

Tapes show FBI failed to stop World Trade Center bombing

by Jeffrey Steinberg

The Federal Bureau of Investigation received warnings months before the Feb. 26, 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center that a terrorist plot was afoot targeting New York City's office skyscrapers. Yet, despite those warnings, the FBI failed to successfully take any preemptive action. These are among the charges that have been leveled since Oct. 26, when 900 pages of transcripts of taped conversations between an FBI informant and his Bureau handlers were released to the *New York Times*. The informant, Emad A. Salem, a former Egyptian Army colonel who infiltrated the inner circles of Muslim cleric Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, covertly taped hundreds of hours of conversations with FBI agents, and those tapes were released late last month to defense attorneys in one of the two federal cases brought against alleged Islamic terrorists. Although Judge Michael B. Muckasey ordered that the tapes remain under seal, several New York newspapers obtained copies and have been publishing excerpts.

The tapes paint a picture of an FBI anti-terror squad riddled with internal conflicts, mismanagement, and inexperience. According to Salem, he was ordered to drop his infiltration of the Sheik Rahman circles by an FBI supervisor six months before the Trade Center bombing, although he had already provided the Bureau with a short list of terrorist targets, including the World Trade Center. Allegedly, Salem, along with FBI special agents, had worked out a strategy to infiltrate the group making the bombs and replace the explosive powder with an innocuous substance. The supervisor allegedly nixed the idea and instead pushed for Salem to wear a body wire into the group's meetings in order to shore up his ability to serve as a witness later. In one of the 70 conversations he covertly taped with his FBI handlers, Salem bitterly complains about the supervisor: "He requested to meet me in the hotel. He requested to make me to testify and if he didn't push for that, we'll be going building the bomb with a phony powder and grabbing the people who was involved in it. But since you . . . we didn't do that."

In another conversation with FBI agent Nancy Floyd, Salem is heard saying: "Since the bomb went off I feel terrible. I feel bad. I feel here is people who don't listen." Agent Floyd responds: "Hey, I mean it wasn't like you didn't try

and I didn't try. You can't force people to do the right thing."

According to Salem's tapes, another of his FBI handlers was also dissatisfied with the unnamed supervisor. On the tape, Salem describes his conversation with John Anticev to Floyd: "I said, 'Guys, now you saw this bomb went off and you both know that we could avoid that. . . You get paid, guys, to prevent problems like this from happening.'" Salem asks Anticev: "Do you deny your supervisor is the main reason of bombing the World Trade Center?" Salem tells Floyd that Anticev and another member of the anti-terror task force, Detective Napoli, affirmed his description, adding, "We was handling the case perfectly well until the supervisor came and messed it up, upside down."

Floyd, on another occasion, also elaborates on the mismanagement by Bureau higher-ups on tape. Describing conversations she had with FBI superiors after Feb. 26, she confides to Salem: "I said that the bottom line comes to this, that in my opinion this thing was handled completely wrong from the very beginning. . . . I told them that I didn't think that the people on the squad had a clue of how to operate these things. That the supervisors didn't know what was going on. That they hadn't taken the time to learn the history or to sit down and talk to him [Salem] and use him for knowledge. I know they had something going, but I know that it was pooh-poohed and I know that's part of the problem, and that's one of the things they're looking at."

In yet another tape, recording a conversation between Salem, Anticev, and Napoli, Salem says: "I told you so, that this is one of the targets. You forgot. You have your papers. Go back to it. World Trade Center, Empire State Building, Grand Central, Times Square." He later adds: "All of these things, you didn't think it was serious. You didn't think," to which Napoli responds: "We knew it was serious. It wasn't that we didn't believe you. It was just that the only way you could have to stay [inside Sheik Rahman's circles] was that you had to testify." Anticev then pipes up: "We couldn't let you make a bomb and then give that bomb to whoever, because later on if that bomb, let's say goes off at a synagogue and kills two, three people, and that it comes out that an agent of the FBI participated in making the bomb, forget it. They

would go berserk. The press would say we knew, we'd be sued, people would be fired."

The Aug. 25 bomb plot

Yet, immediately after the World Trade Center bombing, which killed five, Salem was recruited once again to penetrate the Rahman circles on behalf of the FBI. This time, the FBI provided him with bomb components to pass on to his alleged co-conspirators to prove his bona fides, enabling him to quickly insert himself back into the Rahman network. When the FBI arrested 15 people, including Rahman, for a second bomb plot Aug. 25, Salem's bomb detonators were among the components seized as evidence of the plot to blow up a half-dozen sites, including the Holland Tunnel and the United Nations headquarters.

The attorneys defending Rahman and the others immediately charged "foul play," saying that Salem was actually the instigator of the bomb scheme. By Aug. 29, defense attorneys had learned of Salem's two sets of tapes: One set recorded on behalf of the FBI, of conversations he had with members of the Rahman circle; and the others he covertly recorded while he was meeting with his FBI handlers. In several of the tapes of Salem's conversations with Sheik Rahman and other group members, Salem is clearly heard instigating actions, including the attack against the U.N., which Rahman rejects: "It is not forbidden, but it would put Muslims in a bad light. Think of something else, because the U.N. is considered to be the center for peace."

It's "the fireman starting his own fires," one defense attorney told the *New York Times* on Aug. 29 after reviewing some of the transcripts.

Levels of complicity

Some of the most crucial questions about the World Trade Center bombing may never be answered. Even if it is proven that the four men now standing trial for the Trade Center bomb were involved in the bomb plot, there is a far more important question: Who ordered the attack? That remains a mystery.

At least two individuals implicated in the bombing, one of whom is a defendant in the ongoing federal trial in New York, have been linked to Israeli intelligence. The defendant, Ahmad Ajaj, was a petty criminal in the Israeli Occupied Territories who was recruited as a Mossad spy while in jail on counterfeiting charges, according to a recent *Village Voice* story by Robert Friedman. Ajaj came to the United States on Sept. 1, 1992 along with Ramzi Ahmed Yousef, the only alleged Trade Center defendant who is still at large, and apparently kept Israeli intelligence informed of the Trade Center plot. Although Ajaj was already in jail when the bomb went off, sources close to the probe say that through Ajaj—and possibly even through Salem—Israeli authorities were also aware of the bomb plot.

Furthermore, nearly all of the 15 defendants named in

the August conspiracy indictment, charging them with "conspiracy to levy a war of urban terrorism" under a rarely used sedition law, were involved with the Central Intelligence Agency's covert war against the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. Even Sheik Rahman, whom an Egyptian court acquitted in the October 1981 assassination of Anwar Sadat, was allowed to illegally enter the United States, because he was an asset of the CIA's not-so-secret surrogate war in Afghanistan. Allegedly, when the Soviets withdrew in 1989, the CIA reneged on its promises to many Afghan fighters, causing tremendous resentments, and steering some of them to hook up with drug-trafficking organizations and a number of intelligence services and rogue networks.

Beyond the FBI's bungling, the circulation of a line propagating Islam as the West's new, post-Cold War "enemy image" months before the bombing, is all the more disturbing since it was coming from Israeli hardliners opposed to any peaceful settlement in the Middle East and their allies such as the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL).

Just days after the inauguration of President Bill Clinton, the United States was hit with a string of shattering terrorist incidents, beginning with the January 25 shooting of five people outside the CIA headquarters in McLean, Va. Two days after the World Trade Center blast, agents of the Treasury Department's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (BATF) laid siege to the Waco, Tex. compound of the Branch Davidian sect.

The confluence of the ADL-led propaganda drive and the string of high profile terrorist incidents prompted *EIR* founding editor Lyndon LaRouche to warn of an emerging "strategy of tension" directed against the United States and particularly the new administration. LaRouche later warned that the FBI's predictable mishandling of the Trade Center case would greatly diminish the prospects of ever getting to the bottom of the "strategy."

In his weekly *EIR* radio interview on Nov. 3, LaRouche commented on the new revelations: "There is no question that FBI officials and others, knew full well that the World Trade Center was the target of a major bombing attack no later than August of 1992. So the bomb went off, and for various reasons somebody in the hierarchy passed down the word not to prevent it, or effectively not to prevent it. This is a major scandal and heads must roll. Remember that this problem, this policy, occurred under the Bush administration and under those elements of the Justice Department which were Thornburgh-connected. A lot of this stuff is the heritage of the Bush-Thornburgh Justice Department. . . . It's a very significant case; it ties into, very significantly, the ADL case in California and San Francisco and elsewhere. It's a stinker; it probably is going to blow."

The FBI's new director, Louis Freeh, has reportedly initiated a quiet, in-house investigation of the FBI actions in the Trade Center fiasco. A serious housecleaning is long overdue.