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The New York City Subway Poison Gas Plot

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A NEFA analysis of the New York City Subway Poison Gas Plot
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The Plotters – A Bahrain-Based Terrorist Cell with “Strong Saudi...Connections”

On February 13, 2003, authorities arrested five men who were traveling toward Bahrain from Saudi Arabia on the King Fahd Bridge.¹ According to The One Percent Doctrine, authored by Pulitzer Prize winning reporter Ron Suskind, three of those individuals had “strong jihadist credentials,”² and an investigation of one of them, Bassam Bokhowa, uncovered links to six jihadists in Saudi Arabia, who were also arrested.³

George Tenet, former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, has confirmed that the Bahrain cell had “strong Saudi extremist connections.” Further, Tenet notes that the group “operated independently of al-Qa’ida” but “followed the unwritten protocol between extremists by requesting permission from al-Qa’ida central leadership to conduct the attack.”⁴

The Target – The New York City Subways

During the course of their investigation, authorities discovered that the Bahrain cell was planning to launch a cyanide gas attack on the New York City subway system.

The existence of this plot has been confirmed by George Tenet,⁵ Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Robert Mueller,⁶ and the New York City Police Department (NYPD). For example, in June 2006, NYPD spokesman Paul Browne told the press, “We were aware of the plot and took appropriate precaution.”⁷

The Device – The “Mobtaker”

When searching a computer in a Saudi apartment linked to Bokhowa,⁸ investigators learned that, in George Tenet’s words, “the extremists had created a clever homemade dispersal device called the ‘mobtaker’ – Arabic roughly translated as

¹ Ron Suskind, The One Percent Doctrine, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, © 2006, p. 193.

² Ron Suskind, The One Percent Doctrine, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, © 2006, p.194.

³ Ron Suskind, The One Percent Doctrine, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, © 2006, p. 194 and p. 206.

⁴ George Tenet, At the Center of the Storm, Harper Collins, New York, NY, © 2007, p. 273-274.

⁵ George Tenet, At the Center of the Storm, Harper Collins, New York, NY, © 2007, p. 273.

⁶ Remarks Prepared for Delivery by Director Robert S. Mueller, III, Federal Bureau of Investigation, The City Club of Cleveland, June 23, 2006,

http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/Atlanta/MuellerSpeech_Cleveland.pdf.

⁷ “Senator: NYC Subway Plot was Real,” *Associated Press*, June 21, 2006.

⁸ Ron Suskind, The One Percent Doctrine, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, © 2006, p. 194.

'invention'—a lethal device that could be constructed entirely from readily available material."⁹



Figure 1

Source: DHS-FBI Bulletin

A joint Department of Homeland Security-Federal Bureau of Investigation bulletin, originally issued in September 2003 and leaked to the media, provides a detailed overview¹⁰ of the device's main characteristics:

"Terrorists have designed chemical dispersal devices fabricated from commonly available materials which are designed to asphyxiate victims. The device, in its simplest form, produces hydrogen cyanide (HCN) gas; however, it can be modified to produce both HCN and cyanogen chloride (CICN) gas. Little or no training is required to assemble and deploy such a device, due to its simplicity.

This improvised chemical device (see Figure 1) consists of a pierced container or canister, such as a large milk container or paint can. The holes would presumably allow the toxic gas to escape. The acidic materials are likely to be in glass bottles or vials. The bottom of the container, around the bottles, would be partially filled with a crystalline solid. If cyanide salts are used, the color will be white or yellow. A slightly modified device would also use potassium permanganate (KMnO_4) crystals, which are purple. The device can be used with or without a detonator. A detonator, or other means, is used to break the inner container(s), releasing the acid and allowing the chemicals to mix, creating a gas.

⁹ George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, © 2007, p. 273-274.

¹⁰ The CIA's 2003 "Unclassified Report to Congress on the Acquisition of Technology Relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced Conventional Munitions" also discussed the device: "Information from 2003 details the construction of a terrorist cyanide-based chemical weapon that can be made with easily available items, requiring little or no training to assemble and deploy. The plans are widely available to any terrorist. Such a device could produce a lethal concentration of poisonous gases in an enclosed area." See: Central Intelligence Agency, "Unclassified Report to Congress on the Acquisition of Technology Relating to Weapons of Mass Destruction and Advanced Conventional Munitions," 1 July Through 31 December 2003.

Assessing the device's viability, the DHS-FBI memo states:

"The device could be placed near air intakes or ventilation systems, in crowded open spaces, or in enclosed spaces. It is most effective in enclosed spaces. In most cases, use of a ventilation system for dispersal would sufficiently dilute the gas from one or several smaller versions of these devices; therefore, mass fatalities would be unlikely to occur. HCN and CICN have a relatively low toxicity; therefore, a large concentration of either gas is needed to produce lethality. However, lower concentrations are potentially fatal to the vulnerable, such as children, the elderly, and people already in respiratory distress. The gas readily dissipates and would need to be generated quickly in order to deliver lethal levels of gas. In most cases, HCN and CICN would not be effective in large open areas with good ventilation."

Later, the DHS-FBI memo warns:

"Various transportation systems may be vulnerable to attack using these improvised chemical devices, particularly where security screening procedures are minimal. One or more assembled devices could easily be brought aboard a train or subway. These gases would also be effective when released in confined spaces of buildings or other indoor facilities. It is difficult to judge the number of casualties that would result from the use of multiple devices;¹¹ however, such an attack will likely generate fear and panic among the local population."¹²

The One Percent Doctrine supplements the DHS-FBI bulletin, for Ron Suskind writes that the cell planned to place several devices "in subway cars and other strategic locations" and activate them "remotely."¹³

Conducting Surveillance on the New York City Subway System

According to the NYPD, "surveillance of the subway stations" was "undertaken" by the cell.¹⁴ The operatives purportedly transited North Africa on their way to New York City during the fall of 2002.¹⁵

Ayman al-Zawahiri Cancels the Operation: "We Have Something Better in Mind"

George Tenet asserts that when the Bahrain cell asked Al-Qaida's central leadership for permission to launch the attack, "word came back from [Al-Qaida number two] Ayman al-Zawahiri himself in early 2003 to cancel the operation and recall the

¹¹ Interviewed by *United Press International*, chemical weapons expert Milton Leitenberg explained that casualty assessments for a subway attack were "basically a guessing game" because "every calculation relies on a whole series of assumptions." Leitenberg also labels Suskind's claim that the development of the "mobtaker" was "the equivalent of splitting the atom" "the stupidest statement I have heard in many years." See: Shaun Waterman, "Cyanide Gas Device 'Probably Didn't Work,'" *United Press International*, June 26, 2006.

¹² Department of Homeland Security-Federal Bureau of Investigation Information Bulletin, "Terrorist Chemical Device," Original Date September 16, 2003.

¹³ Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine*, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, © 2006, p. 218.

¹⁴ "The Republican National Convention: The NYPD Intelligence Program," http://nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/NYPD_NYCTerrorism.pdf.

¹⁵ Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine*, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, © 2006, p. 218.

operatives, who were already staged in New York – because ‘we have something better in mind.’”¹⁶

Zawahiri’s “cryptic comment” was the source of “endless speculation at the highest levels” of the U.S. intelligence community, according to Tenet. Unfortunately, Tenet writes, “we still do not know what he meant. However, we do know that the ‘mobtaker’ cyanide device was not sufficiently inspiring to serve al-Qa’ida’s ambitions.”¹⁷

Additional Information: The Alleged Involvement of Yousef al-Ayyiri

In his book, Ron Suskind claims that Yousef al-Ayyiri personally visited Ayman al-Zawahiri in January 2003 to inform him of the New York City plot.¹⁸



Yousef al-Ayyiri

As NEFA Senior Investigator Evan Kohlmann explains in his report “Al-Qaida’s Committee in Saud Arabia: 2002-2003,”¹⁹ al-Ayyiri oversaw Al-Qaida’s network in the Arabian Peninsula until he was killed by Saudi authorities in June 2003. Al-Ayyiri also reportedly managed a training camp in Afghanistan, served as a bodyguard for Osama bin Laden,²⁰ and assisted senior Al-Qaida military commander Abu Hafs al-Masri in teaching Somali militants to use rocket-propelled grenades against U.S. helicopters.²¹ Further, he was responsible for Al-Qaida’s “Institute for Islamic Studies and Research” (a.k.a. “Al-Neda”) website.²²

Additional Information: Saudi Arabia’s Lack of Cooperation in the Investigation?

In September 2003, New York State Senator Charles Schumer wrote then-Secretary of State Colin Powell asking him to “pressure Saudi Arabian officials to remove Saudi Arabia’s Interior Minister Prince Nayef bin Abdel Aziz immediately from his position in charge of Saudi efforts to investigative and apprehend terrorists and people who support them.” In addition to highlighting other examples of the Prince’s alleged “dubious commitment to fighting terror,” Schumer highlighted a *Time* magazine report “that said Saudi officials have refused for months to grant American agents access to a

¹⁶ George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, © 2007, p. 273-4.

¹⁷ George Tenet, *At the Center of the Storm*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, © 2007, p. 273-274.

¹⁸ Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine*, Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, © 2006, p. 217.

¹⁹ Evan Kohlmann, “Al-Qaida’s Committee in Saud Arabia: 2002-2003,” <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/qaidasaudi02-03.pdf>.

²⁰ <http://www.faroq.org/news/news.php?id>, September 2003

²¹ <http://www.page4free.biz/freepage/vnew>, December 2003.

²² <http://www.page4free.biz/freepage/vnew>, December 2003.

Saudi with knowledge of extensive plans to launch a poison gas [attack] in New York City's subway system."²³

There has been no information publicly released on the impact of Schumer's letter.

Additional Information: Other Plots Targeting the New York City Subway System

For more than a decade, the New York City subways have been a frequent terrorist target, as plotters have been enticed by the opportunity to inflict substantial civilian casualties and attack a key node supporting the city's economy. According to the Metropolitan Transit Authority, on average, 4.9 million people ride the subway each weekday.²⁴

On July 31, 1997, the NYPD disrupted a plot to bomb a Brooklyn subway when they raided an apartment and discovered an explosives cache; two suspects, Gazi Ibrahim Abu Mezer and Lafi Khalil, were shot during the raid.²⁵ The indictment in the case states, "On or about July 30, 1997, while in the Apartment, defendant Gazi Ibrahim Abu Mezer showed another individual a pipe bomb that was located in a backpack and told the individual that he intended to detonate the bomb on a subway train the next day."²⁶ Then-New York City mayor, Rudy Guiliani, commented, "it looks like they were going to set off a suicide bomb and try to make the point that the United States and Israel are wrong, and strike against U.S. and Jewish interests."²⁷ (The Brooklyn subway line Abu Mezer planned to target served the heavily Jewish Borough Park neighborhood).²⁸ Authorities reportedly discovered a portrait of imprisoned terrorist Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman in the apartment²⁹ and seized a note³⁰ demanding the release of Rahman, 1993 World Trade Center bomber Ramzi Yousef, Hamas leader Ahmad Yassin, and others.³¹ Abu Mezer received a life sentence,³² while Khalil, who was acquitted in the bomb plot, was sentenced to three years in prison for immigration fraud³³ and deported.³⁴

Then, according to the NYPD, in 2003 and 2004,:

"on three occasions security personnel from Iran's Mission conducted surveillance of New York City landmarks and infrastructure including bridges and the subway system leading into Manhattan. The U.S.

²³ Letter from Senator Charles Schumer to Secretary of State Colin Powell, September 8, 2003, and Charles Schumer Press Release, "Schumer to Powell: Pressure Saudis to Fire Interior Minister Blocking Investigation of NYC Subway Poison Gas Attack," September 8, 2003.

²⁴ "Subways," <http://www.mta.info/nyct/facts/ffsubway.htm>.

²⁵ "Suspects Admit New York Subway was Bomb Target," *CNN*, July 31, 1997.

²⁶ U.S. v. Abu Mezer (E.D. N.Y.), CR-97-804, Indictment, Filed August 28, 1998.

²⁷ "New York was 'Close to Disaster' from Suicide Bomb Plot," *CNN*, August 1, 1997.

²⁸ Tom Hays, "Life Sentence in Subway Bomb Plot," *Associated Press*, March 2, 1999.

²⁹ "Suspects Admit New York Subway was Bomb Target," *CNN*, July 31, 1997.

³⁰ The note vowed they would "burn the Jews" if their demands were not met. See: Tom Hays, "Life Term in N.Y. Subway Bomb Plot," *Associated Press*, March 1, 1999.

³¹ Copy of note seized by authorities in author's possession.

³² Tom Hays, "Life Sentence in Subway Bomb Plot," *Associated Press*, March 2, 1999.

³³ "Former Terror Suspect Sentenced to 3 Years for Immigration Fraud," *Associated Press*, December 3, 1998.

³⁴ Tom Hays, "Life Term in N.Y. Subway Bomb Plot," *Associated Press*, March 1, 1999.

Government and the NYPD are concerned that they were building ‘off the shelf’ reconnaissance of New York targets in advance of any future attacks against New York by terrorists supported by Iran, such as Hezbollah.”³⁵

And on August 27, 2004, authorities arrested Queens, N.Y. resident Shahawar Matin Siraj and Staten Island, N.Y. resident James Elshafay and charged them with plotting to bomb the Herald Square subway stop. The Republican National Convention was scheduled to begin one block away at Madison Square Garden on August 30th. The NYPD reports that “the attackers hoped to collapse the Manhattan Mall, which is immediately above that stop.”³⁶ On August 21, 2004, the men had “entered and inspected the station, and then returned to their car and drew diagrams of the location in order to help them later place a bomb.”³⁷ In January 2007, Siraj received a thirty year prison sentence; Elshafay pled guilty to conspiracy to damage or destroy a subway station by means of an explosive³⁸ and received a five year sentence in March 2007.³⁹

Additional Information: Al-Qaida Training Camp Tests with Cyanide Gas

During the trial of a co-conspirator, convicted Millennium bomb plotter Ahmed Ressam gave highly revealing testimony about his experience at an Al-Qaida training camp in Afghanistan prior to 9/11:

Q. Your chief put cyanide in the box, is that correct?

A. Yes.

Q. He added sulphuric acid to the cyanide, correct?

A. Yes.

Q. And the dog shortly thereafter died from that experiment, correct?

A. Correct.



Questioning on the topic continued:

³⁵ “The Republican National Convention: The NYPD Intelligence Program,”

http://nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/NYPD_NYCTerrorism.pdf.

³⁶ Mitchell Silber and Arvin Bhatt, NYPD Senior Intelligence Analysts, “Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat,”

http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/FeaturedDocs/NYPD_RadicalizationinWest.pdf.

³⁷ Department of Justice Press Release, “Shahawar Matin Siraj Convicted of Conspiring to Place Explosives at the 34th Street Subway Station,” May 24, 2006.

³⁸ Department of Justice Press Release, “Shahawar Matin Siraj Sentenced to Thirty Years of Imprisonment for Conspiring to Place Explosives at the 34th Street Subway Station in New York,” January 8, 2007.

³⁹ “Man Gets Five Years in Plot to Bomb Subway,” *Associated Press*, March 3, 2007.

Q. You practiced these techniques on the dogs so that later on in one of your operations you would be able to perform such techniques on human beings, is that correct?

A. Yes. We wanted to know what is the effect of the gas, yes.

Q. Some of your potential targets while you were in the camp were American citizens, is that correct?

A. In regard to targets in general, yes. Yes, we were speaking about America as an enemy of Islam. ...

Q. The reason you were trained in the use of cyanide at the camps in Afghanistan was because you were going to use cyanide in your urban warfare, correct?

A. We don't know. Possibly if I needed it, I would use it. Yes, because it is very difficult to use gases in the field.

Q. You were trained to use cyanide by placing the cyanide near the air intake of a building, correct?

A. They gave us some examples, but we did not try them out actually.

Q. The reason one of the examples was to put the cyanide right near the air intake of a building such as a government building, correct?

A. Yes, that's right.⁴⁰

Additional Information: Aum Shinrikyo's Attacks

On May 5, 1995, the Japanese doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo placed two bags, one containing sulfuric acid and the other sodium cyanide (which combine to form hydrogen cyanide), in a bathroom at the Shijuki subway station in Tokyo; one of the bags was set on fire. Four individuals were slightly injured in the attack. An additional attempt to produce hydrogen cyanide using bags containing sulfuric acid and sodium cyanide and planted in a restroom at the Kayabacho, Tokyo subway station failed on July 4, 1995.⁴¹

⁴⁰ U.S. v. Haouri (S.D. N.Y.), No. S4-00-CR-15, Testimony of Ahmed Ressam, July 5, 2001.

⁴¹ "Chronology of Aum Shunrikyo's CBW Activities," http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/reports/pdfs/aum_chrn.pdf.