

In terror pursuit, a maze of leads

As FBI inquiries of possible links in region hit dead ends, some in law enforcement say they aren't digging enough

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Albany Shortly after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, a 34-year-old Jordanian immigrant who was being held in Albany County jail contacted authorities and claimed he had driven one of the 19 hijackers on a taxicab tour of Albany a few days before the attacks.

The claim allegedly was made by Abraham Yousef, an Albany cabdriver from Troy who is in state prison after being convicted of raping a teenager he met on the Internet. Some theories police considered in weighing Yousef's claim was that the hijackers who flew out of Boston might have looked at New York's Capitol as a secondary target, or as a landmark for steering south along the Hudson River toward Manhattan, sources close to the case said.

While some police sources still believe Yousef was telling the truth, they said FBI agents dismissed Yousef's story because they could not corroborate his claim after giving him a polygraph exam. FBI officials in Albany declined to discuss their interrogation of Yousef.

In the end, Yousef's claim became just another of dozens of dead-end, terrorism-related leads that police and federal agents in the region have pursued over the past 16 months. The work underscores a task now facing authorities --deciphering fact from fiction.

"All the information that comes in and all the leads we get are reviewed and prioritized and generally investigated until they're disproved or substantiated," said Special Agent Lisa Massaroni, a spokeswoman for the Albany FBI office. "As far as vigilance ... complacency is not a problem. Everyone is so committed to this."

The credibility issue surfaced again recently when police in New York City, Albany and Colonie were alerted to an alleged plan by Middle Eastern terrorists to slip into upstate New York from Canada and to use the Capital Region as a staging ground for a series of New York City bombings. The missive included a caveat that the information was suspect because the source was "unreliable."

Still, the bulletin was disseminated at police roll calls this week, and New York City police posted officers at some of the alleged targets --a gas station, city clerk's office and John F. Kennedy International Airport.

say they aren't digging enough The Times Union (Albany, NY) January 17, 2003

Before 9/11, some officials said, it never would have been likely for that kind of counterintelligence information to have been shared with local police agencies.

"Now, you're in a position where you're getting more (information) than you've ever had in the past, and it's the responsibility of the agent and the cop on the street to make some sense out of it and determine if it has enough reliability to be true. A mistake can be costly," said Mike Smith, an attorney and former assistant special-agent-in-charge of the FBI's Albany office. "If the cops and the agents get numb to it because you get so many people crying wolf, you go back to the same thing you had in Minneapolis and Phoenix where the information was good but nobody paid any attention to them."

Smith was referring to criticism that the FBI failed to analyze information from agents at field offices in Phoenix and Minneapolis, mistakes that congressional leaders have partly blamed for the intelligence community's failure to detect warning signs before the Sept. 11 attacks.

Despite massive overhauls in the FBI and other police agencies since Sept. 11, there are critics who still question the way some leads have been pursued in this region --and whether polygraphs have replaced old-fashioned shoe leather.

In Yousef's case, for instance, one federal law enforcement source said agents may have put too much faith in technology to determine whether Yousef's claim warranted more attention.

"They have been relying too heavily on lie-detector tests," the source said, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Part of their investigative methods, especially the foreign counterintelligence people, is to go give them lie-detector tests, and most people would think it isn't a very effective method."

FBI agents also zeroed in on the man whom Yousef claimed had introduced him to one of the 9/11 hijackers --34-year-old Ali Mounnes Yaghi, a Jordanian immigrant and longtime pizza shop owner in Albany. Yaghi was taken into custody by FBI agents three weeks after the Sept. 11 attacks and also given a polygraph exam while being shown photographs of the 19 hijackers.

His attorney said an FBI agent told him that Yaghi flunked the polygraph exam, but the agent declined to say what questions they believe he failed to answer truthfully.

Yaghi was later cleared of having any connections to terrorism and deported to Jordan last July.

Yaghi, who has a criminal record in Albany that includes charges of trying to run down a cop and a conviction for carrying an illegal handgun, sat in the courtroom for most of Yousef's rape trial in August 2001.

Yousef's story, when coupled with Yaghi's outspoken anti-American beliefs, convinced some police officers in Albany that a Sept. 11 terrorist may have visited the city.

"That was real. That happened," insists one police official, speaking on condition of anonymity. "The structure of the information, in my opinion, made it almost impossible to be a lie."

There have been other investigations during the past 16 months that have left some law enforcement sources doubtful about whether the cases were pursued vigorously enough by federal agents.

One such case involved 26-year-old Jamshed Iqbal, a Pakistani immigrant who lived in Kingston and was arrested by federal agents from Albany nine days after the Sept. 11 attacks. Law enforcement sources said Iqbal was arrested because the FBI received a call from a Kingston-area airport official before the attacks contending Iqbal unsettled them while taking private flight lessons there.

But authorities' suspicions about Iqbal were never revealed in court. Instead, Assistant U.S. Attorney Robert Storch,

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a Justice Department anti-terrorism coordinator, prosecuted Iqbal on charges that he paid a woman \$6,000 to marry him in March 2001 so he could become a U.S. citizen.

Iqbal was sentenced last January to time served and deported.

"This guy should've set off alarms," said one federal law enforcement source. "He had cash, like \$35,000 cash, but he pumped gas. He had a picture of the burning World Trade Center next to his computer. He also had a picture of a cockpit and technical manuals on 747s. You can't believe the fight ... just to get the FBI to look at his computer."

But experts say authorities who are making decisions from the mountains of intelligence information about what's credible and what needs further scrutiny is a tenuous task.

"The problem that they face is that with all the second-guessers down in Washington and with the press, if they make a decision based just on the information that comes to their attention, and it's not reliable and it turns out to be wrong, they're going to hang," said Smith, who also worked at FBI field offices in San Diego and Miami. "It's just a function of resources. Do they have the people they need to handle every report that comes to their attention? The answer is probably 'no,' but they're doing the best they can. They need to give certain reports priority, but in doing that they run the risk of making a mistake."