



**CARNAGE.** New York City police and firefighters inspect the bomb crater just one day after the 1993 World Trade Center attack.

# Tracing terror's roots

How the first World Trade Center plot sowed the seeds for 9/11

BY CHITRA RAGAVAN

It's been 10 years now, but for New York police detective Tom Corrigan and his colleagues, the memories are still chilling. On a snowy afternoon, terror came home to America. The date was Feb. 26, 1993. A powerful fertilizer bomb exploded in the parking garage of the World Trade Center. Six people died. More than a thousand were injured. Rescue workers evacuated more than 50,000 workers from the city's financial district. That night, Corrigan found himself standing at the edge of the enormous blast crater. "I remember being cold," says Corrigan. "It was pitch black, all those sirens from the car alarms, streams of water pouring all over the place—my shoes were sopping wet. It was like *The Poseidon Adventure*."

Corrigan and his partners in the FBI-NYPD Joint Terrorism Task Force moved with stunning speed. Within nine days, task force members arrested a Palestinian man, Mohammed Salameh, and uncovered the identities of his accomplices, Mahmoud Abouhalima and Nidal Ayyad. Both were captured just weeks later. The mastermind of the attack, a slender young fanatic named Ramzi Yousef, fled to Pakistan, but the cops quickly unraveled the plot. A key reason: They had been pur-

suing these men for years. Time and again, however, they were a half step slow and a split second too late. In lengthy interviews earlier this month with *U.S. News*, several key task-force investigators reflected on what remains a bittersweet chapter in their professional lives. "We were so aggressive," says FBI supervisory special agent John Anticev. "Yet there is an overwhelming sense of disappointment. We just missed it."

If the story sounds familiar, it's no accident. The post-mortems on the 1993 World Trade Center bombing revealed many of the same missteps that preceded the September 11 attacks. It wasn't that the cops and the feds hadn't gathered lots of information; they had plenty. But putting it all together was another story, just as it was in the days before the twin towers were attacked. In both cases, convincing superiors of the urgency of their information was also no easy task. "We were saying, 'These people are violent,'" Corrigan recalls, "and [supervisors] were yawning."

There was also a host of missed clues and lost opportunities: Boxes of evidence were misplaced, cops released murder suspects, a key FBI informant was fired, a crucial surveillance was shut down. The moment was lost. The consequences would prove enormous. Over the course of the next decade, the core group of Is-

lamic radicals and associates the task force had deemed so dangerous would strike repeatedly. Significant players *were* arrested, but their cohorts were involved in virtually every major terrorist act against the United States, including the 9/11 attacks.

The story of the first attack on the World Trade Center begins five years *before* the bomb in the yellow Ryder rental truck blew up in the garage. In 1988, the FBI-NYPD task force got a tip that men associated with the al-Kifah Refugee Services Center in Brooklyn, N.Y., were participating in paramilitary training with militant black Muslims at shooting ranges, in hopes of going to Afghanistan to fight the Russian occupation force there. The men were responding, in part, to previous exhortations by al-Kifah founder Abdullah Azzam, whom authorities now identify as Osama bin Laden's former spiritual adviser. Surveillance photos developed by the task force confirmed the allegations. "We also found," the FBI's Anticev says, "that some of them were looking to purchase a lot of ammunition."

The inquiry into those men—and those grainy surveillance photos—took on new importance on Nov. 5, 1990. On that day, an Egyptian janitor named El Sayyid Nosair fatally shot Rabbi Meir Kahane, the militant founder of the Jewish Defense League (JDL), after he spoke at a Marriott hotel. Nosair shot and wounded two other men as he fled but was shot and captured. One of Nosair's accomplices escaped, but two other men found in Nosair's apartment were hauled in for questioning. Their names were Mohammed Salameh and Mahmoud Abouhalima.

**Conspiracy angle.** In his book *The Cell*, former ABC News reporter John Miller and his coauthors offer the first detailed look at the task force's efforts to break the al-Kifah cell. In an incident described by Miller, NYPD chief of detectives Joseph Borelli ordered the case officer, Lt. Eddie Norris, to abandon any broad conspiracy theory and to release Abouhalima and Salameh, allegedly arguing that Nosair acted alone. Borelli remembers it differently and told *U.S. News* that "I never once told anyone not to look at the conspiracy angle." What isn't disputed is this: Three years later, Abouhalima and Salameh, along with fellow al-Kifah member Ayyad, bombed the World Trade Center.

Following the Kahane murder, Anticev, fellow FBI agent John Liguori, and NYPD detective Louis Napoli, another task force member, pulled out those old surveillance photos; sure enough, there was Nosair's picture. Further research revealed that Nosair was the emir for paramilitary training at a Jersey City, N.J., mosque and that his spiritual mentor, an Egyptian cleric named Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman, had recently arrived in New York. Abdel-Rahman was on a State Department terrorist watch list for his role as a suspected accomplice in the 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, but he was allowed into the country for reasons that remain unclear. "We now have the main player from a major terrorist organization here," says Napoli, "and we start seeing the influence on the different mosques he attends."

Hindsight, of course, is always 20/20, and it must be remembered the American investigators knew far less about the twilight world of Islamic terrorism then than they do now. It is

also true, however, that competitive pressures hobbled the antiterrorism task force in New York. While the NYPD's Lieutenant Norris was at lunch one day, task force members grabbed 24 boxes of evidence from his office, only to lose control of them two days later when Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau asserted jurisdiction over the Kahane case. Published reports say the boxes of evidence contained bomb manuals, U.S. Special Forces manuals, maps of New York landmarks, including the World Trade Center, and a notebook with a penciled entry in Arabic about the need for jihadists to topple tall buildings. In his investigation of the Kahane murder, however, Morgenthau decided to pursue a theory that the JDL leader was felled by a lone gunman. After 9/11, Norris blasted the FBI for not knowing what was in the boxes. Anticev rejects the criticism, saying the task force lost control of the boxes when Morgenthau took control of the Kahane case.

The task force never lost interest in Abouhalima, though, because he, too, appeared in those old surveillance photos.

A janitor in Abouhalima's apartment building gave Napoli and Anticev a detonating cap he found under Abouhalima's bed, and the investigators set up a round-the-clock surveillance of Abouhalima and interviewed him several times. "We tried to develop him as a source but to no avail," says Anticev. "He was cool as a cucumber."

Nosair, meanwhile, had become something of a cause célèbre. Unknown to the FBI, Nosair's cousin Ibrahim el-Gabrownny traveled to Saudi Arabia and obtained a \$20,000 contribution from

Osama bin Laden for Nosair's defense fund. Tentacles of the FBI's investigation of Nosair and Abouhalima were extending overseas, but nothing yet pointed to bin Laden as a major player, says Liguori, a task force member. A jury acquitted Nosair of the Kahane murder but convicted him of the other two shootings in 1991.

That same year, evidence of a wider network of young Islamic men began turning up. An FBI agent hooked investigators Napoli and Anticev up with Emad Salem, an Egyptian informant. Posing as a bomb maker, Salem ingratiated himself with el-Gabrownny during Nosair's trial, visited Nosair in jail, and penetrated Sheikh Abdel-Rahman's inner circle. In June 1992, an associate of el-Gabrownny sought Salem's help in a plot to bomb 12 New York targets and kill the judge in the Nosair trial. His new associates wanted Salem to make pipe bombs for them, placing the FBI in a legally precarious position. Salem also refused to wear a secret recording device because he did not want to testify in court. Tensions flared. In July 1991, after several polygraph exams of Salem proved inconclusive, the task force and Salem parted company. Asked if he regrets that decision, Anticev says, "Absolutely. No question about it, I would be fooling myself if I said no."

Without Salem, it was back to the drawing board. Anticev and Napoli subpoenaed Abouhalima, Salameh, Ayyad, and others. Before the men arrived for questioning, Anticev and Napoli plastered the walls with the old surveillance photos. "We tried to neutralize that cell," says Anticev, "by showing them we had been on to them for four years." The group



CLERIC. Omar Abdel-Rahman (hand raised) in Jersey City, N.J.



says the FBI's Stern. In some ways, he was the prototype of the 9/11 bombers—he was westernized, used aliases and phone cards, and was educated abroad. “The others were trying to make a statement,” says Corrigan. “He wanted to kill people.”

On February 26, a month after Abdel-Rahman issued a global *fatwa* against the United States, the World Trade Center bomb exploded. “Nowhere in our wildest dreams,” says Anticev, “from those amateurish pipe bombs to the magnitude of what Yousef was able to create, did we ever imagine they could do this.” Adds Napoli, ruefully: “We didn’t know how to complete the puzzle.”

The task force linked the blast to Salameh, Ayyad, and Abouhalima after tracing the Ryder truck to Salameh. He had listed el-Gabrowni’s Brooklyn address, which was Abouhalima’s mail drop. Napoli paged Anticev and told him the news. “I almost started crying,” says Anticev, “when I heard the address. I knew immediately it was Abouhalima.” When Salameh returned to the rental office to claim his deposit, the feds arrested him.

**Back in business.** Soon after the bombing, Anticev got a phone call from Emad Salem, the former informant. “He gloated,” says Anticev, “Oh, how he gloated. He tried to say, ‘You should have listened to me.’ I had to say, ‘You were right.’” But Salem was also contrite about refusing to wear a wire. He offered to help again, this time, however, for more money. The FBI anted up. Two months later, Salem unearthed a plot hatched by Abdel-Rahman’s translator and bodyguard, Siddig Siddig-Ali, to bomb New York tunnels, bridges, the United Nations, and the FBI’s New York office. Abdel-Rahman, Siddig-Ali, Nosair, el-Gabrowni, and others were convicted of seditious conspiracy and other charges; Nosair was also convicted federally in the Kahane killing. Salem received more than \$1 million and entered the federal witness protection program.

But Yousef wasn’t done. After fleeing to Pakistan, he turned up in the Philippines a year later. A lucky break (a suspicious apartment fire) allowed police and the FBI to foil his plans to blow up at least 12 commercial jetliners over the Pacific. Investigators also uncovered plans by Yousef to assassinate President Clinton and the pope.

Here the ties to bin Laden become more intriguing. Intelligence reports, though admittedly vague, indicated that Yousef had once talked casually of wanting to fly a small plane into CIA headquarters. Yousef’s uncle, Khalid Shaikh Mohammad, was in Manila at the same time as Yousef, according to Miller; Mohammad later became one of bin Laden’s top financial advisers and helped plan the 9/11 attacks. Yousef would not enjoy the same freedom to operate as his uncle. In February 1995, a man Yousef was trying to recruit betrayed him to Pakistani authorities. He was arrested in an unpretentious guesthouse on the outskirts of Islamabad and brought back to New York.

The early work done by the task force and others would ultimately provide the government with the crucial building blocks for recognizing the new jihad movement in America and,

ultimately, understanding al Qaeda. But two major events would distract the task force from the jihadists for years: the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City and the 1997 TWA Flight 800 disaster. The former turned the FBI’s attention toward homegrown threats, and the latter consumed the FBI’s New York office with a 17-month terrorism investigation of a crash that is now thought to have been caused by mechanical failure.

The FBI *did* obtain a sealed grand jury indictment of bin Laden in 1998, but the distractions from the other investigations may have prevented it from uncovering still another plot launched years earlier. In 1994, bin Laden’s secretary Wadi el-Hage—moved to Nairobi and created the Kenya cell that would set off two car bombs in 1998 outside the U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es-Salaam, Tanzania, killing 224 people. Once again, it turned out that the task force had zeroed in on a key player from the old al-Kifah days but had been unable to figure out what he was up to

in time. El-Hage had visited Nosair in prison and also acquired some weapons for Abouhalima after the Kahane murder. The FBI questioned el-Hage in Nairobi, and when he returned to the States in 1997, the bureau questioned him again and placed him under surveillance. But the Kenya cell replaced el-Hage and kept right on plotting.

El-Hage wasn’t the only al-Kifah link to the embassy explosions. U.S. Army Sgt. Ali Mohamed did preliminary scouting for bombing locations for bin Laden as early as 1993; he visited with Nosair when he traveled to Brooklyn and Jersey City to meet with Abdel-Rahman.

Mohamed provided Nosair and other al-Kifah members with Special Forces documents and paramilitary training, and he provided security for bin Laden’s 1991 relocation from Afghanistan to Sudan.

Looking back, the task force’s prescience about the Nosair group is both eerie and disturbing. “It’s like writing a book chapter by chapter,” says Kenneth Maxwell, a former supervisory FBI agent on the task force, “without knowing the ending.” Task force members were devastated by 9/11. The FBI agents are especially stung by the new mantra of prevention; their investigation into al-Kifah is proof, they say, that prevention has always been their *raison d’être*. “To devote your life to this, and then to be told you dropped the ball . . .” says Anticev, his voice trailing away. On the day of the memorial service at ground zero, Anticev told his colleagues, “I can’t go down there wearing my FBI JTTF T-shirt because the mother of a victim would say, ‘Where were you when they were planning these attacks?’” “We got no respect,” says Thomas Donlon, FBI co-case agent on the trade center blast, “for the work we did.” His partner Stern admits that counterterrorism work is unforgiving, the bottom line stark and simple. “You cannot make a mistake,” says Stern. “You have to be 100 percent omnipotent and omnipresent. One day you’re a hero; the next day, you’re a zero.” ●

*With Nancy L. Bentrup, Ann M. Wakefield, Sheila Thalhimer, and Monica M. Ekman*



**TRAPPED.** Trade center workers call for help following blast.