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How Much Do US Presidents Know about Terror? Part II

Second part of DEBKAFfile Special Report

May 18, 2002

How Much Do US Presidents Know about Terror?

Second part of **DEBKAFfile** Special Report, 18 May, 2002

The most striking living proof that American double agents can be planted in the al Qaeda terror network is not to be found in Guantanamo or in East Afghanistan, which US, Australia, Norwegian, New Zealand and British Royal Marine troops are currently scouring for al Qaeda and Taliban pockets. That proof is to be found in Manhattan, not far from the ruins of the WorldTradeCenter, in a cell of a jail that also holds Ramzi Yousuf and the Blind Sheikh Rahman referred to by Condoleezza Rice.

He is an Egyptian with US citizenship called Ali Muhammad.

Although the US media have poured out many words on this man – the most extensive report appeared in the New York Times on June 5, 1999 – the American public knows very little about him.

Very briefly, in the 1970s, Ali Muhammad was an Egyptian military intelligence officer who as part of his duties cultivated close relations with Egyptian radical Muslim elements. After President Anwar Sadat was murdered, Muhammad turned out to have been well acquainted with the plot's conspirators and assassins, including the Blind Sheikh.

In September 1985, Muhammad wangled admission into the United States over a CIA veto. After running him as a double agent for four years, the CIA and FBI decided to oppose his entry to the US. Nonetheless, the Egyptian ex-intelligence officer gained entrance. In fact, he was quickly accepted in the US army, where he carved out one of the most bizarre military careers in that army's history.

From FortBragg, although only a sergeant, he came and went as he pleased, his commanders reporting they had no control over his movements. During his disappearances, he sometimes traveled to Afghanistan and fought the Russian army alongside the Afghan mujaheddin; at others, he stayed in New York and drilled Muslim terrorist groups, some of whose members later took part in the first attack on the TwinTowers in 1993.

In November 1989, after being awarded American citizenship – again over CIA objections - Ali Muhammad resigned from the US army and devoted himself full time to al Qaeda, as one of Osama bin Laden's senior operations officers.

In past reports, **DEBKAFfile** and **DEBKA-Net-Weekly** have cited their Intelligence and counter-terror sources on bin Laden and al Qaeda operations in which Muhammad was actively involved:

1. The 1993 attack, the first, on the WorldTradeCenter
2. The planning for the 12-airliner hijack in the Far East. Had this attack come off, a dozen airliners would have blown up over twelve American cities, including New York and Washington.
3. The 1993 Mogadishu battle, the first confrontation between al Qaeda soldiers, who fought alongside Somali insurgents, and US special forces. It ended in the worst US military defeat after Vietnam.
4. The 1993-1994 wholesale transfer of the al Qaeda network's operational headquarters from Afghanistan to Sudan. Bin Laden was located there up until 1996, when he returned to Afghanistan.

It is a little known fact that the al Qaeda move to Sudan was tacitly encouraged by the Clinton administration, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, who calculated that close Saudi and Egyptian intelligence surveillance would keep the Saudi-born Islamic fundamentalist under control.

They miscalculated badly. Instead of letting his wings be clipped, bin Laden used his three years in East Africa to spread them far and wide through the Arabian peninsula, Ethiopia and Somalia, with the following results:

A. The network's undercover terror cells proliferated, dispersed widely around the Arabian Peninsula, the Horn of Africa, Eastern Africa and the Balkans – primarily Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia. His organization joined forces with the regional and local networks of the Egyptian Jihad Islami headed by Dr. Ayman Zawahiri, to form the

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deadliest, widest-reaching terror organization ever known.

B. These joint cells carried out the abortive 1995 assassination attempt on the life of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in Addis Ababa; the 1996 Khobar Towers blast in which 18 US troops were killed and 500 injured, and the devastating strikes against US East African embassies in Nairobi and Daar es-Salaam, that left 234 victims dead and more than 5000 injured.

Another of their joint endeavors was the ramming of the USS Cole on 12 October 2000, in Aden Harbor. Nineteen US servicemen died and hundreds were injured.

One fine day after the embassies attack, Ali Muhammad turned himself in to the US authorities voluntarily, demanding only a guarantee that he would not face the death sentence.

Ali Muhammad's history demonstrates that US intelligence bodies employed, collaborated with and maintained some level of operational relations with at least one central al Qaeda figure. For at least seven years from 1991 to 1998, the Egyptian terrorist was bin Laden's operational right hand.

That being so, how could Jim Pavitt claim in a lecture last April at Duke University – quoted at length by the White House spokesman Ari Fleischer on April 17 – that the CIA had never had any tactical intelligence on the Islamic networks? This claim in no way supports Fleischer's argument that the administration lacked the equipment for "connecting the dots" into an operationally viable picture.

DEBKAFfile's counter terror and counterintelligence experts raise a couple more questions:

It stands to reason that Ali Muhammad was not the only Middle Eastern fundamentalist to be admitted to the US army; he must have been one of a group activated according to some concept. But who activated them? Who allowed them to enter the United States and who had enough clout to overrule a CIA veto? Who decided to place this Egyptian Muslim in a US special forces facility? And on whose authority was this Egyptian member of a US special forces unit allowed to travel freely round the world, including Afghanistan, and back, without once being detained at any American airport?

The answer is not to be found in any Afghan cave or Sudanese desert. Only someone in high governmental authority in the United States or some western capital fits the bill. And whoever they were, Muhammad's activators, must have been in a position to access advance information on forthcoming major terrorist strikes in or against the United States.

Since the furor broke over the degree of President George W. Bush's foreknowledge prior to the 9/11 attacks, the US media has been swamped with an abundance of leaks demonstrating that the FBI and CIA, as far back as 1995 at least, were in on al Qaeda's ambition to stage a large-scale terror attack in the United States, by crashing explosives-packed airliners on the White House, the Pentagon and other US government buildings.

That information had clearly reached the desks of US intelligence chiefs.

Now we also know that it had reached the ear of the US president. Yet no hint of the advancing peril was vouchsafed to hundreds of millions of Americans.

Who decided to keep it from the general public? And why?

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