliance for Baghdad.

Despite the trail of evidence that lies buried in the tens of thousands of pages of documents related to the World Trade Center bombing case, Mylroie insists that there has been a persistent "lack of keen interest in getting to the bottom of this."

Caption:

1. AP PHOTO / A 1,500-pound bomb that exploded on Feb. 26, 1993, at the World Trade Center in New York left six dead and nearly 1,000 injured.

2. AP PHOTO / An FBI photographer surveys the blast scene. Almost two years later, a search of records has specialists suggesting a link to Iraq.

Memo:

SPECIAL REPORT

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