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Another FBI Agent Blows the Whistle

New evidence that the Bureau quashed another terror probe before 9/11

BY JIM CROGAN

WHEN FBI COUNSEL COLLEEN ROWLEY DROPPED her bombshell, a now-famous letter to the director, detailing how bureau higher-ups thwarted attempts to investigate accused 20th hijacker, Zacarias Moussaoui, before the September 11 attacks, she set off a firestorm. The scorching produced a mea culpa of sorts in June from FBI Director Robert Mueller and a promise of reform.

Now there's another whistle blower telling a similar pre-9/11 tale. And so far, the FBI has gone to great lengths to silence him.

The *Weekly* has learned that Chicago-based special agent Robert Wright has accused the agency of shutting down his 1998 criminal probe into alleged terrorist-training camps in Chicago and Kansas City. The apparent goal of the training camps, according to confidential documents obtained by the *Weekly*, was to recruit and train Palestinian-American youths, who would then slip into Israel. Recruits at these camps reportedly received weapons training and instruction in bomb-making techniques in the early 1990s. The bomb-making curriculum included the sort of explosives later used in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. And government documents state that two trainees came from the Oklahoma City area.

One alleged trainer at the terror camps is now fending off a government lawsuit to seize his bank accounts, car and property for alleged money laundering on behalf of the militant group Hamas. So far, no one has been prosecuted for these alleged terrorism-related activities.

The official government position is that Middle Eastern groups had no involvement in the 1995 bombing carried out by Timothy McVeigh, and that conclusion may stand the test of time. The FBI, however, never fully investigated leads suggesting a different verdict, according to law-enforcement and government sources who spoke on condition of anonymity. Congressional investigators are starting to re-examine the entire matter. There's also another troubling question: Why has the FBI dismissed or ignored evidence linking the Oklahoma City bombing to the Middle East? Is it because these leads are unlikely to pan out or because the agency still has something to hide regarding its own intelligence-gathering lapses?

ROBERT WRIGHT'S STORY IS DIFFICULT TO PIECE together because he is on government orders to remain silent. And by extension so are his attorneys when it comes to confidential information. Wright has written a book, but the agency won't let him publish it or even give it to anyone. All of this is in distinct contrast to the free speech and whistle-blower protections offered to Colleen Rowley, general counsel in the FBI Minneapolis office, who got her story out before the agency could silence her.

Wright, a 12-year bureau veteran, has followed proper channels, sending his book off for an internal review and asking for permission to respond to reporters' queries. Neither of those efforts panned out, and he has since sued the agency over this publication ban. The best he could do was a May 30 press conference in Washington, D.C., where he told curious reporters that he had a whopper of a tale to tell, if only he could.

Wright did say that FBI bureaucrats "intentionally and repeatedly thwarted his attempts to launch a more comprehensive investigation to identify and neutralize terrorists." And that "FBI management failed to take seriously the threat of terrorism in the U.S." Wright was careful not to il-



WRIGHT: HE'S READY TO TALK.

legally disclose any confidential details about what he knew, but tears filled his eyes as he apologized to the families of September 11 victims for the Bureau's mistakes leading up to 9/11. He also made a tantalizing reference to his removal from a money-laundering case that, he implied, had a direct connection to investigations into terrorism.

This still-active case centers on Mohammed Abdul Hamid Khalil Salah, 49, a naturalized American citizen who was born in Jerusalem. Salah has described himself as a humanitarian who distributed money collected in the U.S. to needy West Bank Palestinian families. He's also reportedly worked in Arab-owned grocery stores, as a used car salesman and as a computer analyst for a Chicago-based Islamic charitable group, the Quranic Literacy Institute, which the FBI alleges was involved in money laundering. Institute and Muslim leaders have vehemently denied any wrongdoing.

Both the American and Israeli governments contend that Salah served as a money courier for the terrorist group Hamas. Salah's attorney in the civil action, Mathew Piers, did not return phone calls from the *Weekly*. But in published accounts, Piers adamantly denied that his client was a bagman for Hamas. Salah and his wife are still living

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in a house the government is trying to seize.

In June 1998, the feds filed a civil assets forfeiture suit against Salah. Such actions are frequently used to seize the money and property of drug dealers. In the Salah case, the U.S. Attorney's Office went after personal property and accounts in seven banks, with a total estimated value of \$1.5 million. In the civil complaint, the government alleged that Salah intended the funds would "support a conspiracy involving international terrorist activities, [and] the domestic recruitment and training in support of such activities, including

extortion, kidnapping and murder of citizens of Israel."

Attached to the complaint is a 40-page sworn affidavit from agent Wright. In it, Wright details bank accounts, property deals and money transfers designed to support Hamas. But among the most intriguing elements is a reference to Salah's earlier trial in Israel, which received substantial press coverage in Israel at the time.

In 1993, Israeli intelligence arrested Salah and another naturalized American, Mohammed Jarad, on suspicion of transferring hundreds of thousands of dollars to us for guns and ammunition.

Salah was interrogated by Israeli military intelligence — he says he was tortured, a claim the Israelis deny. Under interrogation, Salah reportedly confessed to recruiting Islamic militants and then helping to instruct them in the use of poisons, chemical weapons and explosives. The training supposedly occurred in the late 1980s. Later, in 1991, Salah allegedly served as a financial agent for Hamas, opening accounts at a number of Chicago-area banks. Wright's affidavit states that between June 1991 and December 1992, Salah spent more than \$100,000 in direct support of Hamas military activities. Wright added that the weapons purchased were used

in Hamas assaults and suicide attacks on Israeli citizens.

In 1994, at Salah's secret military trial, Israeli prosecutors introduced a statement signed by another Palestinian detainee, Naser Hidmi, formerly a student at Kansas State University. Hidmi stated in an affidavit that he accepted Salah's invitation to a four-day "retreat" at a camp in the Chicago area in June 1990. At the camp, he reportedly studied Hamas philosophy and received explosives training. Hidmi also asserted in his statement that he met Salah again at a conference of Muslim youth held in Kansas City in December of the same year. On that occasion, Hidmi claimed he got more Hamas training and Salah participated in the instruction.

In 1995, Salah pleaded guilty to funneling funds to Hamas and he served about five years in prison before being released and deported to the U.S. Mohammed Jarad served six months in jail following a plea bargain to a lesser charge.

While Salah sat in an Israeli prison, the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control added his name to the list of "Specially Designated Terrorists," because of his alleged Hamas connections. After he returned to Chicago, Salah found himself squarely in the FBI's crosshairs. In 1995, Wright began investigating money laundering on behalf of international terrorist organizations. This investigation led him to Salah.

Wright's affidavit alleges that Mousa Mohammed Abu Marzook, a Hamas leader, directed Salah's activities, at one point authorizing him to give \$790,000 to Hamas military units. The Israeli government indicted Marzook, while he was living in the U.S., for abetting terror attacks in Israel. American authorities arrested Marzook and held him for two years before deporting him to Jordan.

Wright also alleged that Salah funneled money through Switzerland via Saudi businessman Yassin Kadi. The U.S. government has since designated Kadi as a financial supporter of Osama bin Laden and frozen his American assets. Kadi too has denied any wrongdoing.

The assets-forfeiture case against Salah, which was filed in an Illinois federal court, remains active. Wright was removed from the case shortly after it was filed. And he would apparently contend, if allowed to talk, that his FBI superiors ordered him to drop any criminal investigation into Salah and the terrorist camps allegedly run by Hamas.

WRIGHT'S WAS NOT THE ONLY PROBE of Middle Eastern links to terrorists and acts of terror in the U.S. Unbeknownst to Wright, an investigation of Salah and his alleged involvement in training camps was undertaken by the House of Representatives Republican Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare. This task force, as previously reported in the *Weekly*, had issued alerts to law enforcement and U.S. intelligence agencies in the months prior to the Oklahoma City bombing. It had warned of an impending Islamist terror campaign, allegedly run by Hamas and directed by Iran.

After the 1995 blast, Oklahoma City-based television reporter Jayna Davis spoke numerous times with task-force executive director Yossef Bodansky. He eventually gave her a memo in which he'd summarized intelligence reports detailing the operations of the terror camps. In the memo, constructed from his intelligence reports, Bodansky wrote that Iranian intelligence had ordered Hamas to develop cadres from among Palestinian youth living in the U.S.

"The idea," Bodansky wrote, "was to build a group of highly trained Arabs with U.S. passports who can be inserted into Israel to replace local cadres killed or arrested by Israeli Forces." The Iranians, Bodansky contended, argued that Israel would treat the Americans with "kid gloves." He also stated it would be easier for these recruits to infiltrate Israel with U.S. documents.