

Convictions, no answers in Trade Center bombing

by Jeffrey Steinberg

The March 3 conviction of the four men charged with the Feb. 28, 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center brought sighs of relief from federal prosecutors involved in the lengthy and complex trial. After presenting 200 witnesses and over 1,000 pieces of evidence, prosecutors were still uncertain that the jury would return guilty verdicts.

After all, not a single witness had been called who could place any of the four Arab men at the scene of the bombing. The hardest piece of evidence linking any of the accused to the bombing was a computer-generated note found at the office of one of the four, Nidal Ayyad, claiming credit for the bombing in the name of a mythical Arab terrorist cell. Although evidence had been produced showing that the storage locker and a Jersey City, New Jersey apartment where one of the men lived had chemical residues of the type used to make a bomb, forensic experts were barely able to even prove that the explosion, which claimed six lives, injured over 1,000 people, and caused an estimated half-billion dollars in property damage, had been caused by a bomb.

Prosecutors were helped by the fact that defense attorneys did not present a case. Only one defendant, Ahmad Ajaj, even called a witness. And, in a shocking development, the attorney for Mohammed Salameh claimed in his closing argument that Salameh had been involved in the bomb plot, but that he had been duped by other co-conspirators. Salameh promptly denounced his attorney and disavowed the "confession."

Whether defense attorneys simply chose not to present a case in the belief that the government had failed to meet its obligation of proof beyond a reasonable doubt, or whether they took a calculated risk because their clients were indeed involved in the bomb plot, may never be known. What is clear is that the convictions, like the trial itself, did nothing to answer the far more important questions raised by the Trade Center bombing. Among the most pressing of those questions is, who were the intellectual authors of the bombing and what was their geopolitical objective?

FBI, CIA, and Mossad complications

One feature of the case that was not explored in the trial was the intelligence links of the defendants and their broader circle of accused co-conspirators. (A second trial, involving 15 Islamic fundamentalists accused of plotting a series of

followup terrorist acts on July 4, 1993, is scheduled to begin in September.)

Nobody disputes that all of the accused, including Egyptian cleric Sheik Abdel Rahman, who is the lead defendant in the pending broader conspiracy trial, were employed by the CIA and other foreign intelligence agencies during the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Sheik Rahman, although he was an accused leader of the plot to assassinate Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in November 1981, was able to obtain visas to enter the United States on four separate occasions between 1986 and 1990. He settled in Brooklyn, New York and was a linchpin in recruiting and fundraising efforts for the Afghan Mujahideen, who were fighting a CIA, British, and Israeli intelligence-directed war against the Soviet Red Army.

One of the convicted, Ahmad Ajaj, has been identified as an Israeli intelligence "mole" who infiltrated the Sheik Rahman circles on behalf of the Mossad, and who was given his "credentials" as an Islamic militant courtesy of the Israelis. Ajaj was a professional criminal who was jailed in Israel on counterfeiting charges and chose to be an undercover spy and provocateur rather than spend years in an Israeli prison.

Another bizarre figure in the Trade Center saga, who will be a central player in the upcoming trial of Rahman and company, is former Egyptian Army Lt. Col. Emad Salem. Salem infiltrated the Rahman circles on behalf of the FBI, alerted the FBI six months in advance that there was a plot to blow up the World Trade Center, and then turned around and secretly taped hundreds of hours of conversations with his FBI handlers, thereby implicating the FBI in a coverup before and after the fact.

Salem first came to New York City in 1987 and worked as a corporate security consultant for Graham Knowles Associates, a firm headed by a former British Army officer who has been described as a secret operative for the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. Salem tried to sell information on the Rahman group to the terrorist Jewish Defense League following the assassination of its founder, Rabbi Meir Kahane, in November 1990.

The war in Afghanistan was an intelligence fiasco on a far larger scale than the better-known Iran-Contra affair. The favorite Mujahideen leader of the CIA, MI-6, and Mossad, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, is a notorious drug trafficker with intimate ties to the Khomeini regime in Teheran. When the war ended with the Red Army in retreat, the United States left a well-trained, well-armed force of Islamic warriors to fight among themselves (and the shards of the old Soviet-sponsored regime) for power. Inside Afghanistan and among emigrés, it became nearly impossible to say who was working for whom. The legacy of that adventure is still playing out—on the streets of Brooklyn, in the trade towers of Lower Manhattan, in federal court, and on the battlefields of West Asia. It may take decades to sort out the mess. And a continuing threat of terrorism is one of the prices still being paid.