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## Czechs Confirm Iraqi Agent Met With Terror Ringleader

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 26 — The Czech interior minister said today that an Iraqi intelligence officer met with Mohammed Atta, one of the ringleaders of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, just five months before the synchronized hijackings and mass killings were carried out.

The official confirmation of the meeting, the details of which remain a mystery, does not amount to proof of Iraqi involvement in the attacks.

But after weeks of speculation and conflicting reports about Iraqi contacts with a cell leader who plotted the attacks, today's confirmation raises fresh questions about whether Iraq's foreign intelligence arm in recent years established secret ties with Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden's organization.

Federal law enforcement officials say that the meeting, in Prague, fit into Mr. Atta's itinerary this way: on April 4 he was in Virginia Beach. He flew to the Czech Republic on April 8 and met with the Iraqi intelligence officer, who was identified as Ahmed Khalil Ibrahim Samir al-Ani. By April 11, Mr. Atta was back in Florida renting a car.

A senior Bush administration official tonight indicated that the Czech decision to go public with the information about the meeting had taken Washington by surprise.

As for the meeting itself, the official said, "We are not sure we know exactly the full meaning of this, but we have known about it for some time." He said the administration would pursue the investigation "wherever it leads", adding, "We are relying on the intelligence agencies, investigators and law enforcement officials around the world to help us."

The public linkage of Iraq's intelligence service and the Al Qaeda terrorists also raises the question of whether those ties suggest Iraqi complicity — either through financing, training or the providing of forged travel documents — in the attacks last month.

The Czech authorities confirmed the meeting at a time of spirited debate in the Bush administration over whether to extend the antiterrorism military campaign now under way in Afghanistan to Iraq at some point in the future. Such a widening of the campaign is opposed by Arab countries and European allies already nervous that the American campaign is being seen as a Western assault on Muslims, despite repeated assurances that the target is not Islam but terrorism.

Speaking at a news conference in Prague, the Czech interior minister, Stanislav Gross, said that Mr. Atta met Mr. Ani, an Iraqi diplomat identified by Czech authorities as an intelligence officer, in early April.

Mr. Gross and other Czech officials suggested earlier this month that while there was evidence that Mr. Atta had visited Prague, there was none he had actually met with Iraqi agents. It was unclear what prompted them to revise their conclusions, although it seemed possible that American officials, concerned about the political implications of Iraqi involvement in terror attacks, had put pressure on the Czechs to keep quiet.

Mr. Atta, who had lived as a student in Hamburg, Germany, was unknown to Western intelligence services at the time, and did not attract the attention of the Czech authorities, according to Hynek Kmonicek, then deputy foreign minister and now ambassador to the United Nations.

Mr. Kmonicek on April 20 informed Mr. Ani that he was being expelled from the Czech Republic for activities incompatible with his diplomatic status, a code phrase for espionage.

"It's not a common thing," Mr. Kmonicek said, "for an Iraqi diplomat to meet a student from a neighboring country, though it is still premature to speculate further" on what transpired during the meeting.

Although Mr. Atta had been a student in Hamburg, he had, by April of this year, shifted his operations to the United States, where he and other members of the hijacking teams attended flying schools in Florida and elsewhere, conducted surveillance of airports and financed their preparations with large cash transfers from banks in the United Arab Emirates and elsewhere abroad.

Mr. Ani was under surveillance because he had been observed near the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty headquarters in Prague, which Czech officials think has been selected for attack and is now heavily guarded.

After Sept. 11, Czech officials worked frantically to trace Mr. Atta's movements, and his identity was established with help from airline passenger lists and passport records.

"The Czech confirmation seems to me very important," said R. James Woolsey, former director of central intelligence who has become a strong advocate outside government for a rigorous investigation of Iraq's possible role in terror against the United States. "It is yet another lead that points toward Iraqi involvement in some sort of terrorism against the United States that ought to be followed up vigorously," he said.

Today's news from Prague fits into a matrix of circumstantial evidence that is emerging on the question of Iraqi support or contact with terrorist groups, but none of it directly connects Saddam Hussein to the events of Sept. 11.

A senior Israeli official said today that the country's intelligence services had not come up with any evidence linking Iraq to those attacks, or to the anthrax scare in the United States. "We don't see any evidence of Al Qaeda in Iraq," the official said. "Not as a base, not as financial support." Still, he said, proof could emerge. "The only reason they might cooperate is the basic common hate of America and Israel," the official said. "But we don't think he's the bad guy ? he's the bad guy, but not for this story."

New information does suggest that Mr. Hussein was actively training terrorists to attack American interests throughout the 1990's.

One example is the testimony of Sabah Khodada, a captain in the Iraqi army who emigrated to Texas in May after working for eight years at what he described as a terrorist training camp at a bend in the Tigris River just southeast of Baghdad.

Mr. Khodada's past was unknown to American officials until an Iraqi intelligence officer, who defected to Turkey earlier this year, told his debriefers about the training camp, at Salman Pak, and said Mr. Khodada had been an instructor there.

Mr. Khodada was interviewed for the PBS documentary program "Frontline ," and he described the camp as a highly secret installation run by an international terrorist known only as the Ghost to the staff.

The camp brought non-Iraqi Arabs from Persian Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, Mr. Khodada said, and gave them training "on assassinations, kidnapping, hijacking of airplanes, hijacking of buses, hijacking of trains, and all other kinds of operations related to terrorism."

Though security was tight there, Mr. Khodada said the Ghost and the other trainers who instructed the non-Iraqi Arabs talked about operations they were proud of.

"For example," he said, "they were telling us about how they were able to penetrate the American forces during the 1991 gulf war, where they went inside Saudi Arabian territory, and they were able to bring coordinates, exact coordinates of the Dhahran air base, which was hit by Scud missiles and many Americans were killed."

Such an account of Iraqi penetration behind American lines in the Persian Gulf war has not been asserted before, but an Iraqi Scud missile did hit an American barracks on Feb. 25, 1991, killing 28 soldiers and wounding nearly 100.

Mr. Khodada's account has yet to be independently confirmed, but the existence of the terrorist base where he worked was confirmed by United Nations inspectors, who searched Iraq for secret defense and weapons facilities during much of the 1990's.

Raymond Zalinkas, a member of the United Nations inspection force in 1994, said that during searches for biological weapons facilities at Salman Pak the inspectors learned of an "antiterrorist" training camp nearby that was in fact a terrorist training camp, according to intelligence reports they read.

"They called it an antiterrorist training camp, but there was intelligence given to us that they actually were training terrorists there," he said today. One of the prominent features of the camp, he added, was a Boeing 707 that was used in hijacking simulations.

The importance of Mr. Khodada's account is that, if true, it establishes a link between Iraqi intelligence and the training of non-Iraqi Arabs from Persian Gulf countries for international operations. But that is where the linkage ends for the moment, unless other witnesses emerge and fill out the account.

Mr. Khodada's identity might never have been known, were it not for the Iraqi National Congress, an opposition group headed by Ahmed Chalabi, a math teacher

turned banker who emerged at the end of the Iran- Iraq war of 1980-88 to call for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

His group was involved in an abortive C.I.A. attempt to build an alliance in northern Iraq to challenge Mr. Hussein's rule. The recriminations over the failure of that effort have left bitter feelings on both sides and in Congress, where Mr. Chalabi continues to have some support. But senior officials in the State Department and the C.I.A. view information that comes from the group with skepticism.

In the case of Mr. Khodada, American officials appear to have concluded that since he cannot provide hard evidence that the terrorist training he observed resulted in specific acts of terror, his information is of limited use. Still, a significant group of senior administration officials, nominally led by Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz, continue to push the investigation into Iraq's possible involvement.

One of the figures they have focused on is Faruk al-Hijazi, Iraq's ambassador to Turkey, who is also known as the former chief of Iraq's intelligence service.

One of the most persistent assertions, again arising from information provided by Mr. Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress, is that Mr. Hijazi was dispatched by Mr. Hussein in 1998 to meet with Osama bin Laden and offer him and his supporters in Al Qaeda a safe haven in Iraq.

Mr. Hussein was said to be so impressed with Al Qaeda's bombing strikes on American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania that he wanted to take control of the group's operations to serve Iraqi interests.

Turkish intelligence officials said this week that they had no information that Mr. Hijazi had traveled to Afghanistan or anywhere else to meet with Mr. bin Laden.

Still, Mr. Hijazi's connection to Iraq's secret service, notorious for internal repression and overseas assassinations, has caused embarrassment for Turkey, and Mr. Hijazi raced home to Baghdad on Sept. 24 after reports in the United States, still unconfirmed, asserted that he had met with Mr. bin Laden in 1998.

Zaben al-Kubaisay, the undersecretary of the Iraqi Embassy, said today from Ankara that Mr. Hijazi returned to Turkey this week. He also maintained he was unable to speak to reporters because of his heavy workload.

Bush administration officials seem at a loss to say how they would react if a smoking gun emerged on Iraqi terrorism against the United States, something that Mr. Wolfowitz at the Pentagon has warned the administration to prepare for.

Mr. Woolsey, a member of the Defense Policy Board that advises Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, says the answer is simple: "It is perfectly reasonable for the administration to focus first and foremost on the Taliban while gathering information about other possible states involved."

If such information proves such involvement, he added, the administration should, after careful consideration, take action, including military steps against Baghdad.

Another member of the Defense Policy Board and a former defense secretary and C.I.A. chief, James R. Schlesinger, is more circumspect.

"We should be cautious before taking action against Iraq which might destabilize one of the more moderate Arab regimes," he said, "but more importantly, such action must be successful, or it should be avoided for the time being. Therefore, any presidential decision on Iraq must be carefully weighed on the basis of sound intelligence and political information."