



Rahimullah Yousafzai / AP

The elusive Osama bin Laden, photographed here in 1998 in the Helmand province in southern Afghanistan, is the leading suspect in the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks

## 'We've Hit the Targets'

That message, allegedly sent by Osama bin Laden's men, makes him suspect No. 1. Can he be stopped at last?

By Michael Hirsh  
NEWSWEEK

Sept. 13 issue — At the time it seemed an empty boast, if a chilling one. On Feb. 7, 1995, Ramzi Yousef, considered the mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, was being escorted in shackles back to New York City. The FBI had just seized Yousef in Pakistan, and agents felt they could crow a little. An FBI SWAT commando pulled up his captive's blindfold and nudged him as they flew in a helicopter over mid-Manhattan, pointing to the World Trade Center's lights glowing in the clear night. "Look down there," he told Yousef. "They're still standing." Yousef replied, "They wouldn't be if I had enough money and explosives."

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RECALLS LEWIS SCHILIRO, a former head of the FBI's New York field office, "He was as cold as ice." Today Ramzi Yousef is safely in prison, as are five of his confederates from the failed 1993 attempt. But Yousef's passion for killing Americans is flourishing in a loose network of tiny Islamic fundamentalist terror groups spread around the world. And the main suspect in the worst foreign attack on the continental United States is the chief impresario and financier of that network, Osama bin Laden, the gaunt, bearded Saudi exile who in February 1998 declared all Americans to be legitimate targets of jihad, or holy war. Bin Laden has nursed a fervent hatred of the United States since its troops landed on Saudi soil to fight the gulf war, and he has haunted the worst nightmares of U.S. security officials for years. The scion of a wealthy Saudi magnate, he was linked to the 1998 twin U.S. Embassy bombings in Africa and the explosion aboard the USS Cole in Yemen last year. But until last Tuesday, bin Laden had not succeeded in shedding blood on American soil.

By the end of America's day of horror, U.S. intelligence officials said, most people inside the federal government were almost certain—about 90 percent certain, the consensus had it—that bin Laden and his global organization, Al Qaeda (The Base), were behind the attacks. One key reason: shortly after the suicide attacks, a source with access to intelligence told NEWSWEEK, U.S. intelligence picked up communications among bin Laden associates relaying a message: "We've hit the targets."

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On Wednesday, the FBI detained several people whom they are now describing as "material witnesses" in Boston and south Florida. Authorities also said

they had identified the two or three terrorists who hijacked each plane. The suspects were said to have entered the country from all over the world, and some had been living in the United States for up to a year. Early leads suggest the team had domestic support networks rooted in the Boston area, but some of the bombers may have come from Canada, which also harbored the terrorist cell that planned the millennium bombing in Los Angeles. A British intelligence source told NEWSWEEK that “two brothers, working on United Arab Emirates passports, one

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of them a trained pilot, have been placed at the Boston airport.” Even so, investigators had only just begun to ferret out the full dimensions of the plot. “We’re in Oklahoma mode now,” said one FBI counterterrorism agent, referring to the frenzy of police work that followed the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. He added: “This is a rubble pile that makes Oklahoma City look like a sandbox.” New FBI chief Robert Mueller, on only his second week of work, conducted a 6 p.m. conference call with special agents in charge of all the 56 field offices. He announced that Washington would take control of the biggest investigation in the agency’s history and appointed veteran deputy director Tom Pickard to run it. FBI officials said they knew this probe was different from anything else they’d ever done. “This is not going to be a classic forensic investigation,” said the counterterrorism agent. “You’re not looking for a traditional bomb ‘signature’ like the rear axle of the Ryder truck. The bomb signature is a plane in the sky.” In other words, there may be little forensic evidence to investigate.

#### SEARCHING FOR LINKS

For the moment the link to bin Laden and Ramzi Yousef appeared to be largely circumstantial. Investigators believe that radical Egyptian organizations were directly behind the suicide attacks. One, Al Gamaa al Islamiya, was run by Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman, the blind Muslim cleric who is serving a prison term in Minnesota for allegedly conspiring with World Trade Center bombing suspects to blow up other New York landmarks. Bin Laden recently has turned complaints about Abdel-Rahman’s imprisonment and treatment by U.S. authorities into a crusade, committing his followers to freeing the religious leader. U.S. officials have identified Ayman al-Zawahiri, the head of another Egyptian militant group that supports the sheik, as deputy leader of Al Qaeda. Abdel-Rahman is kept in solitary confinement, and a month ago U.S. authorities seized his radio.

The fast fingering of bin Laden also did not mask the fact that, like the rest of the country, U.S. officials were in a state of shock over what may go down as the

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readiness in the nation's history. Bush called last Tuesday's searing experience a demonstration of American fortitude. In truth it was a stunning display of America's vulnerability—now and well into the future. Always before, U.S. experts tended to dismiss the idea that terrorists could combine both suicidal fervor and technical skill and sophistication. The 1993 World Trade Center attack, in which conspirators exploded a bomb-laden van in the basement, was seen as just another ragged effort; afterward the terrorists gave themselves away when one was stupid enough to try to get his deposit back on the rental van. Similarly, when an Algerian terrorist was arrested crossing the border from Canada just before Y2K, his obvious nervousness gave him away to an alert Customs official.



By contrast, last Tuesday's coordinated assault on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon was as sophisticated a terror attack as U.S. investigators have seen. A chief mystery was how the culprits might have found four apparently trained pilots to fly suicide missions. One frightening prospect is that bin Laden is winning educated Arab elites to his cause, especially as the Palestinian intifada inflames the Arab world. The FBI has picked up previous hints of high-level help: in 1995 Abdul Hakim Murad, a Pakistani, was accused along with Yousef of a plot to bomb 11 U.S. airliners in a single "day of rage" against the United States. Murad, a commercial pilot, allegedly told investigators that he had been trained as a kamikaze pilot.



## WAS THERE HELP?

Just as scary, the new attacks also suggested that the terrorists had an extensive domestic support network—confederates on the ground who helped them gather intelligence on the targets and possibly provided shelter and logistical support.

Could the bombers have been stopped? NEWSWEEK has learned that while U.S. intelligence received no specific warning, the state of alert had been high during the past two weeks, and a particularly urgent warning may have been received the night before the attacks, causing some top Pentagon brass to cancel a trip. Why that same information was not available to the 266 people who died aboard the four hijacked commercial

aircraft may become a hot topic on the Hill. In testimony to the Intelligence Committee earlier this year, CIA Director George Tenet said bin Laden posed the most immediate terrorist threat to Americans around the world and was capable of “multiple attacks with little or no warning.” “There is a giant accountability issue starting today,” says former Afghanistan CIA station chief Milt Bearden, “and in the midst of legitimate accountability there will be a lot of scapegoating. They’re going to start looking for the modern-day equivalent of General Short and Admiral Kimmel [the armed-forces commanders at Pearl Harbor], and they’re going to find them.”



#### Events of September 11, 2001.

- 8:48 a.m.** American Airlines Flight 11, a Boeing 767 en route from Boston's Logan Airport to Los Angeles International with 92 people onboard, slams into the north tower, 1 World Trade Center.
- 9:05 a.m.** Approximately 18 minutes later, United Airlines Flight 175, also a Boeing 767 enroute from Boston to Los Angeles with 65 people onboard, hits the south tower, 2 World Trade Center.
- 9:21 a.m.** New York City Port Authority closes all bridges and tunnels in New York City.

The deeper problem for counterterrorism experts is that bin Laden's network is so diffuse and diverse—a patchwork of renegade Algerian, Palestinian, Egyptian and other cells—and that foreign governments, including friendly ones, move slowly to crack down on people they know are his supporters. Only last February, a few weeks before Tenet's testimony, a NEWSWEEK reporter sat down in a London coffee shop with Yasser el-Sirri, one of bin Laden's alleged associates. El-Sirri cheerfully boasted that the Egyptian government had sentenced him to death for crimes of terrorism. Attempts to snatch or kill bin Laden have been frustrated by the difficulty of getting precise information on where he is in the mountains of Afghanistan, not to mention a U.S. presidential order barring assassination. Though U.S. intelligence had wiretaps on bin Laden's key lieutenants before the Kenya and Tanzania embassy bombings, they were unable to pick up enough information to prevent them.



## TESTING U.S. INTELLIGENCE

Some counterterrorism operatives now speculate that intelligence picked up by U.S. agencies about possible terrorist attacks on Americans last June may actually have been leaked by operatives associated with bin Laden. Now it appears the terrorists “may have been testing where and how we picked up information—and what were the things we missed,” says a U.S. investigator based in the Persian Gulf. “They saw where we reacted, and presumably also where we didn't react.” Were they casing American airports to see if extra precautions went into effect? “They not only know how to plan, but they know how to test,” said this source, “and they know, obviously, where the gaps are.”

Among the worst of those gaps is the ramshackle state of security checks at U.S. airports. The ability of unknown bombers to exploit these soft spots—and to do it so jarringly, ripping a hole in the heart of America's financial and military power—could itself have serious consequences. For it demonstrates that it can be done again. In fact, terrorism experts say that for years their worst fear has been that a suicide bomber would hit inside U.S. borders. “If someone really wants to kill himself in order to blow up a building here, there is no level of sustainable security in this country that could



prevent it,” says one official. “We just aren’t equipped to handle it. It is beyond us psychologically. And the citizens of this country are not willing to tolerate the lack of freedom that this level of security would mean.”



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That could now change, as part of a tectonic shift in America’s sense of vulnerability. “This shows that you can have mass-destruction

terrorism without weapons of mass destruction,” says Gideon Rose, a terror expert at the Council on Foreign Relations. And that even a missile defense won’t help. “We’re going to have to enact laws that some people from the far left and the far right won’t like,” adds a senior intelligence source. He points to Britain’s sweeping new law that, as he puts it, extends the draconian security measures—including surveillance and holding people on mere suspicion—already used in troubled Northern Ireland. He adds: “We have to understand that national security will have to take some precedence over what we have seen as the right to privacy.”

Sen. Jon Kyl, a member of the Intelligence Committee, says he’s been pushing for years for more intelligence money and less red tape—and for dropping concerns about recruiting human-rights violators as infiltrators into terror groups. “My first reaction was that my knees were weak,” he said. “But frankly, my second reaction was that all of the things we’ve been saying we have to do—maybe through this disaster they’ll get more attention.” No doubt they will.

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*With Mark Hosenball, Daniel Klaidman and Donatella Lorch in Washington and Peg Tyre, Christopher Dickey and Andrew Nagorski in New York*



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