

July 22, 1993

C.I.A. Officers Played Role In Sheik Visas

By DOUGLAS JEHL,

Central Intelligence Agency officers reviewed all seven applications made by Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman to enter the United States between 1986 and 1990 and only once turned him down because of his connections to terrorism, Government officials said today.

The disclosure reveals far more extensive C.I.A. involvement than has previously been known in granting the radical Egyptian cleric an American visa on as many as four separate occasions. Mr. Abdel Rahman's followers include central suspects in the World Trade Center bombing, and his entry into the United States followed what Clinton Administration officials have described as an appalling series of Government blunders.

The failure by C.I.A. officers to identify Mr. Abdel Rahman as a potential threat in six of the seven cases is outlined in a classified version of a report by the State Department's inspector general, who is scheduled to testify about its unclassified findings on Thursday. On two occasions, the officers rejected the applications, but for other reasons, such as failure to provide the address of a sponsor in the United States or to purchase a round-trip airline ticket. Viewed as Mistakes Only

Officials from the Administration and Congress who have been briefed on the findings said there remained no indication that the C.I.A. officers' actions were anything more than mistakes. In each case, they said, the C.I.A. employees were reviewing the applications in assigned roles as consular officers in United States embassies.

The officials, including some who said they had been suspicious of the C.I.A.'s motives, said they had been persuaded that the intelligence agency did not deliberately seek to assist Mr. Abdel Rahman in entering the country.

But the pattern of involvement by C.I.A. officers raises new questions about the agency's role in the case, and is likely to be the subject of scrutiny at a hearing before the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on international security on Thursday. Mr. Abdel Rahman helped to recruit Arab Muslims to fight in the American-backed war in Afghanistan, and his lawyer and Egyptian officials have said he was helped by the C.I.A. to enter the United States.

Mr. Abdel Rahman, who is blind and walks with a cane, was tried and acquitted in connection with the 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat, but remained under house arrest in Egypt until 1986. He was later charged with inciting a 1989 riot in Egypt.

Although he was widely known for his connection to the Sadat assassination, Mr. Abdel Rahman was not placed on a State Department watch list of those ineligible for entry to the United States until 1987. At least one and perhaps two of his visa applications were nevertheless approved by the C.I.A. officers even after he was added to that list of 2.7 million foreigners.

The C.I.A. declined to discuss any role played by its officers in reviewing Mr. Abdel Rahman's visa applications. But a spokesman for the agency said tonight, "The C.I.A. has never sought in any way to facilitate the entry of Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman into the United States."

The spokesman, who insisted that his name not be used, also said that the agency had "no indication that the C.I.A. ever employed or used Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman in any capacity whatsoever."

American officials had acknowledged last week that the diplomat at the United States Embassy in Khartoum who signed the May 1990 visa request that allowed Mr. Abdel Rahman to enter the United States was in fact a C.I.A. officer.

But in interviews this week, the officials from Congress and the Administration said that incident was merely the last in a series of seven incidents in which the Egyptian cleric and C.I.A. officers crossed paths in United States embassies in Egypt and Sudan beginning in 1986.

Altogether, the officials said, it is clear that C.I.A. officers granted Mr. Abdel Rahman three visas, in Cairo in 1986 and 1987 and in Sudan in 1990. In a fourth incident after 1987, a notation on an application found in the United States Embassy in Cairo indicates that Mr. Rahman's application was approved, but it is unclear whether that visa was ever issued to him, said the officials, who were summarizing the State Department report.

The officials said it was nevertheless evident in that case that Mr. Abdel Rahman had not been rejected because of his connections to terrorism.

Only once, in July 1987, did a C.I.A. officer recognize the Egyptian cleric for his ties to possible criminal activities and reject his application for that reason, they said.

"These guys, in most of the cases, didn't recognize him," a Congressional official said of the C.I.A. officers. "Only one time he got turned down because of who he was." Deep Flaws in System Cited

The official and others from Congress and the Administration nevertheless stressed that the State Department investigation of the matter had found no clear evidence of wrongdoing by the C.I.A. officers. They said the C.I.A. employees may have committed some blunders, but that much of the fault lay with deep flaws in the system maintained by the State Department to identify foreign nationals who should not be permitted to enter the United States

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"Just because you work for the agency, I don't know that you should know every bad guy in Egypt who walks through the door," said a Congressional official who was given a classified briefing on the case.

The extent of C.I.A. involvement in reviewing Mr. Abdel Rahman's visa applications at minimum exposes what Congressional officials described as the extensive assignment of C.I.A. officers to even low-level United States embassy jobs.

The Congressional officials said that while the practice is somewhat sensitive and not widely known, it is not unusual for a low-level C.I.A. officer to be assigned a post as a consular official, as they had been in each of the seven cases. They said the duty is regarded as potentially valuable for inexperienced C.I.A. officers because it brings them into contact with foreign nationals, while embassies are often eager to fill the posts, which are not widely sought by regular Foreign Service officers.

Mr. Abdel Rahman's lawyer, Barbara Nelson, had said earlier that the sheik traveled to the United States on tourist visas in 1986 and 1987. But officials of the Immigration and Naturalization Service have said they have no record of either trip.

The report by the State Department's inspector general, Sherman Funk, was said by the Administration and Congressional officials to provide the first authoritative account of Mr. Abdel Rahman's efforts to acquire a United States visa.