

Anthrax and Zawahiri's '97 Letter Bombs to DC/NYC Papers

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Commentators who dismiss Al Qaeda's responsibility for the anthrax mailings in Fall 2001 -- because such mailings are not consistent with the modus operandi of Al Qaeda -- are mistaken. Targeted assassination of individuals has been a primary modus operandi of Ayman Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad group. Al Jihad merged with Al Qaeda over a half decade ago. In 1997, the militant islamists sent deadly letters to newspapers in Washington and New York City, along with individuals in symbolic positions, in connection with the earlier bombing of the World Trade Center.

In addition to the various ministers and heads of state, the group has targeted for assassination journalists who favor peace between Egypt and Israel. Targeted assassination of people in symbolic position was the modus operandi of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad -- not the "big bangs" characteristic of Al Qaeda. Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's #2 and the real brains behind Al Qaeda, was head of Al Qaeda's anthrax production program and was on a decade-long quest to weaponize anthrax for use against US targets.

Al-Jihad has had a role in most foreign terrorist attacks against the United States and its allies over the past 20 years. The group is most well known for its first, the 1981 with the assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. In 1992, Islamic Jihad activists murdered an author who had openly supported Israeli-Egyptian peace. In 1993, al-Jihad carried out two assassination attempts, one on Egyptian Interior Minister and the other against the Egyptian Prime Minister Atef . In 1995, al-Jihad agents made an unsuccessful attempt to kill Egyptian President Mubarak in Ethiopia.

A remarkable account in the Wall Street Journal describes Zawahiri's success in the debate over whether to target the US or the Egyptian regime. The WSJ account explains that his unexplained absence upon imprisonment in a Russian jail in 1996 caused considerable stress, already building because of the lack of the movement's success in Islamic states or in Egypt, the usual financial stresses, and the conflict within the group about Zawahiri's decision to join with Bin Laden.

Some within al Jihad objected to the decision to join with Bin Laden. "There is a deep abyss in thinking," one letter write argued. The head of the group's Islamic-law committee, according to the Wall Street Journal, described it as a "great illusion" -- questioning why Zawahiri had not limited his focus to Egypt. He ventured that "going on his dead end is like fighting ghosts and windmills. Enough pouring musk on barren land!"

Others favored Zawahiri's approach. "We encourage the merger with the Contractor's company as long as it leads to stimulating profitable" trade and the state of the inertia we are in now." Others scoffed. "These are not profits. They are rather a compound of losses," reiterating the argument for a return to a focus on Egypt. Minutes of one meeting reveal fractious in-fighting. Ayman repeatedly threatened to resign -- he denounced his brother Mohamed for alleged financial malfeasance while he had been away.

Zawahiri stepped down temporarily as head in 1999, being replaced by Shehata. Shehata thought it much more important to concentrate on the regime in Egypt. Resignations continued under Shehata by those disgusted by "the thinking and

management, whether old or new." Shehata added to the tensions by being prone to tantrums. He claimed that Zawahiri was a "liar, sinner and a cheat" and even threw stones at one accountant. One notice to members read "The heart is full of pain, sorrow and bitterness... There is a new problem and a new dispute every day."

Shehata stepped down and Ayman resumed the reins. Ayman had prevailed in his view that it made sense to focus on targets in the US rather than Egypt. At the same time, he prevailed in a debate with then Egyptian Islamic Group leader Taha, who argued that resort to biochemical weapons would cause the group to lose support, just as had happened with the massacre of tourists in Luxor in Egypt. In 1997, according to testimony at a trial in Egypt in 1998, Zawahiri succeeded in arranging for a purchase of anthrax through the a Philippine group allied with Al Qaeda.

This was not the first the Egyptian islamists sent letter bombs to newspaper offices Washington, DC and New York City in connection with an attack on the World Trade Center. In January 1997, letter bombs were sent from Alexandria, Egypt, to the Al Hayat office in London, New York, and Washington, D.C. offices of the newspaper Al Hayat. The paper, owned by a member of the Saudi royal family, is perhaps the leading international Arabic-language newspaper. Two people were injured when one bomb went off in London. Bombs were also sent to the prison officials at the Kansas prison where the WTC plotters were being jailed.

The year before, Zawahiri had asked for technical assistance from Iraqi intelligence in the art of making sophisticated mail bombs. This assistance was disclosed in intelligence set forth in a leaked memorandum written by Department of Defense official Feith. NPR set the scene. It was January 2, 1997, at 9:15 a.m. at the National Press Building in Washington, D.C. The employee of the Saudi-owned newspaper "Al Hayat" began to open a letter. It was a Christmas card -- the kind that plays a musical tune. It was white envelope, five and a half inches by six and a half inches, with a computer-generated address label attached. It had foreign postage and a post mark -- a post mark in Alexandria, Egypt. It looked suspiciously bulky, so he set it down and called the police. Minutes later they found a similar envelope. As it turned out, these were the first two of four letter bombs that would arrive at Al Hayat during the day." A fifth letter bomb addressed to the paper was intercepted at a nearby post office. They all looked the same. Two similar letter bombs addressed to the "parole officer" arrived at the federal penitentiary at Leavenworth confirming how some Grinch had spent the holidays in Alexandria, Egypt.

The FBI would not speculate as to who sent the letters or why. But this was your classic "duck that walks like a duck" situation. As NPR reported at the time, "analysts say that letter bombs are rarely sent in batches, and when they are it's generally prompted by politics, not personal animus." Al Hayat was a well respected and moderate newspaper. It was friendly to moderate Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt -- just as, say NBC and CBS, recipients of anthrax in 2001.

Mohammed Salameh, a central defendant in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, was sent to Leavenworth in 1994. The other three Egyptian extremists convicted in the bombing were sent to prisons in California, Indiana and Colorado. Like the blind sheik, Abdel Rahman, Salameh had complained of his conditions and

asked to be avenged. The Blind Sheik was particularly irked that the prison officials did not cut his fingernails. In total, 11 letter bombs were sent to newspaper offices in New York City and Washington, D.C. in December 1996/January 1997.

Rahman had been convicted in 1995 of seditious conspiracy, bombing conspiracy, soliciting an attack on an U.S. military installation, and soliciting the murder of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. His followers were indicted for plotting to bomb bridges, tunnels and landmarks in New York for which Rahman allegedly had given his blessings. The mailing of deadly letters in connection with an earlier attack on the World Trade Center, was not merely the modus operandi of militant islamists, it was the group's signature -- it's their calling card.

The release of the blind sheik would continue to be a central aim of the Egyptian militant islamists. In what would prove a public relations debacle for the islamists, on or about November 17, 1997, six terrorists shot and stabbed a group of tourists visiting an archaeological site in Luxor, Egypt. Fifty-eight tourists were killed along with four Egyptians. The terrorists left leaflets explaining their support for the Islamic Group and calling for the blind sheik's release. The torso of one was slit and a leaflet inserted. It was this experience that caused Taha, who signed the 1998 "Crusaders" fatwa with Bin Laden and Zawahiri, to argue against the use of biochemical weapons in his unsuccessful debate with Zawahiri. Taha, who lived for two years in a Tehran suburb after helping to establish al-Islam in Northern Iraq, was detained while in transit and extradited to Egypt.

In 1998, the blind sheik issued a fatwa directing that Americans be killed to avenge his imprisonment. During the trial relating to bombing the U.S. embassies in Africa, one witness testified that Abdel Rahman smuggled a flier from prison calling on Muslims to avenge indignities he sustained as a prisoner. "Oh people, oh men of Allah, rise up from your deep slumber. ... Rise up and see justice done," the sheik wrote in a letter smuggled out of prison.

On September 21, 2000, an Arabic television station, Al Jazeera, televised an interview with Bin Laden, Zawahiri, Taha (of both the Islamic Group and Al Qaeda), and Mohammed Abdel Rahman (the blind sheik's son), during which they pledged jihad to free Abdel Rahman. They urged that his followers avenge the "insult" paid him by his imprisonment for conspiracy to commit murder.

The Cole bombing, reportedly masterminded by Khalid Mohammed, was also motivated at least in part to free the blind sheik. One government affidavit in the prosecution of the Blind Sheik's attorney, Lynne Stewart, for violating prison regulations, explained: "YOUSRY told SHEIKH ABDEL RAHMAN that "some people spoke to [SATTAR] on the phone and said that they did this operation for Omar Abdel Rahman so he could be released from prison and they asked SATTAR to do some negotiations with the American government and tell them 'if [Rahman is] not released we'll execute another operation."

In the Fall of 2001, Zawahiri wrote:

"Regarding the shaykh's change of mind and his withdrawal of support for the [non-violence in Egypt] initiative that was made by the brothers in Egypt three years ago, the shaykh reached this conclusion because he received information that tens of thousands of detainees were still held in jail and tortured."

As if to highlight the relevance of the al Zayat letter bombs for intelligence analysts, Zawahiri's wrote in "Knights Under the Banner of the Prophet" that he agreed with the supporter of the "blind sheik" who wrote: "the Egyptian Government is guilty of a major shortcoming by not intervening to safeguard the shaykh, guarantee his humanitarian rights inside his US jail, and find a solution to his case because, in the final count, he is an Egyptian national, a Muslim scholar, and a professor at Al-Azhar university. Finally he is a blind and sick old man. His continued detention and the inhuman way in which he is treated will continue to be a source of tension on all levels."

Ahmed and Mohammed Abdel-Rahman, two of the Egyptian sheikh's 13 children, were named as co-conspirators in the September 11 attacks. Ahmed Abdel Rahman helped run a terrorist training camp in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.

The blind sheikh's plight was also of concern to alleged Al Qaeda operatives in the US. According to an August 2002 federal indictment, members of an alleged Detroit, Ohio terror cell had an angry conversation in June 2001 about Abdel Rahman's imprisonment. Similarly, the Government's Indictment of the Buffalo defendants explained that one of the reasons motivating the terrorists actions was that "al Qaeda opposed the United States Government because of the arrest, conviction and imprisonment of persons belonging to Al Qaeda or its affiliated terrorist groups or those with whom it worked."

Sending poisonous letter bombs is also fairly understood as consistent with Al Qaeda's modus operandi in that the Al Qaeda operations manual, the most recent version on CD-ROM, had a chapter on "Poisonous Letter." As with the insertion of biologicals into food, the key is mass panic, not mass casualty.

The Belgian Prime Minister and the US, British and Saudi Arabian embassies were sent letters containing the ingredients of nerve gas in May 2003. This bears on the question of modus operandi even more directly. The incidents belie the argument that islamists would never merely send lethal substances through the mail (where the risk of significant casualty is low) to send a threat or warning.

"Set our brothers free. Bastards," the letter containing the nerve agent ingredient demanded. One of the defendants in that trial is believed to have sought hydrazine for use in producing a bomb. One of the ingredients is hard to obtain, prompting a Health Ministry spokesman to remark that "We're not dealing with a small-time joker." A trial of 23 suspected al-Qaeda members was in its third week. A similar modus operandi was followed in New Zealand with cyanide in early 2002 and early 2003 by a sender purporting to be islamist.

Zawahiri feels that in the usual case, the best way to get a lot of people watching is to kill the maximum number of people. But he wouldn't disagree with the comment by Brian Jenkins, a counterterrorism expert with a quarter-century of experience, that "Terrorism is theater." Just those 10 grams cost \$6 billion and have been the subject of thousands of news stories and the focus of widespread bioterrorism preparations. They were fully adequate to do the job even within the constraints of small batch production.

Al Qaeda's shura or policy-making council is concerned with handling its efforts in such a way as to develop and maintain the Arab hatred of the US and Israel -- and that requires a delicate balance and choice of suitable targets and methods. For example, according to a spokesperson in mid-February, Abu al Bara'a Al-Qarshy, Al Qaeda will not use WMD in a muslim country, particularly the home of

Mecca and Medina. Terrorism involves public relations. Indeed, in 1998, in an interview that appeared in TIME Magazine, Bin Laden himself explained that it was Al Qaeda's "religious duty" to obtain chemical and biological weapons, but it was up to them how to use them.

In June 2002, an Al Qaeda spokesperson Abu Gha'ith claimed that Al Qaeda had a right to kill 4 million people and had the right to use biological or chemical weapons. Kuwaiti-born Sulaiman Abu Ghaith had been an Imam and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. He travelled to Bosnia to fight alongside the Muslim forces. He is considered a trusted insider and chief spokesman for Al Qaeda.

The al Qaeda shura (policy-making council) may deem that Al Qaeda needed to choose the methods of attack carefully so that they are both effective and calculated to gain the support of others. (Gassing the Kurds ultimately was a public relations debacle for Saddam once the world stopped looking the other way). In 2002, Zawahiri was invited to participate by telephone or internet in a conference of islamists in Cairo. The seeds he has planted and cultivated are bearing fruit. Indeed, where there are democratic processes (Zawahiri ironically despises democracy), islamists have made substantial recent gains, to include in Pakistan, Morocco, Bahrain and Turkey. Egyptian authorities were not ready for the numbers that took to the streets of Cairo upon the invasion of Iraq. Everything is unfolding according to Zawahiri's murderous and immoral (and ultimately irrational) strategic plan.

According to many experienced counterterrorism analysts, the Bush Administration played into Bin Laden's shrewdly played hand by invading Iraq. At the time, 80% of the American public thought that the invasion of Iraq would lead to an increase (not decrease) in terrorism, according to a CNN poll. More importantly, there is now a valid concern that the invasion of Iraq will have made breaking the taboo of biological weapons on a broader scale more palatable.