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By *Kenneth M. Quinn*

Sunday, August 22, 2004; Page B04

In the spirit of the 9/11 commission's call for greater "imagination" in intelligence analysis, there is a strong case to be made that the original al Qaeda plan was not to attack New York and Washington on Tuesday, September 11, but rather a week later, on Tuesday, September 18 -- the day on which Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, fell in 2001.

A Sept. 18 timetable would account for one of the most mystifying and disturbing incidents that occurred after the attacks: The spread of the assertion, widely reported in parts of the Arab and Muslim world, that "4,000 Jews" had been absent from the World Trade Center and that their absence was evidence of "Zionist regime involvement" in planning and carrying out the plot.

Since the allegation was clearly ludicrous and demonstrably false -- there was nothing to indicate that there had been a warning to anyone to stay away on Sept. 11 -- it was quickly dismissed in the West as predictable propaganda from anti-Israeli ideologues.

It was the sheer absurdity of the story that made me wonder about its origins. During more than 30 years in the Foreign Service, including several assignments that schooled me in the inner workings of terrorist organizations, I learned that even ridiculous claims don't arise out of nowhere. Why didn't this allegation surface immediately after the attacks, but rather appear nearly a week later, right around Sept. 18? The answer I kept coming back to was that these stories were likely timed to fit with what was expected to be the reality at the time. For had Mohamed

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Atta and his conspirators struck on Sept. 18, a large percentage of Jewish employees who would normally have been present in the World Trade Center buildings would likely have been absent in observance of Rosh Hashanah, and would have escaped death when the planes struck.

In retrospect, these spurious accounts may have been an integral part of the plan devised by Osama bin Laden: a clever psychological warfare effort that was intended to create resentment toward Israel and Jews in America, while simultaneously impeding moderate Muslims and Arab governments from condemning the terrorist attack (since to do so could make them appear to their populations that they were defending Israel).

This disinformation campaign apparently started with a report on a single radio station in Lebanon -- a country that has, as the 9/11 commission points out, strong Hezbollah/Iranian/al Qaeda connections. Following that broadcast, a number of newspapers across the Middle East, including at least one Iranian newspaper, repeated the story, as did speakers at a conference in Tehran.

Moreover, the 9/11 commission report cites evidence that bin Laden seemed obsessed with linking the attack to Israel in some way. Khalid Sheik Mohammed, who authorities believe was the main strategist in the 9/11 plot, reportedly told interrogators that bin Laden initially urged that the attack take place shortly after Ariel Sharon's controversial visit to Jerusalem's Temple Mount in September 2000. After Sharon was elected Israel's prime minister, bin Laden suggested the attack coincide with a planned Sharon visit to Washington, according to Mohammed's account. Both dates proved impossible because of insufficient planning time. An attack during Rosh Hashanah would have been in keeping with one of bin Laden's top priorities -- spreading the rumor of a connection to Israel.

So if the plan had been to strike on Sept. 18, why was the date changed and this important political objective lost? The most likely answer may be that the FBI's detention and interrogation of Zacarias Moussaoui in mid-August of 2001 triggered concern that Moussaoui would reveal something about the plot and the entire operation would be compromised. Such a fear might have caused the terrorists to speed up their timetable, and would have justified a decision to sacrifice a nonessential political objective.

This may be what happened. A careful scrutiny of the chronology of events reveals that immediately after Moussaoui's Aug. 16 questioning by federal officials in Minneapolis, Mohamed Atta and the other members of his al Qaeda cell sprang into action. The commission report states that the attack date "was selected by the third week of August," knives were bought, global positioning

systems to plot positions were obtained and aeronautical charts procured. All airline tickets used by the terrorists were purchased between Aug. 25 and Sept. 5.

But the 9/11 commission report also accepts without qualification Khalid Sheik Mohammed's statement that he did not know that Moussaoui had been interviewed and detained by federal officials. So either the commission was too quick to accept Mohammed's denial or someone else gave the order to move up the attack.

The answer may be that, with time running out, Atta likely made a decision on his own. He accelerated the attack date to Sept. 11 and thus rendered obsolete a psychological warfare plan premised on a Sept. 18 attack. But as I have witnessed in other disinformation campaigns, these bogus stories are often put in the hands of agents well in advance of events and, therefore, cannot be easily modified at the last moment. The al Qaeda story of thousands of Jews being absent from the World Trade Center thus rolled out on schedule around Sept. 18, just when the attack was first planned to occur.

It could be reasonably asked, if there was a fear of being caught, why wasn't the strike carried out even sooner than 9/11, say on Tuesday, Sept. 4 or some other day that week. Again, the commission report has the likely explanation. It reveals that bin Laden himself had insisted that the attack on Washington occur when Congress was in session. Striking on Sept. 4 would, therefore, have been a serious contravention of his orders, since the congressional recess was still in effect. Sept. 11 was the first Tuesday that Congress would be back in operation.

Moreover, it was probably necessary for the attack plan to be kept on the same day of the week. The commission report makes clear that the terrorists had painstakingly researched which type of aircraft would be used on which route, leaving from which airport on Tuesdays (remember that Rosh Hashanah also fell on a Tuesday). While Atta could reasonably assume that the airline schedules were similar on the same day of each week, he could not be certain that all the same flights with the same type of aircraft flew on Wednesday or on Thursday. The hijackers did not have time to research the entire project again. By sticking with a Tuesday, they could move the operation ahead one week, with a reasonable expectation that all the elements of their plan would be the same.

It may, of course, never be possible to determine whether Sept. 18 was the original date of the attack. But if al Qaeda intended to strike on Rosh Hashanah, that would provide a plausible explanation for this strange episode: It was meant to be a psychological strike, concomitant with the stunning aerial attacks that al Qaeda and its operatives carried out on 9/11.

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Kenneth Quinn is a retired Foreign Service officer. He served as the U.S. representative to the U.N. Relief and Works Administration for Palestinian refugees and as U.S. ambassador to Cambodia.

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Was September 18 the real date for the Al-Queda attack on the World Trade Center?

by

Kenneth M. Quinn

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In the spirit of the 9/11 Commission's call for greater "Imagination" in intelligence analysis, there is a strong case to be made that the original Al-Queda plan was to attack the World Trade Center, not on Tuesday September 11., but rather on Tuesday September 18, the day on which Rosh Hashana fell in 2001.

Further, a plausible argument can be advanced that this timetable was urgently moved up when Zacharais Moussaoui was interrogated by federal officials in mid-August.

"Imagination" [i.e.intuition] first drew me to this theory when, a week after the 9/11 attacks, a story spread through some Middle Eastern media reporting that "4,000 Jews" had been absent from the World Trade Center at the time of the attack. Some columnists cited the story as evidence of "Zionist regime involvement" ----an apparently heavy-handed attempt to accuse Israel of carrying out the attack. Since these claims about Jews being absent from the buildings were demonstrably false, they were quickly dismissed by most in the west as predictable propaganda from anti-Israeli ideologues.

But my analytical instincts made me ask why such a story would be circulated when there was absolutely no evidence that anything like this had occurred. And why did these stories not surface right after the 9/11 incident, but only appear a week later around September 18? The answer I kept coming back to was that these stories were much more easily explained if they were seen as timed to fit with what was expected to be the reality at that time. For had Mohammed Atta and his conspirators struck on September 18, a very large percentage of the Jewish employees who would normally be present in the World Trade Center buildings would certainly have been absent observing Rosh Hashana, and would have escaped death.

In retrospect, these spurious press accounts may have been an integral part of the plan devised by Osama bin Laden: A clever psywar effort that was intended to create resentment toward Jews in America, while simultaneously impeding moderate Muslims and Arab governments from condemning the terrorist attack, [since to do so could make them appear to their populations as defending Israel]. This dis-information campaign apparently started with a report on a single radio station in Lebanon [a country as the Commission points out with strong Hezbollah/Iranain/Al-Queda connections]. Following that broadcast, a number of newspapers, including an Iranian newspaper, repeated the story, as did speakers at a conference in Tehran. This added credence to the possibility that the story was part of a carefully structured psychological warfare strategy, now being propagated by agents of influence.

The 9/11 Commission Report cites specific evidence that Osama bin Laden seemed obsessed with linking the attack on the US to Israel in some way. Bin Laden was said to have initially urged the attack to take place shortly after Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount in September 2000, and subsequently during a planned visit of now Prime Minister Sharon to Washington. Both dates proved impossible because of insufficient planning time. An attack on Rosh Hashana would have been in keeping with one of bin Laden's top priorities.

So if the plan was to strike on September 18, then why would the date be changed and this important political objective lost? The most likely answer may be that the FBI's interrogation of Zacharais Moussouai in mid August of 2001, triggered a fear that Moussouai would reveal the plot and the entire operation could be rolled up. Such a fear of compromise would call for speeding up the plan and would justify sacrificing an important but non -essential political objective.

This may be what happened. The 9/11 Commission chronology reveals that shortly after Moussouai's

August 16 questioning by federal officials in Minneapolis, Mohammed Atta and the other members of his cell sprang into action. As the Commission Report states, the attack date was selected by the third week of August, knives were bought, GPS units obtained and aeronautical charts procured. All airline tickets were purchased between August 25 and September 5.

It could be reasonably asked, if there was a fear of being caught, why was the strike not carried out even sooner than 9/11, say on Tuesday September 4th or some other day that week. Again, the Commission Report has the likely explanation. It reveals that Osama bin Laden himself had insisted that the attack on Washington occur when the Congress was in session. Striking on September 4 would, therefore, be a serious violation of his orders, since the Congressional recess was still in effect. September 11 was the first Tuesday the Congress would be back in Washington.

Moreover, it was probably necessary for the attack plan to be kept on the same day of the week. The Commission Report makes clear that the terrorists had painstakingly researched which type of aircraft would be used on which route, leaving from which airport on Tuesdays [Remember that Rosh Hashana fell on TUESDAY September 18]. While Mohammed Atta could reasonably assume that the airline schedules were similar on the same day of each week, he could not be certain that all the same flights with the same type aircraft flew on Wednesday or on Thursday. And since they did not have time to research the entire project again, by sticking with a Tuesday, the terrorists could move the entire operation ahead one week, with a reasonable expectation that all the elements of their plan would be the same.

And so, with time running out, Mohammed Atta likely made a compromise. He brought the attack date forward to September 11 to avoid capture but still fulfill the expressed desire of his leader to strike with Congress in session. As such he rendered the Al-Qaeda psychological warfare plan, premised on a September 18 attack, obsolete. As I have witnessed in other disinformation campaigns, stories are often put in hands of agents well in advance of events and can not be easily modified at the last moment. The Al-Qaeda story of thousands of Jews being absent from the World Trade Centers thus rolled out on schedule around September 18 just when the attack was originally meant to occur.

It, of course, may never be possible to determine whether September 18 was the original date of the attack. But it seems clear that striking on Rosh Hashana would have turned what was perceived as an ineffectual political diatribe about thousands of Jews escaping the attack, into a stunning psychological strike, one concomitant with the stunning aerial attacks that Al-Qaeda carried out on 9/11.

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