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MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Event: Interview of FBI Special Agent Ali Soufan

Type of event: Interview

Dates: August 26, 2003
September 15, 2003

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Background

SA Soufan received his undergraduate degree from Mansfield University. He obtained a masters degree in International Relations at Villanova. He is fluent in Arabic (native speaker). Soufan entered on duty with the FBI at Quantico on July 6, 1997, after being recruited at Villanova. He transferred to the NYFO in November 1997. The NYFO was his first choice office. He spent 6 months rotating through various staffs then in February 1998 he joined a JTTF squad that focused on EIJ and Iraqi FCI work (I-40 with SSA Tommie Donlon). When Soufan was on the applicant squad (this squad does background checks for FBI employees) he wrote a paper on Usama Bin Laden (UBL). His supervisor suggested that he meet with Mark Chidicimo, who was then the supervisor of the analysts. Soufan wrote the paper based on public sources on the Internet. He then “hooked up” with Kevin Cruise who was working on UBL matters. Soufan said he did not even know that a UBL squad existed until he worked with Kevin Cruise. Cruise was very interested in what Soufan had written. Soufan drafted an EC regarding UBL, its title was “International Islamic Front,” that was placed in a binder along with his other UBL research. After the East Africa bombings occurred the EC was used to justify assignment of the East African bombings case to the NYFO.

In June 1998 Soufan was on surveillance when he was paged by Cruise. Cruise told him his “friend” [note: reference is to UBL] had done a press conference with ABC news. [note: this was the John Miller interview that is described in his book The Cell.] Soufan told Cruise that was UBL’s third warning. Soufan explained that it is a part of

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Arab/Semitic culture to give three warnings – it was considered a sign that one was on the path of righteousness. UBL’s first warning was his declaration of war in 1996. The second was the 1998 fatwa. Finally, the third was the warning contained in the June 1998 interview. Despite this pattern, Soufan said UBL did not give three warnings for 9/11. Soufan never had an opportunity to debrief Miller on his interview of UBL although he believes others in the office may have. He noted that SAC John O’Neill and Miller were good friends so he assumed that Miller and O’Neill spoke about it.

After the August 7, 1998, East Africa bombings Soufan went to the UBL squad and said he thought UBL was responsible. The FBI had opened a command post. Tommie Donlon took Soufan to SAC O’Neill in the command post and had him tell O’Neill what he knew about UBL. Soon thereafter UBL claimed responsibility, and then NY became the OO for the case. O’Neill asked Soufan, NYPD Detective Tommie Corrigan (who was assigned to the JTTF), and Kevin Cruise to write a teletype to Headquarters about what they knew. Soufan stayed in the command post with O’Neill for some time and they became close. SAC John O’Neill transferred Soufan to [redacted]’s I-49 squad to work al Qaeda cases. This later became John Liguori’s squad and eventually was renamed IT-1. This squad needed his language skills as he was the only Special Agent with Arabic language skills in the NYFO. There was, [redacted] [redacted] who also spoke Arabic. Soufan worked closely with [redacted] who was the analyst on the squad.

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Later SAC John O’Neill transferred Soufan back to the Iraq squad. On that squad he focused on Albania and arrests of EIJ operatives (one arrest was before the East African bombings and one was after). He continued to help out [redacted]’s squad as well.

In September 1998, he was assigned the Operation Challenge matter in London. Based on voluminous documents found in a house there a large number of people were arrested. Soufan and the others, however, were particularly focused on three individuals who were connected to UBL or EIJ. He worked closely with New Scotland Yard on the matter. Soufan claims they “are the best.” When the English justice system released the three suspects on the grounds that there was inadequate basis to charge them, Ken Karras (SDNY), Ali Soufan and SA Dan Coleman (NYFO) quickly put together an indictment to get the three men rearrested and charged. They were able to link the AKAs found on documents seized in the search with these three individuals. [redacted] who was a Headquarters’ analyst put things together, created spreadsheets, and did research on people to pull the case together. The British gave copies of the recovered documents to the Legat who gave them to NYFO. Soufan indicated that this was a police case, so they worked with New Scotland Yard, not MI-5. They gave a briefing to MI-5 but there was confusion because MI-5 thought the case was built on sources not documents. Apparently MI-5 had copies of all of the documents but had not bothered to read them.

Soufan has been active with training other agencies regarding counter-terrorism, including New Scotland Yard and MI-5. Soufan noted that he believes our system is better than the British system because MI-5 does not share with enough with NSY, which it considers are just “cops.” Soufan recalled he had given a presentation to MI-5 but they

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did not seem to know much. He added that MI-5 and MI-6 also don't share with each other enough.

In October 2000, Soufan was named co-case agent on the Cole bombing case. He traveled with John O'Neill to Yemen for the Cole investigation. When that case was transferred to Kevin Cruise's squad (IT-2), Soufan moved with it.

Analysts

Soufan thought that the Headquarters analysts were helpful. He has worked with [redacted] [redacted] Dina Corsi, [redacted] They were all TDY'ed to NYFO from Headquarters to work on UBL related matters. They would conduct research on various people, make spreadsheets, etc. He noted that in the field there are not really analysts. He believes that the field office analysts should be required to have a master's degrees like the Headquarters' analysts do. He claimed that qualified analysts do not want to be in the field offices because they cannot make enough money. He believes that the FBI is trying to recruit more qualified analysts and is giving the position higher grade levels to make that possible. He indicated that in the field the agents do most of the real analysis.

Soufan indicated that he was not interested in becoming an analyst. He would rather conduct interviews himself to obtain good information and then work with the analysts on it. He liked being "on the ground" in Yemen in the Cole case. He also liked debriefing individuals.

Soufan believes that analysts need to be assigned to particular squads instead of being centralized. He wants analysts to have continuity and a knowledge base and to specialize or he believes it will be a waste of time to use them. He agreed it would be acceptable to have a separate analytical division as long as there were specialists within it.

Access to information

Soufan has Intel Plus on his desktop, which is an FBI database of major cases, separate from ACS. He is waiting for a password for Intelink. Now the squad analyst, [redacted] [redacted] does the Intelink searches for them. He does not have direct access to DocEx. He has to go through Headquarters for this information. Although he indicated that Dan Coleman does have direct access.

Information sharing/dissemination

When Soufan was in Yemen the FBI passed information gleaned in Yemen and written in ECs [redacted] which sent the information back to FBI Headquarters through its own channels because the FBI did not have a means to communicate well. [redacted]

[redacted] Then Soufan would review and approve what they wrote [redacted] to make sure it was not inconsistent with FBI reporting because

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of concerns regarding possible discovery issues. If the FBI had a meeting with the PSO in Yemen, [redacted] would invite itself to the meeting. But if [redacted] had meetings with the PSO, the FBI was not invited.

The CIA had some internal information problems [redacted]

This created a significant information dissemination problem for them.

Soufan indicated that he had started creating IIRs to disseminate information in his work. He created Abu Jandal IIRs that were disseminated. He claimed that three of his IIRs received the highest value rating.

Relationship with CIA

Soufan believed that the FBI generally, and he specifically, had a good relationship with the CIA prior to September 11, 2001. He indicated that the FBI shared information with the CIA. [redacted]

[redacted] Soufan noted that he worked himself to exhaustion in Yemen after the Cole bombing which required his being hospitalized three times.

[redacted] He believed that they would provide everything they had (“We complete each other”) but now he has changed his mind “completely.” If the FBI was present, the FBI wrote up the meeting.

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Soufan was involved with debriefing Abu Zubaida (AZ). He claimed that he began clashing with the CIA analysts regarding how to debrief Zubaida. New analysts were then assigned. Soufan indicated that he and Steve Gaudin [NYFO] arrived on the ground before the CIA was even there. On his AQ organizational chart, Soufan has a dotted line between AZ and AQ because he believes that the connection was not as strong as others had characterized it.

Soufan has been excluded from most of the debriefings of the detainees. He argued that the CIA did not have the appropriate personnel conducting these debriefings because they are not adequately schooled in the nuances of AQ. For example, if a detainee claims he was trained by a particular person, then he must have had a specific mission. There were different people in charge of doing training for specific types missions. For example, all of the plots from AZ were with North Africans and there would be a specific camp for his people. Ressay had no explosives training so he was sent to the Al Farouk (sp?) camp. Those at that camp Soufan characterized as “regular dudes.” The FBI does not receive the results of the debriefings either. Soufan indicated that he had requested through

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Headquarters the write-ups and/or TDs from the detainees but has not received much. He said there was not much of this reporting in Intellink.

Soufan also wrote the EC regarding Al Shari (sp?) to get Saudis to allow an interrogation of the individual. [redacted] Al Shari was in the hospital. The CIA hired a psychiatrist who did not know anything about interrogation. The psychiatrist was a consultant. His techniques and theories created a storm with the FBI agents. There was a large difference in style between the Agency approach and Soufan's approach. Young analysts were coming in and out of the debriefing which caused things to be done. They did not want to hear any advice from an FBI agent who they considered to be just "a cop."

There were also disputes over whether Bin al Shibh was cooperating. The Agency said he was cooperating. Soufan said he was not cooperating. Soufan had approximately 45 minutes with Bin al Shibh as they flew on an Agency plane together. The Agency personnel told CIA Headquarters that they were obtaining cooperation from Bin al Shibh and shut down the FBI's access to him.

Around November or December some Agency personnel decided they did not want to work with Soufan. In January, however, he received a telephone call that the agency wanted Soufan to go to Afghanistan to conduct an interview. The detainee had been in Agency custody for two months but the Agency interrogators had been unable to get any information from the detainee. The DCI was going to be briefing the President about this individual, however, and so they wanted to have some information to report. Soufan went and obtained information from the detainee. Soufan does not know whether it was Agency managers who made the request for his assistance. Soufan indicated that he has heard from acquaintances at the Agency that there have been meetings where he has been discussed and some people want him involved in debriefing detainees and others have overruled the suggestion.

Soufan believes that the person debriefing Khalid Shayk Mohammad (KSM) does not know anything about who KSM was and therefore cannot be as effective at debriefing him like Frank Pellegrino could.

Soufan argued that KSM, Khallad, and Nashiri know a lot about al Qaeda's operations and plans and if the CIA's debriefing techniques are so good and are working, then we should be arresting a lot of people. He asked whether it could be that there are no al Qaeda cells in the United States. He opined probably not, but if that is the case we should stop scaring people. He would like access to these people but understands politics but he wants to see results.

Soufan said he does not receive much from the CIA representative on the NYFO JTTF. He has been called to the SCIF only twice and it was only recently. Someone who was arrested was an unindicted co-conspirator in one of his cases and there was relevant information for him to review.

Soufan indicated that he was angry with CIA as an institution, not with individuals there. He does not believe that he was a poor judge of character when he worked with CIA personnel in previous years. As of October 2002, he became aware of the CIA "campaign" against him. Soufan indicated that he had always been upfront with them and shared information – the Gitmo debriefs for example – yet everyday there appears to be a new attack on him. He is very disappointed in them. He hears claims that he is aggressive and not a team player. But he says they will not put any of these claims on paper. There is a CIA cable that alleges that he "screwed things up" in al-Mirqualla (sp?). The fact was he said he had never been there and so could not have done the things the cable claimed he had done there. His ASAC demanded proof from the CIA about the things they were saying about him or an apology. Apparently the CIA apologized to a small audience through Mark Rossini [note: an FBI detailee to the CTC].

In January 2003, Soufan took a week off from work. Then he received a call from the CIA asking him to travel immediately, which he did. He believed the trip went well but when he returned the campaign against him began again. In another instance he was asked to conduct some interviews of Abu Zubaida. On the first day only Soufan, Steve Gaudin (NYFO), and Deputy Chief of Station. Soufan was supposed only to be an observer but the Deputy COS said go ahead and interview. Soufan wrote cables and gave them to the CIA to disseminate. When the DCI heard about the information that was obtained he was pleased and told his people to congratulate the CIA officers who were there. When he learned that it was FBI that had gotten the information and not the CIA, the DCI was "pissed."

In October 2002 the CIA started campaigning against him he claims. At one point [date?] Headquarters asked to have Soufan participate in debriefings of al-Rimi [reported by Quso as having been a fund mover/provider for various operations, including Cole bombing.]. The CIA refused, saying it was solely an intelligence matter. A CIA person at the meeting said the FBI should know better than to ask for Ali Soufan to travel.

Soufan wrote what he refers to as the "crystal ball" EC regarding an attack on a French naval ship. McFadden briefed this up DOD channels. Two weeks later the Lindbergh bombing happened. The CIA initially claimed it was not a terrorist attack.

Soufan argued that they needed to better define FBI/CIA roles post 9/11. He complained that now when the FBI plans to travel overseas it needs DCI concurrence. Previously he just needed FBI Headquarters' approval and to notify CIA. In fact, he says if he wants to travel to the FBI Legat in London, he needs CIA permission. Soufan believes that there are some excellent CIA case officers and working together they "complete each other." They are in a joint war and thus need to work together. He argued that there needs to be institutionalized sharing of information – to make sure that they receive all of the relevant cables. He argued that al Qaeda is all over the place and they need to work together to defeat them.

DOD relationship

Relationship with DOD is phenomenal. They have granted him access to Gitmo detainees.

History of Al Qaeda

During the August 26, 2003, interview Soufan presented a Powerpoint presentation regarding the structure of al Qaeda that he prepared based on a variety of documents. [note: the Commission has subsequently obtained copies of the slides of this presentation.] Soufan went through what was known about the formation of al Qaeda and its evolving structure.

Al Qaeda was initially formed as administrative records of who came to fight in Afghanistan – “the base” of the mujahadeen. In 1989 after the jihad in the war of Afghanistan against Russia, Arabs met together and decided that they should continue jihad in a united fashion and that the mujahadeen should be the base of such jihad.

According to Soufan, 1979 was a key year. In February there was the Irani revolution and Khomeinis speech was leaked to Egypt. There was the Camp David accord signed by Sadat. In November 1979 200 Wahhabi Saudis took over Mecca and declared rebellion against the king. December 1979 was a gift to the Muslim countries with problems because Russia invaded Afghanistan and so the rebellious forces decided to go fight the communists instead of their own leaders.

In 1989 the Soviets were out of Afghanistan and the Arab factions began fighting with each other. Certain groups stayed in Afghanistan because they could not go home. The NGOs that were created liked this. At the time UBL was supporting the Yemenis coming back to win South Yemen.

When UBL was in Afghanistan he was not a warrior but was considered a rich kid. Once he started criticizing the Saudi king he lost popularity. AQ became an umbrella for lots of groups that lacked a structure.

The East Africa bombings marked a new chapter in AQ. Soufan immediately believed that UBL was responsible for these bombings because the statements claiming responsibility for the bombings used some of the same phrases Bin Laden had used previously and which had been noted in the materials Soufan had previously gathered. Soufan noted that there is a semitic culture “thing” about warning three times before taking action. Here there was the 1996 declaration of war, the 1998 fatwa, and then the June 1998 interview with John Miller in which UBL warned of upcoming attacks. Shortly after the interview with these warnings was aired the Embassy bombings happened. Soufan went to the command post to tell SAC John O’Neill about his beliefs. Soufan ended up staying in the ops center with O’Neill for a time and they became close. Soufan later went with O’Neill to Yemen after the Cole bombing. Then there was a claim

no Embassy bombings, or Cole?
of responsibility that proved he was correct. Soufan then took his old EC regarding UBL and did a teletype demonstrating that UBL was responsible. Because NYFO already had UBL under indictment, it was assigned as office of origin on the East African bombings case.

what? do we know anything?
Soufan wrote the opening EC on Nashiri and Khallad. Fahd al-Quso was the first witness to identify Khallad for them. Quso and Nibras had pledged bayat to UBL in Afghanistan so that was why they were trusted to carry the money to Bangkok for Khallad.

Cole bombing

Soufan commented regarding the well known bad relations between SAC John O'Neill and U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Barbara Bodine. Soufan thought that Bodine and O'Neill must have had a past because things were off on the wrong foot from day 1, initially regarding how O'Neill pronounced Yemen. Soufan noted that he got along fine with Bodine and acted as a buffer between Bodine and O'Neill. He noted she did not have the same poor relations with others, it was only with O'Neill.

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Soufan was in Yemen in summer of 2001. They first moved from Aden to Sana'a when they received a specific threat that a group of people were going to assassinate FBI agents, the Defense Attache, the Ambassador and [redacted] They got out of Aden in a military jet. Then in Sana'a received another direct threat. They left their equipment at the embassy in Sana'a. They did not wait for tickets. A private jet was used to evacuate them. When he got to New York he was not told about general threats but [redacted] * [redacted] told him "the big one was coming."

Islamabad source

The Confidential Informant (CI) in Islamabad [redacted] [redacted] provided them with significant information. [redacted] gave the FBI good information regarding Khallad. It was the FBI who told the Yemenis about Khallad when they asked whether the FBI had heard of him because they (the Yemenis) had not. Soufan described [redacted] important source of information. [redacted] did not know the very top guys, he knew Khallad and Abu Zubaida. [redacted] had told Soufan about Khallad and Jandal prior to the Cole bombing.

Soufan indicated that [redacted] met with the FBI regarding [redacted] prior to the Cole bombing. They agreed that he would be worked jointly even [redacted]

Finally, [redacted] after he was brought to the FBI [redacted] [redacted] He knew the second tier people. Soufan said he was not involved in the decision [redacted] [redacted] but was involved in the debate. [redacted]

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[redacted]
[redacted] [note: Other sources indicate that this promise was not kept.]

Soufan indicated that he got good information from [redacted] when he interviewed [redacted] directly. [redacted]

[redacted] He says the CIA says they need to protect its sources and methods, even regarding people who Soufan brought to them, so they claim they cannot share the traffic with him. They classify it as Humint and then say Soufan does not have Humint [he now does] so he could not read CIA reports of his own interviews.

*when?
why?
still believed
to be true?*

At the time [redacted] identified Khallad's photograph Khallad was considered the mastermind of the Cole bombing. Despite this, Soufan had seen no CIA reporting re: Khallad, including the [redacted] reporting. The photograph [redacted] identified was the photograph of Khallad that Soufan had given to the agency for showing to [redacted]

Soufan indicated that he has a big concern regarding FBI and CIA jointly dealing with sources such as [redacted]. Soufan said that the FBI needs to make sure that the FBI and the CIA are reporting the same things and meeting with the source together because of discovery issues and because the FBI might want to use the sources down the road. Soufan says he "always" warned the CIA of the possibility of a witness being used as a witness at a trial. He warned them that they needed always to have meetings of the witness with both agencies present and that the FBI needs to see the CIA's reporting to make sure identical to the FBI reporting.

Soufan indicated that [redacted] is now solely a CIA source. Soufan did not know when the last time the FBI spoke to [redacted] * [redacted] who was the ALAT who made [redacted] a source, is no longer in Islamabad. Soufan noted that the new ALAT * [redacted] does not speak Arabic either and thus would not be able to communicate with [redacted]

Quso

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In late January 2001 Soufan was given the opportunity to interview Fahd al-Quso directly. Before then the PSO conducted the interviews and merely allowed the FBI to submit questions to them. When he conducted the interview of Quso (over several consecutive days) he read Quso his rights. Quso acknowledged receiving and understanding his rights but refused to sign the form. Soufan indicated that he got more information from Quso than the PSO did. For example, Quso told the PSO that he took \$7000 to Khallad in Bangkok for an artificial limb while Soufan got Quso to admit it was actually \$35,000.

On September 12, 2001, Soufan was in Yemen. There he finally received the "whole story" on the Kuala Lumpur meetings. He re-interviewed al-Quso and got some of the hijackers' names from Quso. Soufan said he was not aware of the KL meetings when he interviewed Quso in January 2001 or else he would have asked different questions.

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Kuala Lumpur meeting

Soufan did not become aware of the Kuala Lumpur meeting and any connection to Khallad until late June 2001. He was in Yemen that summer then was evacuated because of a direct threat to the FBI in Yemen. He returned to New York and heard about the Kuala Lumpur meeting from the rest of his squad. Soufan was out of the country at the time of the June 11, 2001 meeting and so did not see the photographs shown at that meeting. Soufan claimed that no one in NYFO was even aware of the Kuala Lumpur until June 2001, although he believes that FBI HQ was aware of it in January 2000, when it was briefed to the FBI Director. Ali finally got the whole story on Kuala Lumpur meetings on 9/12/01.

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Need for language capable personnel

Soufan noted that there were few agents who had Arabic language skills. In NY he was the only one. WFO has [redacted] also spoke Arabic

[redacted]
He also indicated that there is at Headquarters a former WFO ASAC named Bassam Yousef who speaks Arabic. He noted that the FBI needs to find someone in the Arab community to help it recruit Arab FBI Special Agents. No one has asked him how best to do it.

Miscellaneous

Soufan said he had never been told not to investigate a particular person, i.e., UBL's brothers. He said if he had been so ordered he would have been "pissed off."