

TIME

FROM THE MAGAZINE

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Tower Terror

A murderous explosion in the heart of New York City raises the specter of terrorism in America and sets off a feverish hunt for the bomber

By RICHARD LACAYO

AMERICANS WERE NOT ACCUSTOMED to what so much of the world had already grown weary of: the sudden, deafening explosion of a car bomb, a hail of glass and debris, the screams of innocent victims followed by the wailing sirens of ambulances. Terrorism seemed like something that happened somewhere else -- and somewhere else a safe distance over the horizon.

And then last week, in an instant, the World Trade Center in New York City became ground zero.

At 12:18 on a snowy Friday afternoon, a massive explosion rocked the foundation of the Twin Towers of the Trade Center in lower Manhattan -- the second tallest buildings in the world and a magnet for 100,000 workers and visitors each day. The bomb was positioned to wreak maximum damage to the infrastructure of the building and the commuter networks below. And the landmark target near Wall Street seemed chosen with a fine sense for the symbols of the late 20th century. If the explosion, which killed five people and injured more than 1,000, turns out to be the work of terrorists, it will be a sharp reminder that the world is still a dangerous place. And that the dangers can come home.

Against that threat, the relevant intelligence agencies mobilized quickly. The news from New York sent the FBI and other federal agencies to Code Red, their highest state of readiness. The FBI activated its Joint Terrorist Task Force, and the CIA turned up the heat at its Counterterrorist Center in Langley, Virginia, a conglomerate of psychiatrists, explosives experts and hostage negotiators. Meanwhile, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the agency responsible for investigating the loss and theft of explosives, mobilized its 13-member National Response Team held on 24-hour call in the New York area. They were joined by bureau chemists from headquarters in Rockville, Maryland.

Until it is firmly concluded that a terrorist was responsible, the New York City police department is in charge, and it was the N.Y.P.D. that took the lead in sifting through the 19 telephoned claims of "credit" that were received in the first 24 hours. Though none came in before the blast -- the earliest followed it by an hour, well after the first news reports -- a few were intriguing. Many of the calls were made by people claiming to be affiliated with Balkan groups, including one made by a caller in Europe who said he represented the Black Hand, a Serbian extremist organization last active about 10 years ago. According to terrorism expert Xavier Raufer, Serbian nationalists have threatened terrorist reprisals against West European countries for interference in the region.

There were immediate suspicions that Bill Clinton's decision last week to air-drop

relief supplies over Bosnia -- a step that had seemed like a low-risk humanitarian gesture -- might have been answered in thunder by the Serbs. Still, the Bosnian hypothesis was by no means the only one. A caller from the West Coast credited the Iranian Revolutionary Guard; an anonymous tipster blamed Jewish extremist groups.

Because of their trouble getting to the "blast seat" in the dangerously crumbling underground garage, investigators could not even confirm to their complete satisfaction what had caused the explosion. But its size and intense heat suggested a bomb, as did traces of nitrate found at the edges of the blast crater. Until they could determine otherwise, informed experts assumed that hundreds of pounds of high explosives had been packed into a car or van that was left at a four-level underground parking garage. The garage is situated below the Trade Center plaza and near a station of the PATH commuter subway line that links Manhattan and New Jersey.

The Trade Center is not a surprising target. In the early 1970s CIA agents compiled a list of potentially vulnerable sites that they believed might make high-value terrorist strike points. Near the top of that list, former deputy CIA director Bobby Inman told TIME, was the World Trade Center. "When the people responsible for anticipating terrorist attacks began to run scenarios on this kind of thing, this was one of the places." Why? "Because of the number of victims who would be involved," said Inman. The information raises questions about what kind of extra precaution the Port Authority might have taken in light of the building's tantalizing vulnerability.

The bomb blew out a crater 200 ft. by 100 ft. wide and five stories deep. Floors collapsed onto one another with an impact that caused the ceiling of the PATH station nearby to come crashing down, showering chunks of concrete onto commuters waiting on the platform. In the same moment, the 110-story Twin Towers swayed visibly as the force of the blast shuddered upward. Lobby windows exploded onto the plaza and marble slabs fell from the walls. As fractured steam pipes launched jets of hot mist into the air, the first victims stumbled out of the buildings, bloodied and in shock.

Fires quickly broke out, launching thick, acrid smoke up hundreds of stairwells and elevator banks. In both towers the electricity went out, including emergency backup systems. Even on the highest floors, workers were stunned by the speed at which smoke flew upward. David Deshane, 25, was on the 105th floor when he felt the explosion. "All the computers shut down, then all the phones shut down," he said. "Then all of a sudden we saw smoke (everywhere." He ran to hit the fire-emergency button. "Nothing happened." In a panic, some people broke windows to admit air, sending daggers of glass raining onto the crowds below and creating a chimney effect that drew smoke upward even more quickly.

Four of the dead were Port Authority workers, whose offices and locker rooms were located on the lower levels that sustained the worst damage. More than 24 hours after the blast, two other workers were still missing. But the toll was less severe than first feared. Though some suffered major injuries, most of the victims were treated for smoke inhalation or minor burns.

In a meeting late Friday evening, the state and federal agencies involved in the case hammered out a protocol to govern the inquiry. The first priority was to stabilize the pillars that hold up the Vista Hotel on the Trade Center plaza and which were supported in turn by the garage floors that were ripped away in the blast. Before investigators can safely enter the blast site, workers must buttress the dangerous sagging remnants of the garage and lay a web of tubular steel beams across the crater left by the bomb. It may be days before investigators can begin to sift through the tons of debris for clues to the bomber.

Then the hard work begins. Once they enter the damaged area, investigators will face the tedious process of finding chemical traces and fragments of the vehicle to help

identify the type of bomb. Most well-known terrorist groups have their own "signatures" -- characteristic explosive compounds, detonators and even device designs. If investigators find enough clues, "they can detect who made this particular bomb," says Professor Robert Phillips, an expert in terrorism at the University of Connecticut. "They're able to detect even individual bombmakers' ways of doing things, of placing wires, of placing fuses, how they put the whole thing together. There aren't lots of people in the world who do this well." At the top of Phillips' suspect list are Middle Eastern and Balkan terrorists. Says Phillips: "The car bomb is very much the signature of these groups."

According to Inman, the sheer difficulty of constructing bombs of this nature almost rules out an American-made device. "There hasn't been a domestic development of the kind of skills that are needed for this, as there has been in Northern Ireland or the Middle East," says Inman.

Outside experts liken the task of identifying the Trade Center bomb to the inquiry into the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, in which debris was scattered for miles. Investigators in that case drew a life-size diagram of the plane on a warehouse floor, then set about reconstructing it piece by piece like a jigsaw puzzle. From that they could determine where in the plane's body the blast occurred, because "the metal would be bent to follow the contours of the vectors of the explosion," says Phillips.

Though the FBI does not yet know whether enough evidence is left to piece together the car bomb it believes was there, its experts plan to move large quantities of debris to a secure location and examine it with microscopic care. They will search for tiny remnants that don't really belong at the scene -- that are not, say, part of a car's headlights or dashboard. Items as small as a bit of wire can point to whether a timing device was used.

The whole area will also be examined for chemical residue, which will help in determining what kind of explosive was used. In car bombings, bits of explosive matter are often found in the nooks and crannies of what is left of the auto's trunk lid. Nitrate, traces of which were found in the Trade Center crater, is the most basic component of most explosive mixtures. The next step is to find traces of chemicals that may be unique to a certain compound, like potassium or ammonium, which would identify the explosive far more precisely.

Experts will also try to determine the velocity of the shock waves emanating from the blast. "Different compounds explode at different speeds," says Brian Jenkins, senior managing director for Kroll Associates, an international investigating firm. "You can tell by examining the metal that was torn apart. Was it a big explosion that moved a lot of things, or was it a high-velocity explosion that rent metal?" Sophisticated plastic explosives tend to shred metal and pulverize concrete, while common substances like dynamite tend to knock walls over and push vehicles around. Once investigators identify the substance, they will try to determine whether it was a homemade explosive, one made from commercially available material or a product of limited availability, like a military-grade explosive. If the material is common, the trail may be colder than if it is a closely monitored substance.

Initial speculation in this case centers upon plastic explosives like Semtex, the lethal weapon of choice for many terrorists because it is safe to handle and undetectable by sniffer dogs or X-ray inspection. A small amount hidden in a portable radio blew Pan Am Flight 103 out of the sky in 1988. Semtex was produced in quantity under the communist government of Czechoslovakia; while the postcommunist Czech Republic has discontinued production, large quantities remain in the hands of terrorist gangs that obtained them illicitly. Three years ago, Czechoslovak President Vaclav Havel estimated that "world terrorism has supplies of Semtex to last 150 years."

Until last week, federal agents were confident that terrorist groups contemplating

action on American soil would have considerable difficulty smuggling in enough high explosives to manufacture a sizable car bomb. Could they have obtained them in the U.S.? Although high explosives are widely used in the construction industry, they are monitored. The FBI maintains close contacts with manufacturers and dealers, while sales are tightly regulated by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. Though the Pentagon possesses its own plastic explosive, a Semtex relative called C-4, a would-be terrorist would have to steal it from a military facility -- a theft that would probably be detected. Other explosives might be simpler to accumulate, however, like ammonium nitrate, an ordinary component of fertilizer that has been a favorite of the Irish Republican Army.

Experts speculate that the bomb may have consisted of several hundred pounds of high explosives. The bomber may have known that because the device would be detonated in the reinforced enclosure of a garage, it would deliver more bang for the buck. An enclosed area can double the "shock wave" value of an explosion. "When you have a contained explosion, the blast doesn't vent," says Phil Hough, president of International Explosives Disposal (USA). "Effectively the building becomes part of the bomb." Says Phillips: "The garage was the perfect location because of both the damage to the upper floors ((with smoke)) and structural damage the bomb would cause at the base."

Once more is known about the methods and materials of the bomber, federal agencies can compare them with the details of past bombings that are stored on its computer data base. There is also a massive job ahead of identifying and interviewing witnesses who may have seen something in the parking garage or the building. And the FBI is intensifying surveillance of possible terrorist groups and foreign agents suspected of involvement in the bombing. The bureau has also infiltrated potential terrorist groups in this country, as the CIA has done overseas. Those contacts can now be used to gather leads. "You're going to have to depend on informants," says former CIA official David Whipple. "And you almost always have informants."

Investigators will look at every possible motive, from Balkan nationalism to employee dissatisfaction at the Trade Center. "You can't take just one track, because you come to dead ends and you've lost time," says an FBI official. "You have to investigate multiple tracks at the same time." Eventually, with luck, the pieces start coming together. "Some of it is misinformation, some of it is disinformation," says Jenkins, "and some small portion is information. You have to sort all that out. In the ideal situation, these paths begin to converge. You get a chain of physical evidence that takes you all the way from the debris back to the perpetrator."

Will the perpetrator be carrying a flag? Says former CIA Director Robert Gates: "It's always been a possibility that, as ethnic conflicts spread, the losers might try to exact some sort of price, to attract attention to their cause." But it was by no means certain last week that the Trade Center bombing was an act of political terrorism. During the Gulf War, a bomb found on a chemical storage tank in Virginia instantly raised an alarm. The culprit turned out to be a businessman who hoped to make an insurance-fraud fire look like the work of Iraqis.

Yet even before the answers were in as to who had planted the bomb, a new question -- whether a season of terrorism might begin in the U.S. -- had been raised. In the wake of the explosion, bomb threats forced the evacuation of the Empire State Building and Newark airport. Both threats were false, but no one was ready to dismiss the likelihood of another assault. Around the country, airports and other public facilities stepped up security. The blast was a reminder of the vulnerability of most American office buildings, shopping malls, airports and railway stations. Even the U. S. government has let its guard down since the mid-1980s, when American installations were on constant alert and concrete barriers were set up around many government buildings in Washington.

"International terrorism in the '80s was fundamentally fueled by the cold war," says Phillips, "and you can almost date the diminution of that terrorism with Gorbachev's ascension to power." But the end of communism has helped ignite the fires of nationalism in regions like the Balkans, emboldening other fanatical groups to sow the kind of trouble once created by Soviet and East bloc terrorists.

As the only remaining superpower, the U.S. can find itself the target of resentments of players on all sides who are seeking American involvement or trying to fend it off. Massive car bombs have become familiar as political weapons in the Middle East and Europe. But it would represent a quantum leap in terrorist capabilities -- and brazenness -- to assemble one in the U.S. Middle East terror networks, for one, have never shown themselves to be capable of that or interested in doing so, preferring to concentrate their attacks on Westerners in Europe, where they have found it easier to operate.

Whoever the bomber was, he made an indelible statement. On top of the deaths and injuries, the bomb's damage to the heart of New York City's financial district will bring heavy costs. Repairs and restoration alone will cost the Port Authority as much as \$100 million, according to one estimate. But the disruption to business will be even worse, because the Port Authority will have to close the giant complex for at least several days for structural and safety work. The towers, which represent about 10% of all the office space in Manhattan's financial district, are so large that they have two ZIP codes.

Perhaps the most unsettling possibility is that the hand behind the blast will never reveal itself and never be discovered by anyone else. Though two Libyan intelligence agents were indicted in the downing of Pan Am 103, they have never been brought to trial, and no nation or group ever came forward to take responsibility. Just blocks from the World Trade Center, the walls of the Morgan Guaranty Trust Co. are still scarred from the effects of a bomb that was hidden in a horse-drawn wagon on Sept. 16, 1920. When it exploded into a lunchtime crowd, 40 people died and 200 were injured. The mystery of the blast was never cleared up. The investigators who have begun scratching through the rubble of the Trade Center are determined that this flash of terror will not go unsolved.

With reporting by Edward Barnes, Sophronia Scott Gregory/New York and Michael Duffy, Jay Peterzell/Washington

TIME

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The Terror Within

The low-rent, loosely organized plot to bomb New York City demonstrates a deadly new threat to America's public safety

By GEORGE J. CHURCH

The visions were apocalyptic: bomb blasts spreading fire and smoke through United Nations headquarters and a lower Manhattan skyscraper that houses, of all things, the New York offices of the FBI. Other explosions the same day in the Holland and Lincoln tunnels under the Hudson River, crushing motorists inside cars turned to twisted junk, killing many more by spreading intense heat, smoke and noxious fumes throughout the enclosed space of the tubes. Thousands dead, thousands more injured, the nation's biggest city in a wild panic.

It was supposed to happen this week, stunning America with a new and ghoulish kind of pre-Fourth of July fireworks display. It won't, though. A SWAT team of FBI agents and New York City police burst into a garage in the borough of Queens at 1:30 last Thursday morning, catching five men hunched over 55-gal. barrels, swirling wooden spoons to mix fertilizer and diesel fuel into an explosive paste. The alleged bombmakers were hauled into court, some still wearing overalls splotted with what the local FBI chief called a "witches' brew." They and three others nabbed in raids on apartments, all described as Muslim fundamentalists, were charged with conspiracy to carry out the bombings and held without bail. Several other suspected members of the ring are still at large while authorities look for more evidence against them, but are not regarded as dangerous.

If the plotters had succeeded, their handiwork would have traumatized the entire U.S. as well. In Washington, President Clinton said the American people should feel "an enormous sense of pride" that the terrorist plot had been foiled. In New York City, U. S. Attorney Mary Jo White noted that Siddig Ibrahim Siddig Ali, accused ringleader of the bombmakers, had been quoted as boasting, "We can get you anytime!" (He uttered these words after the Feb. 26 bombing of the World Trade Center.) Said White: "Law enforcement's answer is, 'No, you cannot' . . . We will not permit the likes of these defendants to terrorize our city."

Well, not so fast. The World Trade Center bombers, for all their ineptitude -- one expert on terrorism likens them to the Three Stooges -- did set off a blast that killed six people and injured more than 1,000. Their would-be imitators failed mostly because a confidential informant inside the ring helped the FBI keep his comrades under close surveillance. FBI men dubbed him "the Colonel"; he was later identified as Emad Salem, 43, a former Egyptian military officer.

Salem was part of the inner circle around Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, the blind, fiery Egyptian cleric who has been spiritual mentor both to the accused World Trade Center bombers and to members of the new ring. In fact Salem served for a time as Abdel Rahman's bodyguard. He is said to have turned informant partly for money (the FBI reportedly has recommended that he be given a \$250,000 bonus for his help), but largely because he thought terrorist killings were betraying, not furthering, the cause

of Islam and were likely to prompt a worldwide backlash against Muslims.

Salem's position close to Abdel Rahman apparently enabled him to win the conspirators' confidence completely. They gave him prime responsibility for making the bombs and for finding and renting (with \$300 given him by Siddig Ali) a safe house that could serve as an explosives factory. When the plotters became worried that they were being watched, it was Salem they asked to sweep the safe house for electronic bugs. Next time the feds may not be lucky enough to find an informant, at least one so trusted by his comrades.

There is almost sure to be a next time -- and then another and another. The end of the cold war and the disintegration of the Soviet-bloc governments that often abetted terrorism have not done away with the phenomenon. Quite the opposite: terrorism of new varieties seems to be on the rise around the world. As the World Trade Center plot and last week's arrests illustrate, the U.S. is not safe any longer. The sole superpower, it is now the focus of many of the world's resentments as well as much of the world's hope. Terrorism, says Bruce Hoffman, an expert at Rand Corp., "is going to join the omnipresence of crime as one of the things we have to worry about in American cities."

The cruise-missile attack early Sunday morning in Baghdad may do little to allay such fears. Yet it was a swift and powerful response to one of the world's boldest practitioners of state terrorism. The raid came after the CIA and FBI had concluded that Saddam's government had tried to kill George Bush with a car bomb during the former President's visit to Kuwait last April. The Egyptian government was less fortunate in combating terror: six days before the U.S. bust, a bomb filled with nails exploded outside a subway entrance in Cairo, killing seven and wounding 20. That was the fourth blast in or near the Egyptian capital since February -- the first went off hours after the World Trade Center bomb -- and brought the cumulative toll to 21 dead, 76 injured.

On the very day of the New York City arrests, Kurdish militants attacked Turkish institutions -- embassies, consulates, businesses, banks -- in 29 cities throughout Europe. Some of the assailants only trashed stores and offices, but one Kurd was killed outside the Turkish embassy in the Swiss capital of Bern, while raiders in Munich and Marseilles took and then released a total of 31 hostages. The Kurds were extending to Europe a guerrilla war that has raged for nine years in southeastern Turkey between Kurdish rebels and the Ankara government.

In the U.S. the same day, a Yale professor was seriously injured when he & opened a package containing a bomb -- apparently the latest attack of a bomber who has struck university and high-tech targets on and off since 1978 while successfully concealing his identity and motives.

As these assaults show, terrorism spans a spectrum from state-sponsored attacks to individual acts (like the exploits of the university and high-tech bomber) that straddle an ill-defined border between terrorism and plain ordinary crime. The mix, however, has been changing. The traditional tightly organized, centrally directed, usually left-wing and often state-financed networks of highly trained terrorists are in decline. The end of the cold war has deprived them of the money, weapons and safe havens that used to be provided by Moscow and Eastern Europe. Syria and Libya, traditional sources of training, direction and money, have been lying low lately, partly because they know they can no longer get backing in any confrontation with the U.S. from a Soviet bloc that no longer exists. Effective police work has largely neutralized such groups as the Red Brigades in Italy and the Red Army Faction in Germany.

While old-style terrorism (narrowly defined as politically motivated violence involving the citizens or territory of more than one country) has decreased since the 1970s, homegrown, ad hoc and, especially, ethnically or religiously inspired violence has increased. For example, terrorism and organized crime are blurring, especially in

such places as Italy and Colombia. Using a much broader definition of terrorism -- which counts violence committed inside a country by its own citizens -- Pinkerton Risk Assessment Services concludes that terrorist attacks worldwide increased to a record 5,404 in 1992, up 11% from 1991, and the number of people killed rose above 10,000 for the first time. Just since the World Trade Center bombing, at least 36 car bombs have exploded around the world, killing more than 300 people and wounding more than 800, according to Brian Jenkins, one of the world's leading terrorism experts.

Which indicates that the new terrorism could be even deadlier than the old. Harder to combat too, precisely because its perpetrators are less organized than their forebears and thus more difficult to spot, track and intercept. To fight the rise of decentralized terror, the U.S. must respond with more sophisticated intelligence gathering. Says a top Pentagon official: "We need to improve our capabilities, to try to outthink them, to outimagine them."

- The new attackers are sometimes called free-lance terrorists, and some truly are. Examples are the Palestinians with no history of political activity or affiliation with any organization who randomly stab or ax Israelis on the streets, and some of the German rightists who assault and kill Turks and other foreigners. Their depredations are "unorganized, unstructured, spontaneous acts with a political motivation," says Ernst Uhrlau, director of the Hamburg branch of an agency equivalent to the FBI. Police can never predict where or whom they will strike because, says Uhrlau, the offenders themselves "don't know in the morning what they will be doing that night."

Mostly, though, the new terrorists are a collection of groups that form, change and regroup, operating with some coordination and perhaps prompted or even financed by a state -- Iran and Sudan are the leading suspects currently -- but not really controlled or directed by anyone. "Inspiration may play the same role as instruction. A state can issue a mandate to carry out an act," says Jenkins, and leave the rest "up to local initiative." That poses a severe problem for counterterrorists who are used to searching for, say, an organization run from Tripoli and coordinated by alleged diplomats operating out of Libyan "people's bureaus" (embassies) around the world. "We're always looking for a central headquarters," says Jenkins. But the new terrorists, he says, comparing them with their predecessors of the 1970s and '80s, are "more religious, more ecumenical, more implacable, less organized, less structured, more unyielding, more difficult to predict and to penetrate."

All of which gives the New York plot more than local importance; the group that planned it in many ways typifies the new terrorism.

It had some connections to the World Trade Center bombers. According to court papers, two members, ringleader Siddig Ali and Clement Rodney Hampton- El, a black American convert to Islam, told FBI informant Salem they had helped that group test-fire a bomb. Several members of both groups had also fought with the Islamic fundamentalist guerrillas harassing the Soviet invaders of Afghanistan -- a resistance movement supported, ironically, by the U.S., which is now the terrorists' target.

Otherwise, though, the two groups seemed to be connected only tangentially, through Sheik Abdel Rahman. Members of both groups worshipped at the Jersey City, New Jersey, mosque where Abdel Rahman preaches fiery sermons. Mahmud Abouhalima, an alleged member of the World Trade Center gang, once served as Abdel Rahman's driver. Siddig Ali was Abdel Rahman's interpreter.

No one, however, has yet alleged that Abdel Rahman gave either group any actual directions. The FBI did get a court order allowing it to record some conversations between Abdel Rahman and members of the ring broken up last week. Some agents then wanted to arrest the sheik, and prepared an affidavit in support. The debate on whether to order the arrest went all the way to Attorney General Janet Reno. The

consensus of superiors who reviewed the document and the evidence it contained, however, was that the agency just did not have enough to link Abdel Rahman to the plot in anything but a marginal way. FBI agents did raid Abdel Rahman's apartment in Jersey City and carted away boxes of documents and tapes -- said to have been left there by Siddig Ali for safekeeping -- but no other action immediately followed.

Besides the bombings, the terrorist group is alleged to have plotted four assassinations, all of people Abdel Rahman has something against: Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, whose secular government the sheik preaches must be overthrown; U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, an Egyptian regarded as a traitor by Islamic fundamentalists because he helped negotiate peace with Israel; Republican Senator Alfonse D'Amato, who has urged that Abdel Rahman be imprisoned; and Dov Hikind, a New York State legislator who has questioned whether Abdel Rahman's followers were involved in the 1990 murder of Meir Kahane, a Zionist zealot. Abdel Rahman professes abhorrence of terrorism, but he is widely considered adept at phrasing religious messages in ways that sound innocent to outsiders but that some Muslims understand as coded incitements to violence.

Foreign connections are somewhat the same story: there seem to have been some, but vague and indirect. Five members of the gang were described by the FBI as Sudanese who had become legal permanent residents of the U.S. (Another was said to be a Palestinian born in Jordan, and the other two native-born U.S. citizens -- one apparently Hampton-El, the other a Puerto Rican named Victor Alvarez.) According to diplomats in Cairo, three of the supposed Sudanese may really be Egyptians who passed through Sudan and acquired Sudanese passports. Sudan is now second to Iran in the financing and training of Muslim terrorist groups, and it shelters P.L.O. terrorists from Lebanon and Tunisia as well as Egyptian fundamentalists fleeing from a crackdown by Mubarak. But though they may have been given or promised some help by Sudan, Iran or both, the bombers appear to have drawn their plans on their own.

Those plans allegedly were quite specific. According to a federal affidavit, Siddig Ali told the FBI's informant Salem on May 7 that he had "connections" who would help him drive a vehicle laden with explosives into a parking garage of the U.N. building and leave it there to be detonated. (Actually, that would be no great trick. Dozens of cars with diplomatic plates allowing entry to the U.N. complex are parked all over Manhattan; a terrorist could easily steal one and drive it past U.N. guards, who rarely check to see if the person at the wheel has any identification.) Later in May, Siddig Ali allegedly told Salem that he had carried out pre-bombing surveillance of the federal building housing the FBI's New York offices and made sketches of its entrance. He allegedly remarked that some guards would have to be killed for the bombers to get inside.

At the end of May, Siddig Ali added the tunnels to the list. While driving through one of them with Salem and "Amir Last Name Unknown" -- as he is identified in the affidavit -- Siddig Ali said the tunnels should be bombed after the U.N. but before the federal building. He "discussed where a bomb would best be placed and where a fire should be set as a diversion."

Finally, the gang proceeded to actual assembly of the bombs. Last Wednesday two men brought to the Queens safe house diesel fuel from a gas station in Yonkers, a northern suburb, operated by one of the suspects, Mohammad Saleh. Some of the gang also reportedly made specific preparations to flee the country within a few days. The FBI and city police, who had been watching the assembly through concealed television cameras (which later pictured their own raid on the factory) and listening through monitoring devices, decided they had better move immediately. Said FBI special agent in charge James Fox: "We entered so fast, some of the subjects said they didn't realize strangers were in the bomb factory until they had the handcuffs being put on them."

The defendants were charged immediately with conspiracy and attempting to damage and destroy buildings by use of explosives. If convicted they could be sentenced to 15 years in prison. U.S. Attorney White, however, said additional charges are likely to be filed. Said Fox: "These people are going to do many years of hard time."

Perhaps, but will that deter further attacks? The case might never have been cracked without the help of Salem. FBI agents insist he did not drop into their lap: they were led to him by contacts carefully cultivated in the Muslim community. "There was some damn good police work involved," says one. But it seems unlikely that a similarly highly placed informant could be located in every incipient terrorist group. And, says former FBI director William Webster, there are "dozens and dozens" of similar groups around the country; their very lack of central organization or direction makes them difficult to crack.

The U.S. has long been a major terrorist target, but most of the assaults on Americans and their organizations have taken place overseas. Terrorist attacks inside the U.S. have been extremely rare. There are many reasons, though, to think that may change. As the only remaining superpower, the U.S. already is the Great Satan to Islamic fundamentalists -- the protector of Israel, supporter of the perceived infidel Mubarak, prime enemy of theocratic Iran. But there could well be many other groups with grievances: Bosnian Muslims who think the U.S. has abandoned them to slaughter; Kurds who think Washington has left them to the cruelties of Saddam Hussein, the Turkish government or both. Indeed, the U.S. could be a target for just about any group that feels itself aggrieved and believes the one superpower has caused its troubles or could stop them but won't bestir itself.

There is also the copycat factor. Blundering though they were, the World Trade Center bombers still hit what for terrorists is the jackpot: headlines. Big, bold, worldwide headlines, which might well tempt other groups to think they could achieve the same results, call attention to their cause -- and, if they operated with a modicum more intelligence than those bombers, even escape uncaught.

Finally there is the open nature of American society. Borders are porous; potential terrorists can slip in easily. Many kinds of explosives can be bought easily, legally and without arousing suspicion. Diesel fuel is available at almost any gas station, and fertilizer of the right kind at most garden shops and hardware stores. The alleged bombers arrested last week are said to have bought their supplies in 10-lb. sacks from a hardware store on Canal Street in Lower Manhattan. Such supplies are even cheap. The World Trade Center bomb is said to have been assembled from materials bought for about ^ \$400.

Most of all, there is the legal code. Wiretaps and bugging can be ordered only if there is evidence or probable cause to believe that a crime has been or is about to be committed. Mere suspicion, however well founded, is not enough to make an arrest stick; there has to be hard evidence. Freedom-of- speech laws protect fiery oratory that in many other countries would get an aspiring terrorist leader jailed or deported long before he attracted a coterie of followers willing to bomb and kill.

Democratic values can be a protection too: many immigrants hold American freedoms so dear that they report their more radical countrymen to the FBI or police. In any case, turning the U.S. into a police state in order to prevent terrorism would be not only morally repugnant but probably ineffective; in many countries dictatorial repression has bred, not stifled, terrorism. So the nation essentially will have to watch carefully, improve its intelligence work -- and hope.

With reporting by Richard Behar/New York, Dean Fischer/Cairo, James O. Jackson/Bonn and Elaine Shannon/Washington, with other bureaus

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TIME

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Biting His Handlers

An FBI informant's secret tapes raise a troubling issue in the tower-bombing case: Did the bureau screw up?

By WILLIAM A. HENRY III

The FBI, which looked supremely capable in speedily rounding up suspects in the World Trade Center bombing, may actually have bungled a chance to thwart the explosion, according to secretly taped conversations between informant Emad Salem and his FBI handlers. In the most startling passage, leaked to the press last week, an agent seemingly accepts Salem's claim that the bombing could have been averted through his undercover work, including a proposed ploy to substitute inert powder for explosives.

The FBI, mortified by the possibility that Salem warned someone in the agency and was overlooked because of doubt that he was trustworthy, is investigating. Salem had parted company with the bureau half a year before the bombing, ironically because he reportedly would not wear a body microphone for secret taping. He was hired after the attack to penetrate the larger group of alleged terrorists. The agent who spoke in apparent confirmation of Salem may, FBI sources hopefully suggest, simply have been placating a volatile informant who was overstating his case.

The 70 audiocassettes unquestionably contain material embarrassing to the FBI and awkward for the prosecution in both the bombing trial under way in Manhattan and the related case alleging a massive conspiracy to blow up New York City landmarks and assassinate public officials. Says William Kunstler, a defense attorney in the second case: "The FBI never knew they were being taped, so they said very careless things -- how the informant was to conduct himself, how far he could go and how to entice them. This is probably the only case since entrapment became a defense where you have the law-enforcement agents being taped without their knowledge."

In the most extreme outcome, the defense in the World Trade Center case could secure a mistrial on the basis that Salem's tapes contain potentially helpful evidence and should have been handed over months ago instead of last week, after excerpts and summaries appeared in the press. Prosecutors have taken weeks to establish how heinous the bombing was; last week the case reached its 58th witness without any testimony directly linking the defendants to the bomb. This strategy could be blunted if the jury comes to believe that the U.S. government had the opportunity to forestall the bombing. While that would not make the defendants any more or less guilty, it might give them more sympathetic appeal.

In the other case, which has not yet come to trial, defense attorneys hope that the tapes will prove entrapment by law-enforcement authorities. Says Columbia University law professor Gerard Lynch, a former federal prosecutor: - "There's very little published in this case to suggest entrapment. But if jurors hear about government conduct that offends them, they could decide to acquit." Salem's testimony is essential to buttress tapes of his dealings with defendants. These newly revealed tapes with the FBI, however, may make both him and his handlers look

sleazy. A former Egyptian army officer, Salem has a reputation as a tale spinner. It cannot help that the FBI trusted him so little that it once dropped him or that he trusted the FBI so little that he taped his conversations. Moreover, a good deal of the talk is about payment, with Salem seeking \$1 million and officials advising him how to get it. The more they hear Salem talk about money, the more jurors may wonder how far he was prepared to go to get it.

With reporting by Ratu Kamlani/New York and Elaine Shannon/Washington

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TIME

FROM THE MAGAZINE

Monday, Sep. 6, 1993

Would You Believe This Witness?

HE REALLY WAS A COLONEL IN THE Egyptian army. Cairo records confirm it. But everything else about Emad Salem is disputed or highly mysterious.

He says he was a member of assassinated President Anwar Sadat's bodyguard. But the commander of the guard does not remember him.

While serving as an aide to Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman, Salem insisted to American reporters that Islam is a religion of mercy. Then he showed them photographs of people with cigarette burns and other marks of torture. Some journalists got the idea he was boasting of his own handiwork.

FBI agents were in touch with him as early as 1991. But they did not know if they could trust him: some feared he was an Egyptian intelligence agent pursuing an agenda that was not Washington's. They recruited him as a full-time informer only after the Feb. 26 bombing of the World Trade Center, when they desperately needed someone inside an Islamic radical group. Then he annoyed them by tape recording conversations with his FBI contacts as well as with alleged terrorists. One federal agent calls Salem "a pain in the ass."

A worshipper at Abu-Bakr Mosque in Brooklyn, New York, where Salem showed up a few years ago, says most of the members did not trust him. Though he tried to seem devout, the source claimed that Salem could not pray or recite the Koran properly. But members of Sheik Abdel Rahman's alleged terrorist conspiracy seem to have had no doubts. A grand jury indictment last week tells of a number of meetings at which alleged conspirators voiced fear that there might be an informer among them, then pointed a finger at one of their ringleaders. Salem was present at all sessions; once he was even asked by Abdel Rahman to investigate the charges.

Salem is now in the federal witness-protection program and unavailable to clear up these mysteries. Which raises the biggest question of all: What will a trial jury make of his crucial testimony?

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