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FROM DEBKA INTELLIGENCE FILES

Hijack suspect was wanted man U.S. denied Israel's request for extradition

Editor's note: DEBKAfile's electronic news publication is a news-cum-analysis live wire, online round the clock seven days a week. A weekly edition, DEBKA-Net-Weekly, is now available through WorldNetDaily.com. Drawing on DEBKAfile's unique sources, analytical talents and forward-looking insights, it is presented as a compact, intelligence-angled weekly package. It is available as a direct e-mail feed or via the Internet.

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Hijack suspect Mohamed Atta and his cousin Marwan Ashehri, two of the 19 hijackers named by the U.S. Justice Department, as perpetrators of the New York World Trade Center and Pentagon, Washington suicide attacks, have been variously described as Egyptian, United Arab Emirates and Saudi nationals.

Yet, according to DEBKA-Net-Weekly, they were actually Arab-Americans.

Hamburg investigators said two of the terrorists were Mohamed Atta, 33, and Marwan Alshehhi, 23, whose training at a Florida flight school has been the focus of intense FBI probes this week. The German investigators said the two were from the United Arab Emirates.

Atta, 33, was implicated in a series of bus bombings that hit Jerusalem in 1996. He evaded Israeli capture by going to ground among his

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relatives in America. The U.S. authorities at the time turned down Israel's request to extradite this U.S. national. He is reportedly the scion of a prominent, affluent family in El-Bireh, Ramallah, one of whose members is a former mayor and most of whom carry American citizenship, as do many elite Palestinian families in Ramallah and its environs.

The latest information coming out of the FBI investigation traces Atta, Ashehri and another of the seven suicide pilots, Ziad Jarrah, from the Lebanese Bekaa Valley, to Hamburg four years ago, where they established an Islamic terrorist cell.

Terrorist experts note that this cell based itself on a much older German-based terrorist group – the one involved in the 1988 Pan Am 103 terrorist disaster over Lockerbie, Scotland, in which 270 died. Atta, who set up an Islamic prayer room in the local university, was known in Hamburg as “Mohamed el-Amir.” Ashihri registered for studies, but never turned up. Jarrah, who flew aboard the plane that crashed near Pittsburgh, went from Germany to Afghanistan 18 months ago and from there to Miami, Florida.

It now appears that some of the seven suicide pilots may have trained not only in private flying schools in Florida, but at U.S. military schools. That is yet another pointer to how well Islamic jihadists were able to secretly place themselves in American society and its institutions.

The most recent penetration dates back 11 years at least, although its roots go back much earlier. In 1990, when the Afghan war ended with the Red Army's defeat, Osama Bin Laden, who led the international Islamic brigade America raised to fight the Red Army, turned coat. “Afghan Arabs” -- as those volunteers came to be known -- were allowed to settle in the United States with their families. Some stayed loyal to their former commander and enlisted to the Al Qaeda, the militant movement Bin Laden created to fight the second surviving secular superpower, America.

Those Afghan Arabs form the American-based

core of Al Qaeda. A second important branch that buried its operatives inside the United States was the fanatical and violent Egyptian Jihad Islami movement, Bin Laden's foremost ally.

In the latter half of the 1990s, those two groups working hand in glove were joined by a younger generation of Arab Moslem militants from the Middle East, brought up in the tradition of suicide for the cause.

Those three branches, numbering no more than some 2,500 activists in all, form the engine powering contemporary international terrorism. They gained entry into the United States in the last 11 years with the help of moles and agents inside America's governing institutions, including its intelligence machinery.

Those agencies emphatically deny such penetrations. This is only partly true, according to DEBKA sources. Whereas it is inconceivable that U.S. counterintelligence would directly hire Muslim terrorists, there are known cases of U.S. double agents, who by definition serve two services, knowingly aiding an alien agency, which is close to the Bin Laden network.

Furthermore, U.S. counterintelligence has strived for two decades at least to penetrate the militant Islamic fundamentalist world by planting its own moles and double agents – with very little success. In most cases, those plants remained faithful to their religious tenets, not their American handlers, using their covert American connections to spread the fundamentalist net inside U.S. intelligence itself.

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