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Wednesday, July 29, 2009

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How Much Do US Presidents Know about Terror?

Third and Last Part of DEBKAfile Special Report

May 19, 2002

How Much Do US Presidents Know about Terror?

The Intelligence Was there, But Blocked

Third and Last Part of **DEBKAfile** Special Report, 19 May, 2002

Three separate episodes over two decades, presented here for the first time by the intelligence and terrorism experts of **DEBKAfile** and **DEBKA-Net-Weekly**, demonstrate that the malaise afflicting US intelligence is long-standing. It has not been cauterized by the periodic excision of individual double spies and traitors. These clandestine bodies remain tightly closed to outside scrutiny and a law unto themselves when it comes to cleaning out the stables. It is no accident that the alerts prior to the 9/11 attacks and the fresh warnings this week of a second-wave al Qaeda attack on America are diffuse and described as no better than "chattering".

The lax response of which the Bush administration is accused comes under the traditional hands-off attitude of American presidents towards the hot potato of intelligence and its ingrained habit of murkiness and mystification.

This habit, traditionally exploited by internal enemies, including al Qaeda's secret helpers, no longer fits the needs of the hour. A healthier openness is necessary to fight global terror. Terrorism at home, in particular, cannot be fought without public vigilance and the public will not be vigilant if it is uninformed.

EpisodeOne: 1981 Assassination of Egyptian President Sadat

In April 1981, six months before he was murdered, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat arrived in Washington for formal talks on topics familiar to contemporary readers: Egyptian-Israeli relations, the Palestinian and other Arab issues. His true object was to present President Ronald Reagan and CIA director William Casey the documents, tapes and film footage gathered by Egyptian military intelligence, documenting secret operational conclaves among radical Islamic Egyptian military officers plotting his assassination. One of the conspirators was the Blind Sheikh Abdul Rahman. Calling itself Taqfir al-Hijra, its group's members belong today to the Egyptian Jihad Islami and al Qaeda.

Sadat appealed to the Americans for help against the conspirators.

Soon after he left the US capital, a flow of innuendo reached the world media implying the Egyptian president was laboring under severe strain that impaired his judgment. The next rumors prepared the public mind to regard Sadat as falling prey to delusions of persecution.

Six months later, on October 6, 1981, Sadat was murdered by the very same extremist Muslim conspirators he feared and whose names he brought to Washington.

DEBKAfile and **DEBKA-Net-Weekly** reveal here for the first time that the Egyptian military intelligence officer who handed Sadat the documents and tapes recording the conspiracy was none other than Ali Muhammad (whose strange career as an American Green Beret, Osama bin Laden's senior operations officer and present location in a Manhattan jail, is detailed in Part Two of this series).

The campaign to discredit the Egyptian president and his proofs of a plot against his life was orchestrated by CIA officer Aldrich Hazen Ames, who was sentenced 15 years later to life imprisonment for spying for Moscow from 1985. According to **DEBKAfile**, Ames began serving the Russians much earlier – probably in 1971 or 1972, and he was well acquainted with Ali Muhammad.

Episode Two: Sequel to the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu

The calamitous 1993 battle between American special forces and the Somali General Farrah Aidid's renegade militia left two lingering problems in its wake:

1. The US military command, before sending the troops into battle, appeared to have been ignorant of the fact that al Qaeda and Egyptian Jihad Islami operatives on the spot were looking after the arms and training needs of Aidid's force, as well as supplying him with fighting strength.

2. The well-laid ambush in which the American force was cornered indicated that, unlike the Americans, the rebel Aidid had advance intelligence on US military security and movements.

Hypothetically, an Ali Muhammad, or one of his ilk planted inside American military

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units, could have fed this vital information to the enemy. But that is not what happened.

On February 21, 1994, Aldrich Ames was arrested in Washington for spying for Moscow. Five days later, a CIA unit was flown into Mogadishu and broke into UN offices there. They knew exactly where to look for the secret papers handed to Aidid with the signaling codes and operational plans of the US units who went into battle against him. Their instructions were to locate the documents and destroy them on the spot, which they did. The raiding party also found that those secret plans had reached the rebel Somali general by a circuitous route: an American traitor had handed them to his contact at UN headquarters in New York, who sent it on to Mogadishu.

Ames was not the only American double agent with undercover contacts at UN headquarters in New York. Philip Robert Hanssen, Earl Pitts and Kim Roberts were also discovered to have accomplices inside the world body. Many CIA and FBI officers are convinced that Ames and Hanssen betrayed the American battle plans and codes in Somalia; they also know the name of the enemy agent at UN Headquarters who took receipt of the stolen information.

Episode Three: 1996 Ethiopian Airways Hijack

Very little was made in America and Europe of the hijack of Ethiopian Airways Flight 961, that took off from Addis Ababa for Nairobi on November 23, 1996, and never arrived. Had that incident been fully exposed and investigated, subsequent calamities might have been averted.

Immediately after takeoff, the flight was commandeered by a group of what were later described as drunken, dissident Ethiopian students. The couple of lines given in the incident in the world media described the plane as making a forced landing for lack of fuel in the Indian Ocean, 450 meters from the Comoro Islands. Of the 175 passengers and crew aboard, 127 were said to have died in the crash-landing and 48 were injured, most seriously. One curious fact emerged from an Agence France Presse report. None of the 48 passengers who survived and had seen the hijackers, variously reported as between 8 and 12, identified any of them among the dead and wounded. It was as though the ground had swallowed them up.

For years after the event, **DEBKAfile**'s terror experts kept their ears to the ground and eventually made some discoveries:

A. Far from being misguided Ethiopian students, the hijackers were well-trained al Qaeda and Egyptian Jihad Islami terrorists.

B. The passengers included the American consul in Bombay and his wife, as well as a senior CIA officer called Leslie Ann Shedd who, although only 28, was one of the great talents of the organization. Also aboard were seven senior directors of the Israeli Aviation Industries with bodyguards, the head of Ukraine military intelligence and the deputy commander of the Ukrainian air force. This group was on its way to a secret meeting at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem.

C. The hijackers took over the controls of the airliner early on in the attack – an early precursor of Islamic hijackers as trained pilots.

One of the terrorists' first actions was to separate the CIA agent, the Israelis and the Ukrainians from the other passengers. In the exchange of fire between the hijackers and the Israeli security men, Leslie Ann Shedd and all the IAI directors were shot dead together with the Ukrainian intelligence chief. The deputy air force commander and one Israeli guard survived with serious injuries.

D. The landing in waters off the picturesque Indian Ocean Comoro Islands, just 500 yards from Galawa Beach resort on the northern tip of Grande Comore Island, was carefully planned in advance. Waiting ashore was a group of al Qaeda helpers led by Abdallah Muhamed Fazul, Osama bin Laden's chief operations officer in East Africa. This group used fishing boats for a feigned rescue of the passengers. In fact they only carried off the hijackers, removing every trace left by the operation including the dead and wounded assailants.

The United States, Britain, France, Israel, Ethiopia and the Ukraine quickly joined forces to clamp a heavy curtain of secrecy down over the episode, as a result of which no serious investigation took place. No one therefore identified the hands behind the hijacking, discovered how they obtained the extremely sensitive intelligence on the movements of an American secret agent and senior officers of Israeli aviation manufacturing, or how they knew about the Ukrainian commanders aboard the plane.

Two years later, after two US embassies were attacked in Kenya and Tanzania, the American inquiry led to a lead-character seen last on the Comoro Islands – the same Abdallah Muhamed Fazul. Only then was he identified as chief of al Qaeda's East African region command center in Moroni, capital of this Indian Ocean island republic.

But by then it was too late. In September 1998, when an FBI special team obtained permission from the Comoran government to inspect Fazul's home, the bird had flown, leaving only computers. The flight was precipitate, indicating he had been tipped off about the American searchers on his tail.

Already then it must have been obvious that a thorough inquiry into the Ethiopian Airways attack and the murder of a CIA officer might have led the US inquiry much sooner to Fazul and the chance of breaking up his networks before they could prepare for their next operation in East Africa. The same hand that blocked publication of the airline

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hijack appears also to have blocked the inquiry.

The rising peril from al Qaeda and its component bodies was recognized well before September 2001. Between 1997 and 1999, concerned individuals, many of them non-Americans, approached members of the Clinton administration, the White House, the CIA, the FBI to warn them that the internal situation in US intelligence services makes it possible for Islamic extremist terror groups to operate inside America. Unfortunately, those warnings fell on deaf ears.

As for the Bush administration, even now, members of his administration and the US intelligence community continue to argue they cannot “connect the dots” for lack of tactical intelligence. But, by the same token, al Qaeda - no supermen - could not wage terror in America or fight in Afghanistan without tactical or other intelligence.

So where do bin Laden's followers get it from?

Probably from the same sources that tipped off Aidid in Mogadishu and the Ethiopian hijackers in Addis Ababa, who blocked the information Anwar Sadat sought to convey to President Reagan and who are still present, they or their successors, under cover inside the American intelligence community.

That is why America, though fighting terror around the world – from Afghanistan and the Philippines to the Republic of Georgia – remains prey to the menace of terror described by vice president Dick Cheney as more serious than the 9/11 atrocities. Without turning its intelligence agencies inside out, America has scant chance of beating this global bane.

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