

Much known, little done

Clinton administration slow to react to terrorist activity

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By Richard Minter, SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Part four of an exclusive four-part series of excerpts.

President Clinton's first opportunity to defeat Osama bin Laden came late in the afternoon of March 3, 1996, in an Arlington, Virginia, hotel suite. It was the first attempt by the Clinton Administration to deal decisively with the arch-terrorist. It lasted less than 30 minutes.

Sudan's then Minister of State for Defense Elfatih Erwa flew in for a secret meeting with Timothy M. Carney, the U.S. ambassador to Sudan, and David Shinn, Director of East African Affairs at the State Department. Both Carney and Shinn were State Department veterans. Also present was a middle-aged man who was a member of the CIA's Directorate of Operations [Africa division] at the time and is still active with the agency today. . . . The CIA believed, and its representative told Erwa at the time, that some 200 al Qaeda terrorists were holed up in Sudan. [The actual number, the author learned in Khartoum in 2002, was as high as 583. . . .]

Five days later, Erwa again met with the CIA operative. This time, the two State Department officials were not present. Erwa and the CIA officer were alone as they decided the fate of Osama bin Laden.

Sudan offered to arrest and turn over bin Laden at this meeting, according to Erwa. He brought up bin Laden directly. "Where should we send him?" he asked. This was the key question. When Sudan turned over the infamous Carlos the Jackal to French intelligence in 1994, the CIA covertly provided satellite intelligence that allowed Sudanese intelligence to capture him on a pretext and escort him to the VIP lounge at the Khartoum airport. There, he was met by armed members of French intelligence and flown to Paris in a special plane. Would the CIA pick up bin Laden in Khartoum and fly him back to Washington, D.C.? Or would bin Laden go to a third country?

The CIA officer was silent. It was obvious to Erwa that a decision had not yet been made. Or perhaps his offer was not quite believed. Yet, the Sudanese official was still hoping for a repeat of the French scenario. Finally, the CIA official spoke. "We have nothing we can hold him on," he carefully said. Erwa was surprised by this, but he didn't let on. He was still hoping for a repeat of the French scenario, a silent and quick operation to seize bin Laden and bring him to justice. . . .

Sudan's files on bin Laden and his network were extensive. Sudan had dossiers on all of bin Laden's financial transactions, every fax he sent [the Mukhabarat had even bugged his fax machines], and every one of bin Laden's terrorist associates and his dubious visitors. If Sudan's surveillance was as good as Erwa claimed, bin Laden's entire global terrorist network would be laid bare. And the CIA would be able to track the movements of his foot soldiers and lieutenants across the Middle East.

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There were good reasons to believe that Sudan was serious about taking action against bin Laden. . . . His terrorist activities had isolated Sudan from the United States and much of the developed world. Sudan's internal politics were moving against the terror master too. President Bashir was in the midst of a power struggle against Hassan al-Turabi, the Islamist leader. Bin Laden supported Turabi with cash and a potential armed cadre of Muslim militants. If Bashir could rid himself of bin Laden, he could simultaneously restart Sudan's relationship with the United States and vanquish his chief internal political rival.

Over the next few months and years, Sudan would repeatedly try to provide its voluminous intelligence files on bin Laden to the CIA, the FBI, and senior Clinton Administration officials - and would be repeatedly rebuffed through both formal and informal channels. This was one of the greatest intelligence failures of the Clinton years - the result of orders that came from the Clinton White House.

As the Clinton Administration was weighing whether to seize bin Laden or take the opportunity to obtain valuable intelligence on his global network, the CIA's own intelligence on bin Laden was shockingly poor.

Human intelligence on al Qaeda was virtually nonexistent. Washington Times investigative reporter Bill Gertz uncovered a memo written only a few months after Sudan offered its intelligence on bin Laden. The July 1, 1996, CIA memo was marked "TOP SECRET UMBRA," meaning only the case officers, analysts, and officials specifically cleared to read the documents marked "UMBRA" could have access to this sensitive document. The July 1996 memo reveals how ignorant America was about its emerging nemesis. "We have no unilateral sources close to bin Laden, nor any reliable way of intercepting his communications," the report said. "We must rely on foreign intelligence services to confirm his movements and activities."

This frank report reveals that as early as 1996 - five years before the September 11 attacks - the CIA and other senior policymakers knew about bin Laden-related intelligence failures. When it came to rectifying the cause of these failures, however, little was done.

** Richard Minter is the author of "Losing bin Laden: How Bill Clinton's Failures Unleashed Global Terror." The excerpts are from that book.*

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