MSNBC.com

Newsweek

Investigators Link Last Week's Attacks, Embassy Bombings in Africa and USS Cole

Officials say the ties are more evidence of bin Laden's role in masterminding all three

By Daniel Klaidman, Michael Isikoff, and Mark Hosenball
Newsweek Web Exclusive

Updated: 12:03 p.m. ET Sept. 20, 2001

Sept. 20 - Bush administration officials have identified crucial new ties between the hijackers involved in last week's terrorist attacks and a top aide to Osama bin Laden implicated in both the 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa and last year's attack on the USS Cole, NEWSWEEK has learned.

THE MAN, TAWFIQ BIN ATASH, is described by U.S. law-enforcement officials as a longtime bin Laden operative. Bin Atash, sources say, was photographed by a foreign intelligence service early last year meeting with Khalid al Midhar, one of the hijackers aboard the American Airlines flight that crashed into the Pentagon.

Law-enforcement officials also said today they are making important new progress in their investigation into last week's assaults and, despite initial confusion, are now reasonably confident of the identities of 15 of the 19 hijackers aboard the four aircraft that crashed last week. One official told NEWSWEEK that investigators believe they may have identified yet another conspirator in the attacks—a French citizen who was training at a U.S. flight school when he was picked up on U.S. immigration violations in Minneapolis on Aug. 17.

InsertArt(1177197)But the key development, U.S. officials say, may be the possible connections between the hijackers and bin Attash, who is also known by his nom de guerre "Khallad." He is a "trusted member of bin Laden's inner circle," says one U.S. counterintelligence official.

The Yemeni-born Khallad first traveled to Afghanistan in 1989 where he joined bin Laden's terrorist organization, Al Qaeda. U.S. officials say he later assumed control of bin Laden's contingent of bodyguards and served as the "personal intermediary" between bin Laden and the operatives who carried out the Oct. 12, 2000, suicide bombing in Yemen of the USS Cole, which killed 17 U.S. sailors.

The apparent association between Khallad and the shadowy al Midhar is one of the strongest pieces of evidence yet linking last week's terror assault and bin Laden. But new details obtained by NEWSWEEK also show that U.S. officials had substantially more knowledge about the highly suspicious associations of al Midhar and other hijackers than they have publicly acknowledged.

U.S. officials say that at least three of the hijackers—al Midhar; his associate aboard the Pentagon flight, Nawaf al Hamzi, and Mohammed Atta, who was on American Airlines flight 77—had been known as associates of Islamic terrorists well before last Tuesday's attacks. In addition, Habib Zacarias Moussaoui—a French citizen who was detained in Minneapolis on U.S. immigration charges—had been previously placed on a "watch list" of suspected Islamic terrorists by the French government, French authorities confirmed today. Moussaoui, who was arrested by U.S. officials on Aug. 17 and has refused to cooperate, is now believed to be part of the conspiracy behind last week's attacks, a U.S. official said. "He was probably a player," the official said.

U.S. intelligence and law-enforcement agencies first picked up al Midhar's trail as early as December 1999 when they were first alerted that he was traveling to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, with his associate, al Hamzi, to meet with Islamic extremists. To plan his trip, NEWSWEEK has

learned, al Midhar made his travel arrangements through a Yemeni organization that is well known to U.S. intelligence as a "logistical center" and "base of support" for Al Qaeda.

Based on this information, the CIA enlisted the aid of the Malaysian security service to conduct surveillance against al Midhar. Al Midhar had arranged to stay at a local hotel. The Malaysian security agency took surveillance photos of his activities at the hotel and then turned them over to the CIA. Shortly after the meeting, U.S. officials have since learned, al Midhar and al Hamzi flew to Los Angeles where they entered the United States on business visas and took up residence in San Diego.

But, at that point, U.S. immigration officials had not been warned about their true identities. In the meantime, U.S. intelligence seems to have lost their trail, officials say after the October 2000 suicide bombing of the Cole, CIA officials began reviewing their files and made two key connections: During his trip to Malaysia, al Midhar had been photographed meeting with two top bin Laden operatives—Khallad and Fahad al Quso. Like Khallad, al Quso has been linked to the Cole bombing. One official said that he had been assigned the job of videotaping the suicide attack for bin Laden, but apparently botched the job when he overslept.

The associations set off alarm bells at CIA headquarters in Langley, and the FBI was alerted. At that point, sources say, the FBI and CIA launched a joint investigation to pursue leads in various countries where al Midhar and his associate, al Hamzi, had traveled. But once again, U.S. officials lost the trail track. On July 4, 2001, al Midhar and al Hamzy reentered the United States on a Saudi airliner—once again, receiving business visas from the INS—and listed their destinations as the Marriott Hotel in New York.

In late August, officials say, the FBI was alerted that the men had reentered the United States. Officials at FBI headquarters in Washington recommended a "full field investigation" to locate and "neutralize" the two men. But agents were still looking at the time of the attacks.

© 2003 Newsweek, Inc.

© 2006 Newsweek, Inc.

URL: http://msnbc.msn.com/id/3067693/