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Terror Watch: Memo Tying Atta and Saddam a Fake

A document tying the Iraqi leader with the 9/11 terrorist is probably fake. PLUS, how terror financiers manage to stay in business

WEB EXCLUSIVE

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Dec. 17 - A widely publicized Iraqi document that purports to show that September 11 hijacker Mohammed Atta visited Baghdad in the summer of 2001 is probably a fabrication that is contradicted by U.S. law-enforcement records showing Atta was staying at cheap motels and apartments in the United States when the trip presumably would have taken place, according to U.S. law enforcement officials and FBI documents.

The new document, supposedly written by the chief of the Iraqi intelligence service, was trumpeted by the Sunday Telegraph of London earlier this week in a front-page story that broke hours before the dramatic capture of Saddam Hussein. **TERRORIST BEHIND SEPTEMBER 11 STRIKE WAS TRAINED BY SADDAM**, ran the headline on the story written by Con Coughlin, a Telegraph correspondent and the author of the book "Saddam: The Secret Life."

Coughlin's account was picked up by newspapers around the world and was cited the next day by New York Times columnist William Safire. But U.S. officials and a leading Iraqi document expert tell NEWSWEEK that the document is most likely a forgery—part of a thriving new trade in dubious Iraqi documents that has cropped up in the wake of the collapse of Saddam's regime.

"It's a lucrative business," says Hassan Mneimneh, codirector of an Iraqi exile research group reviewing millions of captured Iraqi government documents. "There's an active document trade taking place ... You have fraudulent documents that are being fabricated and sold" for hundreds of dollars a piece.

Mneimneh said he hadn't seen the Telegraph document that purports to place Atta in Baghdad. But he, along with senior U.S. law-enforcement and intelligence officials, said the claims of an Atta trip to Iraq in the months before the September 11 attacks were highly implausible—and contradicted by a wealth of information that has been collected about Atta's movements during the period he was plotting the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The Telegraph story was apparently written with a political purpose: to bolster Bush

administration claims of a connection between Al Qaeda and Saddam's regime. The paper described a "handwritten memo" that was supposedly sent to Saddam Hussein by Tahir Jalil Habbush al-Tikriti, chief of Iraqi intelligence at the time. It describes a three-day "work program" that Atta had undertaken in Baghdad under the tutelage of notorious Palestinian terrorist Abu Nidal, who lived in the Iraqi capital until his death under suspicious circumstances in August 2002.

"Mohammed Atta, an Egyptian national, came with Abu Ammer [who is unidentified] and we hosted him in Abu Nidal's house at Al-Dora under our direct supervision," the document states. "We arranged a work program for him for three days with a team dedicated to working with him ... He displayed extraordinary effort and showed a firm commitment to lead the team which will be responsible for attacking the targets that we have agreed to destroy."

The document, which according to Coughlin was supplied by Iraq's interim government, doesn't say exactly when Atta was supposed to have actually flown to Baghdad. But the memo is dated July 1, 2001, and Coughlin himself places the trip as the summer of 2001.

The problem with this, say U.S. law enforcement officials, is that the FBI has compiled a highly detailed time line for Atta's movements throughout the spring and summer of 2001 based on a mountain of documentary evidence, including airline records, ATM withdrawals and hotel receipts. Those records show Atta crisscrossing the United States during this period—making only one overseas trip, an 11-day visit to Spain that didn't begin until six days after the date of the Iraqi memo.

One FBI document, labeled "Law Enforcement Sensitive," states that during the summer of 2001, Atta "conducted extensive travel" that included visits in Florida, Boston, New York, New Jersey and Las Vegas. Indeed, this and other FBI documents show that during the last few days in June—when the presumed Iraq trip would appear to have occurred—almost all of Atta's movements are accounted for: On June 27, 2001, Atta flew from Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., to Boston. On the morning of June 28, he traveled from Boston to San Francisco (flying first class) where he switched planes and landed in Las Vegas that afternoon at 2:41 p.m. That afternoon, he rented a Chevrolet Malibu from an Alamo rental-car office, set up an account at an Internet café called the Cyber Zone and checked into the EconoLodge motel on Las Vegas Boulevard, a cheap motel in a neighborhood of seedy strip joints that is located barely two blocks from the local FBI office.

The FBI records show Atta logged onto his Cyber Zone Internet account five times over the next two days and then checked out of the EconoLodge at 3:30 a.m. on the morning of July 1. He then returned his rental car and boarded a flight to Denver at 5:59 a.m., landing in Boston later that day. A week later, on July 7, Atta boarded a flight from Boston to Zurich—the first leg on his trip to Spain. He returned to the United States on July 19, 2001.

Much about Atta's movements is still unknown—and most likely will remain so. FBI officials believe, for example, that Atta flew to Las Vegas as part of a series of trips he

took that summer to test security at U.S. airports in preparation for the September 11 attacks. But it is just a theory. The visit to Spain is believed to have been for a meeting with Ramzi bin al-Shibh, one of the planners of the September 11 attacks, who also was in Spain during the same time.

While all of Atta's movements cannot be accounted for, enough is known to make it "highly unlikely" that the September 11 ringleader could have flown off to Baghdad for a three-day work program with Iraqi intelligence, a FBI official told NEWSWEEK. For similar reasons, the bureau has long since discounted claims by Czech intelligence—and widely promoted by some Iraq hawks in the Bush administration—that Atta had flown to Prague to meet with an Iraqi intelligence agent around April 8, 2001.

FBI records show Atta and fellow hijacker Marwan Al-Shehhi checking out of the Diplomat Inn in Virginia Beach, Va., and writing a check for cash for \$8,000 for a SunTrust account in that city on April 4, 2001. For the rest of that week, Atta's cell phone was used to make repeated calls to Florida. On April 11, Atta rented an apartment in Coral Springs, Fla. While acknowledging that a few days are unaccounted for, the FBI has found no evidence that Atta departed the country overseas during this period, an official said.

Mneimneh, the Iraqi document expert, says that there are other reasons to discount the handwritten memo touted by the Telegraph. The document includes another sensational second item: how Iraqi intelligence, helped by a "small team from the Al Qaeda organization," arranged for a shipment from Niger to reach Iraq by way of Libya and Syria. Although the shipment is unspecified, the reference to Niger was immediately suggestive of Bush administration assertions earlier this year that Iraq sought to import yellowcake uranium from that African nation—claims that also have been widely discredited as being based on other forged documents that apparently came from the Niger Embassy in Rome.

Mneimneh says the wording of the document makes him highly suspicious: Iraqi intelligence officials were notoriously conservative and rarely—if ever—put incriminating information in writing. The reference to the Iraqi intelligence working with a "small team from the Al Qaeda organization" is "too explicit," he says.

Ironically, even the Iraqi National Congress of Ahmed Chalabi, which has been vocal in claiming ties between Al Qaeda and Saddam's regime, was dismissive of the new Telegraph story. "The memo is clearly nonsense," an INC spokesman told NEWSWEEK.

Contacted by Newsweek, The Sunday Telegraph's Con Coughlin acknowledged that he could not prove the authenticity of the document. He said that while he got the memo about Mohammed Atta and Baghdad from a "senior" member of the Iraqi Governing Council who insisted it was "genuine," he and his newspaper had "no way of verifying it. It's our job as journalists to air these things and see what happens," he said.

Holes in the Terror Financing Net

What does it take to shut down a major terrorist finance network ? U.S., European and United Nations investigators acknowledge that despite decisions by the Bush administration and the United Nations to put out of business a Swiss-and-Bahamas-based Islamic financial network called Al-Taqwa ("Fear of God" in Arabic), the network's long-time chief, who is also the subject of U.S. and United Nations sanctions, still is fighting to keep some of his businesses open.

Youssef Nada, an elderly Egyptian financier who founded and ran the Al-Taqwa network from bases in southern Switzerland and northern Italy, was designated a terrorist financier by the Bush administration in November 2001. A U.S. Treasury official testified to Congress that Nada had provided financial assistance to Al Qaeda both before and after the 9/11 attacks. In 2002, the Treasury placed more than a dozen companies established by Nada and an Eritrean-born business associate named Ahmed Idris Nasreddin on the U.S. terrorist finance sanctions list.

But U.N. officials and some news organizations recently have reported that despite international and U.S. sanctions, Nada and Nasreddin have continued to operate companies and own businesses—including luxury hotels in Italy owned by Nasreddin. And NEWSWEEK has learned that authorities in the tiny alpine money haven of Liechtenstein have recently failed in efforts to seize control over the remnants of one of Nada's corporate vehicles.

In an apparent effort to keep part of his financial network alive, law-enforcement sources say, Nada successfully applied to Liechtenstein officials for permission to rename two of his companies based in the pocket principality, both of which were in the process of liquidation. Liechtenstein authorities subsequently launched an effort to oust Nada as liquidator of one of the companies, now called Waldenberg, and install a former senior Liechtenstein government official as the new liquidator. This would have given investigators control over what remains of the records of the company, which might have yielded valuable clues as to Nada's financial activities.

But European law-enforcement sources say that a judge in Liechtenstein recently rejected the government's proposals to install a new liquidator, leaving Nada in charge of the failed company—and its critical records. A recent U.N. report noted that even though U.N. sanctions say that officially designated terrorist financiers like Nada must not be allowed to travel internationally, Nada has traveled from his residence in a tiny enclave of Italian territory surrounded by the Swiss canton of Ticino to Liechtenstein on business. A Swiss government official said that due to relaxed travel controls around Europe, it is not practical for the Swiss government to enforce an international travel ban on Nada, who has repeatedly denied any connection to Al Qaeda or terrorism.

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