

## Part 3: The United States and Mideast terrorism

# Was the US government alerted to the September 11 attack?

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An essential aspect of the official version of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—which maintains that these attacks came as a complete surprise to the US government and its intelligence apparatus—is the claim that the CIA and other intelligence agencies relied too heavily on electronic surveillance rather than on-the-spot agents infiltrated into the terrorist organizations.

As a result, so the story goes, without agents among the Islamic fundamentalists, the CIA and FBI were unable to discover the plans of Osama bin Laden and forestall them. The absence of American agents is simply asserted, without any examination of the evidence. The argument is largely circular. The very success of the attack on September 11 is taken to prove that the US government had no agents in the milieu which supported the hijackers.

There are two assumptions here: first, that US agents could not penetrate the terrorist circles; and second, that American agents would have intervened to stop an attack had they learned of it in advance. Both these assumptions are questionable.

The official claim of “no human intelligence” about September 11 is of course difficult to analyze or refute on the basis of empirical or forensic evidence. It is in the nature of such activities that they take place in secret, and remain largely unknown to the public. But the credibility of this claim can be judged in the light of the historical record of the relationship between American imperialism and Islamic fundamentalism.

The United States has been deeply involved in the Middle East for more than half a century, and in Afghanistan for more than two decades. US intelligence agencies have had long and intimate ties with Islamic fundamentalists and encouraged them to engage in terrorist violence. Without this US role there would have been no al Qaeda, bin Laden would have remained a construction magnate in Saudi Arabia, and September 11 would never have taken place.

## The origins of the mujahedin

Those who carried out the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were not even born when the US government first began to sponsor violent Islamic fundamentalists and use them against political opponents in the Middle East. As far back as the 1950s, the United States and its main Arab client state, Saudi Arabia, gave financial support to fundamentalist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. US officials backed the fundamentalists against the pan-Arab nationalism of Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser, as well as against socialist elements in the Arab working

class, especially in the Saudi oilfields.

One analyst of this process writes: “It was during the 1958-60 period that the US State Department began to exaggerate the communist threat to the Middle East, and the ARAMCO CIA, and indeed the Beirut and Cairo CIAs, began supporting Islamic fundamentalist groups as a counterweight to Nasser. In part, this was an extension of Kim Roosevelt’s earlier successful use of Muslim elements (Fadayeen Islam) against leftists in Iran. The anti-Nasser Muslim Brotherhood was funded, religious leaders were prodded to attack the USSR for its anti-Muslim ways (Said K. Aburish, *The Rise, Corruption and Coming Fall of the House of Saud*, St. Martin’s Press, New York, NY, 1996, p. 161).

This relationship expanded quantitatively and qualitatively with the outbreak of civil war in Afghanistan. Even before the invasion of the country by the Soviet Union in December 1979, the United States had decided to give financial and military backing to the Islamic fundamentalist parties engaged in guerrilla warfare against the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul, which had come to power in an April 1978 military coup.

US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski hoped that a full-scale war in Afghanistan would prove as debilitating for the USSR as the Vietnam War had been for the United States. The Carter administration began to pour in weapons and money, especially favoring the most right-wing Islamic fundamentalists, those who became the ideological forebears of the Taliban and Osama bin Laden.

Carter’s successor Ronald Reagan enthusiastically embraced the fundamentalists. He hailed as “freedom fighters” political organizations that sought to establish a state based on a medieval version of Islamic law: a religious dictatorship which practiced slavery, oppression of women and barbaric mutilations for alleged lawbreakers.

But the man who really deserved the title of “founding father” of al Qaeda was Reagan’s CIA director, William Casey. It was Casey who initiated the campaign to recruit Islamic militants from all over the world to come to Afghanistan and fight in the anti-Soviet cause. Islamic fundamentalists from dozens of countries—from Morocco to Indonesia, and including even some black Muslims from the United States—traveled to Afghanistan under CIA auspices, received training in weapons and explosives from CIA trainers and went into combat with US-supplied arms.

Osama bin Laden himself was a product of this process. He first went to Afghanistan in the early 1980s as a sympathizer of the Afghan mujahedin, using his knowledge of construction to help build roads, bases and other facilities, paid for with a combination of his own and US money. It was in Afghanistan that he made the contacts among Islamic fundamentalists worldwide which made possible the organization of later terrorist attacks on US targets. What the Bush administration and the American media

today demonize as a global conspiracy of Islamic extremists is thus a Frankenstein monster created by the American government itself.

This history is well understood by the more conscious strategists for American imperialism. Zbigniew Brzezinski suggested cynically a few years ago that the emergence of al Qaeda was an acceptable price to further US interests in the Middle East and internationally. He told a French newspaper: “Which was more important in world history? The Taliban or the fall of the Soviet empire? A few over-excited Islamists or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?” (Interview with Vincent Javert in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, January 15-21, 1998)

## **Al Qaeda and the CIA**

Bin Laden, as is now widely reported, turned against the United States in 1991-92 after the deployment of large numbers of American troops in Saudi Arabia in the course of the Persian Gulf War. The official story is that this marked the end of all contacts between US intelligence agencies and the Islamic fundamentalists who would go on to form al Qaeda.

Here our analysis necessarily moves into an area where established facts are few and far between, and inference and probability must be relied on. Is it credible that the CIA, after a decade of the most intimate ties with the Afghan mujahedin, was suddenly cut off from all information and unable to determine what its erstwhile protégés were doing?

The servile American media has never challenged Bush administration, Pentagon or FBI spokesmen on this subject, and one should not hold one’s breath until a highly paid American journalist puts his job on the line by asking such questions. But the long-term, close-knit relationship between the CIA and the Afghan mujahedin makes the sudden drying up of all sources of intelligence unlikely.

The CIA is in the business of knowing its collaborators intimately, and it worked with bin Laden and his supporters and followers for a dozen years. Even today, after a decade of increasing hostilities, those described by US government sources as key bin Laden aides are for the most part drawn from the Egyptian and Saudi Islamic fundamentalists radicalized during the war in Afghanistan. The CIA knew their families, their weaknesses and their vices, and it has never been squeamish about using such information to compromise individuals and secure cooperation with its purposes.

That is not to say that there was not a real conflict between bin Laden and the US government, or that al Qaeda is simply a front organization. It is not necessary to resort to such a conspiracy theory to reject the claim that the US government had no idea of the plans being laid by the terrorist group. It is the official version which is preposterous and far fetched: the claim that the most extensive and well-financed intelligence apparatus in the world could not make a dent in an organization consisting largely of its former employees.

Despite the current official mystification, bin Laden & Co. were a far more accessible target than, say, such Stalinist-ruled regimes as North Vietnam or North Korea. The CIA has cultivated sources among the Islamic fundamentalists since the 1950s. Moreover, friendly intelligence services, including at least those of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan—to say nothing of Israel—would have had their own contacts as well.

## **The role of agents provocateurs**

It is critical to consider September 11 in the context of earlier terrorist

attacks on American targets, particularly the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. In both these attacks, it has come to light that American agents provocateurs played a central role. This casts doubt on the claims that US intelligence was unable to penetrate al Qaeda. And it raises the question whether similar agents had some connection to September 11.

Those charged in the 1993 World Trade Center attack and for a subsequent conspiracy to blow up other targets in New York City were mostly former guerrilla fighters in Afghanistan who entered the United States with the covert assistance of US intelligence agencies. Among them was a former Egyptian intelligence agent and US government informer, Emad Salem, who was identified as a principal instigator of plans to bomb targets in the New York City area.

Salem and the FBI claimed that he had functioned as an informer in 1991-92 and then again from April 1993 on, but not during the period of the actual organization of the March 1993 bomb blast which killed six people and destroyed the sub-basement area of the twin towers. This was a transparent effort to avoid questions being raised about why the FBI, tipped off by its informant, did nothing to stop the attack.

In the 1998 events, it was revealed that the US government received advance warning of the Kenya bombing two weeks before it took place. During the trial last year of four men charged in the bombings, defense lawyers were able to demonstrate that US officials did not pass on the warnings to the personnel of the threatened embassies, thus contributing to the high death toll, especially among local civilians who were in or near the facilities at the time of the blasts.

As with at least one of the warnings about September 11, this information came through the Israeli intelligence service Mossad. Moreover, one of those charged in the Kenya and Tanzania bombings was a former Green Beret sergeant and special warfare instructor, Ali A. Mohamed, another former Egyptian security officer who was brought into the United States under a special CIA program to provide citizenship for key informants. Although Mohamed supposedly turned against the US government because of the 1991 Gulf War, he was still serving as a government informant as late as 1995.

No doubt most of those who participated in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the bombing of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, and similar outrages, were Islamic fundamentalists who believed that they were somehow striking a blow against the US government. But in the murky world of agents, double agents, and agents provocateurs, they may well have been used to serve the purposes of American imperialism, which has utilized terrorist attacks—and above all September 11—as the pretext for carrying out military actions overseas and attacks on democratic rights at home.

Terrorist attacks on innocent civilians, whatever the motivation or pretext, are politically reactionary. Moreover, because terrorism substitutes the armed action of a tiny minority for a struggle to develop the political consciousness of the masses, it is much easier for imperialist agents to feign sympathy and penetrate and manipulate the organization involved. From this political standpoint, the claim that US intelligence was unable to infiltrate al Qaeda is not believable.

## **Some curious connections**

Perhaps the murkiest aspect of September 11 is establishing the actual relationship between bin Laden himself and the US government. He was, of course, a CIA asset for more than a decade. He is one of several dozen sons of a Saudi construction billionaire whose family has longstanding ties to the United States and, in particular, to the family of George W.

Bush. (The bin Ladens were investors in the Carlyle Group, the multibillion-dollar venture capital firm which employs the president's father, the former president, as a well-paid "rainmaker," drumming up business in the Middle East. They sold their holdings in the firm after September 11.)

As late as 1996, more than four years after Osama bin Laden announced his intention to drive the US out of Saudi Arabia, the US government declined an offer by Sudan to extradite him. US officials suggested there was not enough evidence to convict bin Laden of terrorist actions in a US court. Even after the 1998 embassy bombings made him a household name, the CIA had surprising difficulty in locating him in Afghanistan.

Last October 31, the French daily newspaper *Le Figaro*—one of the country's more conservative journals—published a sensational story claiming that bin Laden had met with CIA officials at some point during a nearly two-week stay, July 4-14, 2001, at the American Hospital in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, where he was treated for kidney disease.

The report was roundly denied by US and UAE officials, and there is no way to verify it independently. But the newspaper is certainly well-connected. One of its major investors is the Carlyle Group, the private equity firm which directly links the Bush family and the bin Laden family.

There are other indications that the relations between the US government and Islamic terrorists are not as they appear in the American media.

There is the case of Nabil al-Marabh, who was caught at the Niagara Falls, New York border crossing in June 2001, stowed away inside a tractor-trailer with a forged passport, and was turned back to Canada by US immigration officials. "Nine months earlier, he had been identified to American intelligence agents as one of Osama bin Laden's operatives in the United States. American customs agents knew about money he had transferred to an associate of Osama bin Laden in the Middle East. And the Boston police had issued a warrant for his arrest after he violated probation for stabbing a friend with a knife." Al-Marabh was released on bail in Canada, and later arrested near Chicago after the September 11 attacks. While he was jailed in Canada, "Marabh boasted to his cellmates that he was 'special' to the F.B.I." (*New York Times*, October 5, 2001)

Then there is the report which appeared September 24 in *Newsweek*. The weekly magazine reported that on September 10 "a group of top Pentagon officials suddenly canceled travel plans for the next morning, apparently because of security concerns." This suggests that some level of the American state had knowledge, not only of the imminence of the attack, but even of its exact timing. Needless to say, no major American publication has followed up this report.

And what is one to make of an article that appeared in the *Washington Post* September 23, on the newspaper's front page, under a double headline: "Investigators Identify 4 to 5 Groups Linked to Bin Laden Operating in US. No Connection Found Between 'Cell' Members and 19 Hijackers, Officials Say"?

The article reports that the FBI had identified multiple al Qaeda groups operating "for the last several years" in the United States, but found no connection between them and the 19 hijackers who carried out the September 11 attack. This is an astonishing admission, given that the entire US military campaign against Afghanistan has been predicated on holding Osama bin Laden responsible for the suicide hijackings. The article continues:

"The FBI has not made any arrests because the group members entered the country legally in recent years and have not been involved in illegal activities since they arrived, the officials said.

"Government officials say they do not know why the cells are here, what their purpose is or whether their members are planning attacks. One official even described their presence as 'possibly benign,' though others have a more sinister interpretation and give assurances that measures are in place to protect the public."

Here the mind boggles: amid a nationwide dragnet, with hundreds of Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans rounded up and questioned for no other reason than their national origin and religion, the FBI tells the principal daily newspaper in the nation's capital that it has not arrested known collaborators of Osama bin Laden because they have done nothing wrong since they arrived in the US. Their presence may even be "benign," an astonishing adjective to use after the murder of nearly 3,000 people.

The *Post* article was written jointly by Bob Woodward and Walter Pincus, a fact which adds to its significance. Woodward needs no introduction to those familiar with the Watergate scandal. He was the recipient of the most famous leak in US history, obtaining inside information about Nixon's actions in Watergate from a source Woodward dubbed "Deep Throat," never identified but believed to be a top official in the national security apparatus. Walter Pincus is a national-security reporter for the *Post*, covering the CIA and Pentagon. He worked as a CIA operative in the 1960s, as a member of the National Student Association, a fact which was only revealed two decades later.

An article by these two individuals, given the prominence of front-page publication in the *Washington Post*, should be understood as a semiofficial hint by the US intelligence services that their relationship with Osama bin Laden is considerably more complex than that presented in the propaganda which now dominates the media.



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