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TERRORISM

FBI source had '93 contact with bin Laden

Revelation missing from Sept. 11 reviews, surfaces in obscure court case



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OLD ENEMY: Osama bin Laden told an FBI source in 1993 that he was looking to finance terrorist attacks on U.S. soil.

By GUY TAYLOR AND JOHN SOLOMON
The Washington Times

In a revelation missing from the official investigations of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the FBI placed a human source in direct contact with Osama bin Laden in 1993 and ascertained that the al Qaeda leader was looking to finance terrorist attacks in the United States, according to court testimony in a little-noticed employment dispute case.

The information the FBI gleaned

back then was so specific that it helped thwart a terrorist plot against a Masonic lodge in Los Angeles, the court records reviewed by The Washington Times show.

Exclusive

"It was the only source I know in the bureau where we had a source right in al Qaeda, directly involved," Edward J. Curran, a former top official in the FBI's Los Angeles office, told the court in support of a discrimination lawsuit filed against the bureau by

his former agent Bassem Youssef.

Mr. Curran gave the testimony in 2010 to an essentially empty courtroom, and thus it escaped notice from the media or terrorism specialists. The Times was recently alerted to the existence of the testimony while working on a broader report about al Qaeda's origins.

Members of the Sept. 11 commission, congressional intelligence committees and terrorism analysts told The Times they are floored that the information is

just now emerging publicly and that it raises questions about what else Americans might not have been told about the origins of al Qaeda and its early interest in attacking the United States.

"I think it raises a lot of questions about why that information didn't become public and why the 9/11 Commission or the congressional intelligence committees weren't told about it," said former Rep. Peter Hoekstra, Michigan

» see **BIN LADEN** A13

BIN LADEN

From page A1

Republican, who chaired the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence from 2004 through 2007 when lawmakers dealt with the fallout from the 9/11 Commission's official report.

"This is just one more of these examples that will go into the conspiracy theorists' notebooks, who say the authorities are not telling us everything," Mr. Hoekstra told The Times in an interview last week. "That's bad for the intelligence community. It's bad for law enforcement and it's bad for government."

Former Rep. Lee Hamilton, an Indiana Democrat who co-chaired the 9/11 Commission with former New Jersey Gov. Thomas Kean, said that as far as he can remember, the FBI never told the commission that it had been working a source so close to bin Laden that many years before 9/11.

"I do not recall the FBI advising us of a direct contact with Osama bin Laden," Mr. Hamilton told The Times in a recent interview.

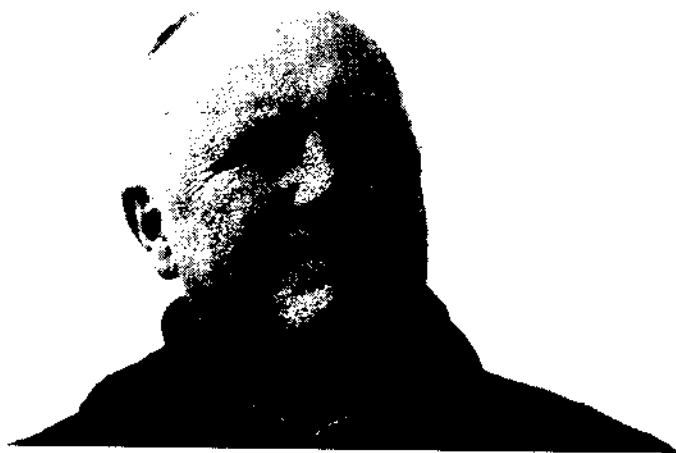
Exactly how the information was omitted from the various congressional reviews and the 9/11 Commission report is a mystery. FBI officials and staff involved in the review said they couldn't determine definitely so many years later whether the information was kept from the various investigations or whether it was simply overlooked by staff in the thousands of pages of documents and electronic records made available during the exhaustive reviews of al Qaeda's history.

"Both the commission and the U.S. government compiled a fair amount of evidence about the activities of the set of groups later best known as al Qaeda during [the early-1990s], when the group was settling into Sudan. We did not delve as deeply in this period because it was so distant from the plotting that led directly to the 9/11 attack," said Philip Zelikow, who served as the 9/11 Commission's executive director and now teaches history at the University of Virginia.

Like Mr. Hamilton, Mr. Zelikow said he does not recall ever being told by the FBI about the 1993 source and that Mr. Curran's disclosure appeared to involve "valuable intelligence gathered in 1993 and 1994."

But Mr. Zelikow cautioned against reading too deeply into the revelation, asserting that bin Laden's activities that long ago would be viewed as "pretty attenuated in relation to 9/11."

FBI officials told The Times that the bureau could not say for certain that its agents specifically briefed the 9/11 Commission



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about the 1993 asset or plot but was proud that it gave unfettered access to its records to the various investigators.

"The FBI made all relevant information available to the 9/11 Commission and the joint intelligence community inquiry. Throughout both of these reviews, the FBI shared pertinent documents and knowledgeable personnel in order to present all known information to commission and inquiry personnel," Assistant Director Michael P. Kortan said.

The lawyer who represented Mr. Youssef and called Mr. Curran to testify in the 2010 court case, however, said the FBI kept the information from his litigation for years.

Attorney Stephen Kohn said that even his own client declined to tell him about the sensational revelation until it surfaced during the court hearing because the information had been kept classified.

"I was shocked when it came out, and I was frustrated because the FBI had censored that information clearly to hide it from the public," said Mr. Kohn, who has represented some of the FBI's most famous whistleblowers over the years.

"There was absolutely no reason for that to be kept secret," he told The Times in an interview. "In some respects, it was kind of demeaning for the FBI because they had kept secret one of the most significant triumphs in the war on terror all so they wouldn't have to give credit to Bassem for the work he had done. As a result, none of the bureau got the credit it was due for what was a spectacular counterterrorism triumph."

Mr. Youssef remains with the bureau,

overseeing its telephone intercept analysis unit, and he won an appeals court ruling a few years ago to pursue a discriminatory lawsuit against the bureau. That ruling was handed down after FBI supervisors were forced to admit he was blocked from his job as one of the bureau's top terrorism fighters because he was mistaken for an Arab Muslim whose loyalties should be questioned after Sept. 11. In fact, Mr. Youssef was a highly decorated agent and a Coptic Christian.

As the case played out in federal court in 2010, Mr. Curran testified in Mr. Youssef's favor, methodically telling the court about the agent's many successes during the early 1990s when the U.S. government's unofficial war on terrorism was just beginning. Those successes included thwarting specific terrorist attacks, including one on a British cruise liner and another that targeted the Los Angeles area, Mr. Curran testified.

The former supervisor testified that Mr. Youssef developed a confidential source connected to the infamous "Blind Sheikh," Omar Abdel-Rahman, the mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, and that he managed to get the source to go overseas and meet personally with bin Laden.

The source was "very in tight, close" to the leadership of al Qaeda, which was then known as the Islamic Group, Mr. Curran testified.

"The one source came back, had direct contact with bin Laden," Mr. Curran testified, adding that upon returning to the U.S. the source indicated to the Blind Sheikh that bin Laden "had a target picked out for an explosion in the Los Angeles area. I believe

it was a Masonic lodge.”

Mr. Curran said the source also provided information about terrorist cells operating in California. During the testimony, he related in detail how Mr. Youssef flipped the asset so “he was working with us,” describing how the FBI collaborated with the source’s wife from an arranged marriage to get him deported from the United States to put pressure on him.

“He wanted to come back, and that was the carrot we used to get his cooperation,” Mr. Curran said.

Eventually, the plot to blow up the Los Angeles target was diffused based on information the source provided the FBI, according to the court testimony and other FBI documents.

Mr. Curran’s testimony is further supported by two documents, his own FBI personnel performance review report as an assistant special agent in charge in Los Angeles at the time, and a 1995 inspection report of the Los Angeles FBI office, both of which reference the asset and the thwarting of the plot.

“During the past six months, through ASAC CU’s personal efforts, the FBI identified and supported an investigative effort which uncovered a large terrorist group operating out of the Los Angeles and San Diego areas,” stated Mr. Curran’s 1994 performance evaluation, a copy of which was obtained by The Times.

The evaluation stated that Mr. Curran “personally participated in the overseas interview of a potential asset who is in a position to provide valuable intelligence information to the nation’s entire intelligence community.”

While the document made no specific reference to the asset’s proximity to bin Laden, it stated outright that “the development of this asset, as well as the initiation of other investigative techniques, has resulted in the Los Angeles office obtaining significant intelligence information which is not being provided by any other sources and agencies.”

The 1995 inspection report of the Los Angeles office, meanwhile, praised agents for conducting “analysis of asset information received immediately preceding the February 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, which indicated the presence of an active terrorist infrastructure.”

Similarly, Mr. Youssef provided a written set of answers in his own court case that played out years later, during which he confirmed that he had personally groomed an asset who led to the uncovering of two active terrorist cells in California.

Mr. Youssef wrote that he began investigating information in January 1993 — about a month before the first World Trade Center bombing — that an Egyptian man was involved in terrorism activities

in the California area and “this effort led me to a source that was initially contacted by another government agency.”

“I quickly developed a scenario to gain the source’s trust, and in a short period of time, I gained the source’s trust,” Mr. Youssef wrote. “During the relatively short recruitment period, it became evident this source was in a unique position to know and provide highly valuable information not just about the main subject but regarding two very active, thriving IG terror cells.”

Missing from the testimony and the record is any mention of what eventually happened to the human asset and whether he was still available to the United States in later years. U.S. officials declined to discuss the source’s whereabouts after 1994.

The more than 500-page official 9/11 Commission report, as well as equally exhaustive reports produced by the House and Senate intelligence committees, and the CIA’s office of inspector general, made no mention of the source or his contributions to thwarting a Los Angeles area terrorist plot.

The 9/11 Commission report broadly outlines how, during the early 1990s, bin Laden was seeking to expand al Qaeda globally — an effort that included “building alliances extended into the United States,” and that “the Blind Sheikh, whom Bin Laden admired, was also in the network.”

But the report downplays the notion that bin Laden was actively plotting or seeking to finance any specific attacks inside the United States as far back as 1993 — two pieces of information that, according to Mr. Curran’s testimony and contemporaneous documents, the FBI’s Los Angeles field office corroborated at the time.

Alternatively, the report outlines how all of the attacks pursued by bin Laden during that period were against U.S. assets outside the United States.

With regard to the one attack inside the U.S. — the first World Trade Center bombing — the report says “bin Laden involvement is at best cloudy.”

Mr. Zelikow said he regards Mr. Youssef as a “valuable FBI agent” and does not doubt the credibility of Mr. Youssef or Mr. Curran.

But he concluded that if the source referred to by Mr. Curran “had remained close to al Qaeda leadership into the Afghan period, I am pretty sure we would have known about that.”

Mr. Hoekstra, however, is not so sure.

“I believe that if one of the agencies wants to hide something from you, it’s pretty hard for someone else to find it,” he said. “My bias would be that if the FBI knew about this and wanted to hide it, they could, absolutely.”

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