

Vertiefungstext 2: Fouda, Yosri und Schleifer, S. Abdallah, covering Al-Qa'ida, Covering Saddam. A dialogue between Al Jazeera London bureau chief Yosri Fouda and TBS Publisher and Senior Editor S. Abdallah Schleifer, *Transnational Broadcasting Studies* 9 (2002)

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[Issue 9 home page](#)

[Return to current issue](#)

[Archives main page](#)

Covering Al-Qa'ida, Covering Saddam

A dialogue between Al Jazeera London bureau chief Yosri Fouda and TBS Publisher and Senior Editor S. Abdallah Schleifer.



Yosri Fouda and S. Abdallah Schleifer discuss the thrills and chills of covering Al-Qa'ida.

SAS: Your special report "Top Secret: The Road to September 11th" broadcast in two installments last September by Al Jazeera contains the most detailed and undisputed confirmation by Al-Qa'ida leaders Khalid Al-Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi Bin Al-Sheeba that Al-Qa'ida carried out the 9/11 terrorist attack. Why you? And who decided you would be the correspondent that these two leaders would talk to, in an interview that should have (but probably hasn't) put an end to all doubts in the Arab world as to who are responsible for 9/11.

YF: Yes, that question "Why me?" did come up, on the first of the two days I spent with Khalid and Ramzi. (Their people follow the Arab manner of addressing them by their first names; I did the same and I'll do the same here.) Once my blindfold and sunglasses, which hid the blindfold, had been removed and I had gotten over the shock of finding myself in a nearly empty apartment with Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, one of the most important figures in the Al-Qa'ida leadership, and Ramzi Bin Al-Sheeba, who had a \$ 25 million dollar bounty on his head at that time, just as Khalid did, I asked them, first of all, "Why me?" me and they said Sheikh Abu Abdallah [Osama Bin Ladin's kunya or honorific. Editors.] had picked me. Again I asked them, but why me? And they said there are other journalists both inside and outside of Al Jazeera who are thought of as having some sort or degree of sympathy with their cause. So for that very reason, they said they wanted to have this story done by someone "more secular in his professional approach" so that their message would carry more credibility.

SAS: Interesting. Rather sophisticated too, like so much else about their operation.

YF: It was and it confirmed my initial impression that there is someone who understands media, and particularly television, inside Al-Qa'ida. I already had that impression, not just because of the video tapes that were sent out before and after 9/11, but because after I got the first phone call, from a man who turned out to be an intermediary, asking for my fax number, I received a three-page fax with an outline of a program Al-Qa'ida had in mind for me to do to mark the first anniversary of 9/11. The fax proposed story ideas, locations, and personalities. I later learned Ramzi Bin Al-Sheeba passed it on to the intermediary who made the contact.

So in a sense from the beginning of the contact we had some sort of unwritten contract or understanding. They knew who I am and they knew what my program is all about, so when I made the decision to accept their invitation and go for the story I knew it was going to be about information and not just rhetoric. And that's what happened.

And this was not my first contact with Al-Qa'ida. I had gone to the Pakistani tribal areas last January (2002) to check out reports that at least 150 Al-Qa'ida fighters had managed to evade Pakistani and American forces and crossed over into Pakistan after the collapse of the Taliban. They knew I was there but conditions were such that I couldn't make direct contact. But after I left they sent me tapes of two fighters, who told how they had managed to escape and evade arrest in the tribal areas. I used those tapes in a Top Secret report that was broadcast the first week of March (2002.)

Anyway the interview wasn't some sort of discussion and I didn't go there to argue with them and I didn't go there to judge them. I went there in the hope I could come back with some solid information and they knew that and that's why they cut a long story short, and started telling me specifics, about how it was.

SAS: It seems like they were quite prepared for you and ready to get right down to business.

YF: Absolutely. I mean they started first of all by introducing themselves with their rank within the organization. I already knew about both of them. Even before September 11th the FBI had a \$5 million dollar price on Khalid's head. He is an uncle of Ramzi Yusef, the Pakistani who is now doing life in an American prison for organizing the first attack on the World Trade Center, and Ramzi had already been accused by the FBI of involvement in the attack on the USS Cole off Aden in October 2000. Ramzi was a flat mate of the key hijackers when they lived in Hamburg and he was already implicated and wanted by security agencies all around the world. "Recognized us yet?" Khalid said; he said it as a joke. At that moment Ramzi was shaking my hand. "You will," Ramzi said, "when your door is knocked at by the dogs from intelligence."

So Khalid got right down to business, laying down the conditions that I would not talk about their means of communication, nor would I mention their real code-names and if I was asked what they now looked like, I was to say they looked exactly like the photos in circulation that I would be shown. Then I was asked to place my hand on the Qur'an and solemnly swear to this.

Khalid struck me as shrewd and very direct. He was obviously annoyed that I had been allowed to bring my mobile phone with me;

he snatched it, switched it off, removed the SIM card and battery, and put it away in another room. After prayers, which were led by Ramzi, I asked him if he was traveling, since he had used the shorter prayer form for travelers. Ramzi said 'Yes, we're traveling. You didn't expect us to show you where we live, did you?'

At that moment Khalid asked to see my British passport. I was taken back and a little concerned. I handed it over and he leafed through it very quickly. 'Nice one, that,' he said and when he came to my Pakistani visa he noted down the serial number and handed it back.

Khalid told me there would be no filming on the first day and that they would provide me with a camera and cameraman on the next day; that they would provide for everything. Ramzi added that I would be taken straight from the safe house to the airport when they were finished.

Then with very little fanfare Khalid introduced himself as head of the so-called Al-Qa'ida military committee and Ramzi as coordinator of the 9/11 operation - which they would describe either as "the Holy Tuesday operation" or "the Martyrs' Operation" or the "Manhattan and Washington Raids" using the old Arabic word ghazwa used at the time of the Prophet, to describe raids against enemies which were like modern-day commando operations.

SAS: Why do you say "so-called?" Did they use that phrase?

YF: Not at all. But that was how I felt at that moment; I hadn't thought of Al-Qa'ida as a formal organization and suddenly I'm in front of somebody introducing himself as the head of the Al-Qa'ida military committee. Well, they have committees and departments and Khalid told me they had a department for martyrs; it was from that department that they picked the men who would accompany the hijacker pilots and leaders and he said they were never short of people, who in his own words, were "willing to die for Allah." His problem was actually the opposite-of having to choose from among them, to pick the right people who would suit the requirements of any particular operation. In this case, at least at the leadership level, suitable people familiar with the West.

It became very clear to me, not just from the titles, but from the relaxed, calm, and easy way they talked about the preparations and planning for two days that Khalid and Ramzi were the two master planners of 9/11. They were both proud of what they had organized, Ramzi speaking calmly and with authority while Khalid would make decisive interventions. Khalid was the more active of the two. His hands never stopped moving as he walked around us.

As I mentioned in my article in the Sunday Times Magazine (Sept. 8, 2002) there were clear limits on what they would say and I'm sure there are still many details of the planning that, at the time of my interview, remained known only to these two men and possibly one or two others. But I was able to fit what they said into the gaps that existed in past attempts at explaining the plot and I've built up an account which I outlined in the Sunday Times article and which is the basis for my documentary report. It's an account that has been described as unprecedented and an account that I believe is authentic.

Ramzi and Khalid told me how two and a half years prior to 9/11 they took the decision within the military committee to attack inside America and they started to look for targets. Khalid said that the first thing that jumped into their minds was striking at a couple of nuclear facilities but they dropped this idea for now, being concerned that it might "get out of hand." He wouldn't elaborate beyond that. But when I asked him what do you mean by "for now." He said "for now" means "for now."

SAS: So that means that Khalid, who is still at large, was implying that Al-Qa'ida reserved the right to blow up nuclear facilities in the future?

YF: Absolutely. That's exactly what I got from him and I think he wanted to underline this. Incidentally it was Khalid, as chairman of the military committee, who had come up with the proposal that the "martyrdom operation" in America should target prominent buildings. His plan was similar to an earlier one to send 12 airliners simultaneously into American landmarks. Intelligence agencies know about this earlier plan, "the Bojinka plot" as they call it because it went disastrously wrong. Khaled had worked on it in 1994-95 with his nephew Ramzi Yousef, who was on the run after the first World Trade Center bombing. Yousef was hiding out in Manila working on bomb designs and initial logistics. But he fled his apartment when chemicals he had stashed there for making bombs caught fire and he left behind a laptop containing full details. Within months he was arrested in Pakistan. Khalid who had just arrived in Manila at the time of the fire managed to escape and he wasn't heard of again until his name was given to FBI interrogators by Abu Zubaydah, a senior Bin Ladin deputy, who was arrested after a gunfight in Pakistan last March (2002). Now Khalid was explaining to me how he not only resurrected the Bojinka plot but had refined it into a devastatingly effective act of war. In 1999, Mohammed Atta, an Al-Qa'ida "sleeper" who had been studying and working in Hamburg since 1992, was earmarked along with other sleepers by the military committee to pilot the death flights.

That autumn, in 1999, they all got together in Kandahar, meeting in a building used so often by volunteers from Saudi Arabia that it was known as Al-Ghumad House, after the large Al-Ghamdi clan; later on, four young Ghamdis would end up as foot soldiers in the hijackings. According to Ramzi, the council consisted of the four pilots as well as Khalid al-Mihdar and Atta's deputy, Nawaf al-Hazema. According to Khalid, four reconnaissance units were sent to America in pairs or singles over the next five or six months. In the autumn of 2000, Atta entered the US to begin flying lessons in Venice, Florida, along with Marwan al-Shehhi who piloted the United Airlines plane that he crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center. Ziad Al-Jarrah was nearby in another training school and [Hani] Hanjur, already a trained pilot, was undergoing further training in Arizona. Ramzi told me that a decision was taken not to put them all in the same flight school. The idea was to keep contact to a minimum.

SAS: Did you have a sense, during your two days with them, who was higher in the leadership?

YF: Well obviously Khalid Sheikh Mohammed outranked Ramzi Bin Al-Sheeba by far. Khalid is head of the military committee and Ramzi was the coordinator of 9/11 but I think even there he came to

be called the leader or coordinator of 9/11 by default. He originally wanted to join the other 19 hijackers. But he was turned down twice when he tried to get an entry visa. When he failed I think he just focused on his role as a coordinator.

SAS: This was by his own admission, that he tried twice and failed, or is this something you uncovered on your own?

YF: Yes, he mentioned it and I had that confirmed from other sources. I also interviewed the owner of the flight school, Arne Kruithof, where Ziad Al-Jarrah (who flew the United Airlines plane which crashed in Pennsylvania) learned how to fly. And Kruithof confirmed that he had twice tried to get Ramzi an entry visa upon Ziad's urging, and because Ramzi had poor English Kruithof referred Ramzi to an English-language school; they tried for the visas and they failed. When Ziad asked Kruithof why the visa requests were turned down, the flight school owner said he didn't know. But American officials subsequently made no secret of it. They said Ramzi was turned down because he was implicated in the USS Cole attack.

SAS: Your sources are presumably American intelligence sources?

YF: Yes.

SAS: Now if I understand you correctly, American intelligence sources be it within the INS or some other agency the INS checked him out with, knew at the time they turned Ramzi down that he was implicated in the Cole attack. That's rather odd, because if they knew that and turned him down for that reason, you'd think they would have wondered who else was at that flight school and why? Or, even more to the point they should have issued him a visa just to get him in to the United States and grabbed him for the Cole attack. If that's the case it fits right into a list of intelligence blunders by both the FBI and the CIA that have already surfaced in the press and in Congressional hearings.

YF: Yes, that's right. I mean if you consider this angle, its really a large angle because of certain coincidences, at least seven or eight other missed opportunities like this one, that just don't leave one with a comfortable sense; that suggest that 9/11 could actually have been aborted. There is still an ongoing debate about this in the States.

I do believe, even having come back from Pakistan with the first direct admission intended for public eyes and ears by Al-Qa'ida that they were indeed responsible for 9/11, that we only have part of the picture. A lot of questions have still to be answered. A lot of questions. Some people would wonder about the very sophistication of the operation, and whether or not, even if Al-Qa'ida wanted to do it, whether or not they were actually capable, alone, of executing it.

SAS: People say that but I remember in the past-back in 1970 when I was reporting on the Palestinian fedayeen for *Jeune Afrique* and NBC News-how the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) hijacked simultaneously and nearly flawlessly four planes originating from different international airports and flew three of them to Dawson Field in Jordan and one to Cairo via Beirut and after getting everybody off the planes, blew them up. In retrospect

those were much nicer times - people hijacked planes then to make a political point, not to murder the passengers and lots of other people. In fact they were even pleasant to the passengers. Al-Qa'ida makes one almost a little nostalgic for old-fashioned Marxist revolutionaries. But that isn't the point I am trying to make. The PFLP had significantly fewer resources than Al-Qa'ida and certainly invested far less time and money in preparation than we know Al-Qa'ida did, above all from your report but also from earlier reconstructions. Yet the PFLP pulled it off taking over four international carriers, which had far tougher security than American domestic airliners prior to 9/11.

YF: But there is another thing. You know I was interviewed on CNN on the eve of the first anniversary of 9/11 and Jonathan Mann, who was interviewing me for his program "Inside," challenged my information during the taped interview, when I referred to the case of a group of Israelis taking pictures with a clear view of the World Trade Center, waiting for the first plane to hit. I told him that I had it on record from Vince Cannistraro, the CIA's former chief of operations for counterterrorism, and off record from the FBI and I used it - that the Israelis were there in position before the first plane hit. Well Jonathan Mann refused to accept this and he kept saying that was impossible and I kept telling him to go look at my footage for Part I which was already in CNN's hands in Washington DC.

What happened is that they had asked me to go on Mann's show live and I now regret that I didn't but I was so tired at the time that I had requested he do the segment with me at a reasonable hour for Qatar and tape it. So when the interview appeared in his show, the part where I allude to the Israelis and quote Vince Cannistraro was cut out. Incidentally, when the Americans finally released the Israelis and sent them back to Israel the cover story was provided by Shimon Perez who told the press that the arrested Israeli were indeed intelligence operatives but they were in New Jersey monitoring US-based Hamas operatives and had no prior knowledge of the 9/11 attack.

SAS: This is the story, rather hushed up at the time, about a group of Israeli intelligence agents posing, I believe, as art students. According to the ABCNEWS website version which ran late in June and which also quoted Vince Cannistraro, the Israelis were taking pictures of the World Trade Center in flames, from the roof of a white van and of themselves with the trade center in the background, and they were arrested, held, and eventually deported. Nothing in that report about Israelis being there pre-positioned.*

I wish I had seen your documentary with Cannistraro saying what you quote him as saying. But certainly, if any intelligence agency could have penetrated Al-Qa'ida, it would be Mossad, or whatever name this particular branch of Israeli intelligence goes by. It's more or less common knowledge in Palestinian as well as Jordanian intelligence circles that the Israelis penetrated Hamas a long time ago. And the accuracy of their targeted assassinations on the West Bank and even in Gaza indicates they have a very large pool of Palestinian agents. None of us know for certain what that story means but it wouldn't be the first time that an intelligence agency holds back information from an allied intelligence agency either for the sake of political gain or not to compromise their undercover assets, or, in the case of the FBI and CIA, probably out of bureaucratic jealousy. And horrendous as that implication sounds it

wouldn't be the first time a US government has covered up an Israeli outrage against Americans, directly, or, in this possible case, indirectly, -I'm thinking, of course, of the Israeli air force attack on the USS Liberty during the June 1967 war which left a number of American sailors dead or wounded, but which has left behind too many survivors ever to be completely hushed up.

But to get back to Ramzi. Shortly after your documentary appeared around the anniversary of 9/11, Ramzi was caught by the Pakistanis and turned over to American intelligence officers. This capture was described by President Bush as a major boost in the war of terrorism but you found yourself initially denounced as "a pig and a traitor" on various Islamist websites and you told the Washington Post (which reported as did other media that the interview had taken place in Karachi last June) that you "couldn't blame people for thinking what they do" and that you yourself wondered at first if there could have been some unforeseeable link.

YF: Yeah. Well there were rumors going around at the time that American intelligence agents were secretly planting tracking devices on Al Jazeera correspondents likely to be in contact with Al-Qa'ida. But when you think about it, that doesn't make sense. If that were the case why would the intelligence apparatus wait for all that time to act? According to the official version, the interviews took place in June but they didn't get hold of Ramzi until early mid-September. Actually this question of dates is very important for another reason. All of these Islamist websites that were denouncing me alluded to my interview as taking place in June. That's what I mentioned both in my article in The Sunday Times Magazine and in my documentary-that I met them in June.

SAS: So?

YF: I lied.

SAS: Really?

YF: Yeah.

SAS: But you're going to come clean with TBS, right?

YF (laughter): Yes, of course. I lied because I needed to lie. I'll tell you why. Because I thought, maybe even expected, that if something went wrong and I needed to get in touch with them through a website or a statement or a fax or whatever-the people that I met then and the people who were around them, they would be the only ones who would know that I had met them one month earlier than I let on, and so I'd know I was talking to the right people.

So after the first wave of denunciations a pro-Qa'ida website "jihad.net" put up a statement online in the name of Al-Qa'ida clearing me of any blame or connection with Ramzi's arrest and I knew this was an authentic communiqué because it alluded to the interview taking place in May.

SAS: Well then who started the rumors in Pakistan that you were responsible for the arrest?

YF: I really don't know. It might have been one of the Pakistani journalists close to the government, not because the government had anything against me, but it could have been about throwing the blame away from them; after all, they made the arrest and turned Ramzi over to the Americans, so they might be afraid of a reprisal from Al-Qa'ida and indeed, the "jihad.net" statement that cleared me, put the blame on the Pakistani government.

SAS: Or it could just have been a gut reaction or, perhaps a better metaphor, a knee-jerk reaction by a typical Pakistani militant who is pro-Qa'ida but doesn't really know anything.

YF: That could be it, but you know until now I cannot blame some people for making that sort of association. Look at the coincidence of the timing of the broadcast of Part 11 of the documentary with the Ramzi interview, and the announcement of the arrest because until now I am not really sure whether the arrest happened that day or maybe a little less than a week before because there is a Reuters report that Ramzi was actually arrested on the 9th. Part II was broadcast on the 12th. And I'm also saddened at the fact that the timing of the arrest shifted the attention of viewers away from the content of the documentary, from the very art of journalism, and the making of the difficult story that it was; that it became instead part of a breaking news story about the arrest of one man. But of course it is a major story and perhaps the most important investigation that I've done until now.

SAS: Well, in light of the fact that the "jihad.net" site has exonerated you, do you think that this is not the last story you are going to do with Al-Qa'ida? Are you ready to do more?

YF: Yes, I'm ready to do more but I think they're going to remain underground for a while but I do expect them to get in touch with me somehow. Whether they are going to invite me to again meet with them or some other members of Al-Qa'ida or whether they will just throw a tape at me and provide me with some information, that's another story. But I do have the feeling that they might like to get in touch with me again. When so many people in our part of the world were making an unfortunate connection between my work and Ramzi's arrest, Al-Qa'ida were the people I worried least about- Khalid and the people around Khalid and Ramzi, because they knew what happened exactly before, during, and after the interviews and then they watched the documentaries. I must confess I was flattered when they said that Yosri Fouda kept his word, he made good on his promises even though they had some reservations. Well I expected that anyway and I was glad they had reservations.

SAS: Good for you that they had some reservations about your reporting; otherwise you might be on your way to Guantanamo by now. Were you surprised that there was no operation during the anniversary of 9/11?

YF: No, not really, I mean, although they tried to give me the impression that the organization was still alive and kicking, and they would like to launch a thousand operations like 9/11, that sort of talk didn't strike me as really serious. I think they are in a lot of trouble; I think they would be happy just surviving everything that's been happening since 9/11. I think they need some time to regroup and rethink and in light of the uncertainty that remains as to the fate

or whereabouts of Bin Laden or Dr. Ayman [Al-Zawahiri] for that matter, they will need a lot of time to regroup. They obviously have problems. When I left they kept my tapes because they wanted to black out their faces and then they promised to send me the tapes of the two interviews - a little more than an hour with each. But nothing came, finally I got an audio tape of my interview with Ramzi sent to me by Ramzi and that's what I built my documentary around along with some of the material I remembered from our conversations and other material I had.

That feeling I have that the organization is going through very difficult times is stronger today than ever, because at the time I was working on the documentary I felt that if Bin Ladin was really dead, as some think, particularly given Khalid's one slip of the tongue when he referred to Bin Laden in the past tense, then Ramzi Bin Al-Sheeba would have been the natural replacement. Even though Khalid outranked him, and was eight years older than Ramzi, Khalid still deferred to him as the Imam to lead prayer and he has the charisma of a leader for a group like this.

Ramzi made quite an impression on me. True I'm not surprised that it was Ramzi who got caught and not Khalid. Khalid was much more careful, much more experienced and Khalid is much more the operational officer type; more tactically minded, less ideological than Ramzi. For instance Ramzi would comment on the CIA and Mossad and say that the people had too high an opinion of them and that we shouldn't have such an attitude because Allah is not with them and things like that. Khalid wouldn't use such terms or express such a concept.

But Ramzi made an enduring impression upon me. His philosophy, even his vocabulary, is very much like Bin Ladin's. At just 30 years of age he eclipses his master with field experience in coordinating an unprecedented operation on Western soil. Yet Ramzi also has Bin Ladin's serene charm, zest, and religious knowledge.

SAS: Religious knowledge? Al Azhar would certainly contest that. From an orthodox, Azhari perspective all of those *fatwas* that Bin Ladin and Dr. Ayman issued and which Ramzi obviously believes in, were totally off the wall and were thoroughly condemned. I'm not saying that Bin Ladin wasn't or isn't pious, but the idea of him being qualified to issue *fatwas*, as having some sort of deep knowledge of the religion? The only people who have reason to believe that are his own followers and some of those writers for the National Review and those Christian Fundamentalist or Evangelical ministers in America who want to believe, like Bin Ladin's followers, that Bin Ladin and Al-Qa'ida is Islam.

YF: Well, there is something about Ramzi and the people around him-it's religious and more than religious. It's like a certain psychological or psychic state of certainty they are living in. It's very significant that they refer to the "Holy Tuesday Operation" first as holy and secondly as a *ghazwa*-the raids launched at the time of the Prophet. It was used during that time but not after that. It tells you a lot; they are convinced they are literally reliving or living in a psychological way in that time.

SAS: Obviously not in any self-conscious sense, given their mastery of computer technology, the Internet, video cameras, media needs, general operational skills, ability to move in and out of European

and American cities without particularly attracting any attention. Putting aside the traditional Pashtun dress that Bin Ladin and Dr. Ayman and I assume the other leaders all adopted once they had sunk roots in Afghanistan, they are far more modern in their skills and mode of operations than a good many Americans.

YF: Well, they do live in a special state of mind, be it a psychology or whatever, that is certainly more than that of religious practice. At one point Ramzi told me that Mohammed Atta would call him a few weeks before 9/11 to tell him, "Brother, don't be sad. We will meet one day in paradise," and Ramzi would say to him, "Inshallah, when you are in Paradise and see the Prophet (peace and blessings upon him), please extend our regards to him as well as to Abu Bakr and Umar and the Companions." And the group all had *kunyas*, as Abu Fulan, the father of this or that.

SAS: Right but that's very Arab. Even the most secular Palestinian fedayeen did that.

YF: But not in the same way. They took the *kunyas* of famous Muslim warriors in the time of the Prophet and the earliest caliphs. Ramzi, who after all was the coordinator, knew his men better by their *kunyas* than by their real names and he would have trouble remembering the real or formal names of some of his men.

SAS: How did Ramzi and Khalid handle those reports about the peculiar behavior of some of the members of the group—that some of them hit the striptease clubs before the operation, and drank alcohol or had girl friends? Did you ask Ramzi and Khalid about that?

YF: Yes, quite early on and Ramzi simply denied it. He said those reports were fabrications. As for Ziad Al-Jarrah having a Turkish girl friend, Ramzi insisted they were married. But that was strange because they had met in another city in Germany and moved to Hamburg together, where Ramzi met Ziad, but Ziad and his girl friend never actually lived together. In fact when I visited Ziad's family in Lebanon, they not only denied that Ziad was married but they absolutely insisted he had girl friends and liked to go to the clubs in an effort to convince me that their son couldn't conceivably be mixed up with a band of religious fanatics. And Arne Kruithof, the owner and manager of the flight school, Florida Flight International, where Ziad learned how to be a pilot, was very fond of Ziad and spoke highly of him and he said they use to go out together. So I asked Kruithof if Ziad would drink and he said yes he would order a pint of beer.

SAS: My own instinct is that just as they inhabited a psychic or psychological state that convinced them they were reliving the Prophet's experiences at the very moment they were about to violate both the very strict *shari'a* ("Islamic law") rules governing war and the Prophet's canonic sayings condemning the killing of civilians, so they must have assumed that the purifying nature of their approaching martyrdom gave them some sort of cosmic dispensation.

YF: Speaking of dispensation and states of mind, when I was in Karachi waiting to meet up with Ramzi and Khalid, my contact called me at the hotel I was staying at to arrange a meeting time. Since it was Friday I suggested we meet in the mosque either before

or after the prayer and he said to me "No, no, no! Don't leave the hotel." And I said, "But it's Friday and there are the prayers," and he said, "No, no, no! God will forgive you." But I think their sense of dispensation was derived directly from the idea that they were engaged in *jihad* ("holy struggle"). Now you know, in *jihad* there are certain liberties allowed.

SAS: You mean like not having to pray in a congregational manner if that puts the believers in danger, or being allowed to say one's prayers on horseback if on guard or patrol and not having to dismount and pray, as one usually does, on the ground.

YF: Right. Well, I believe they took the liberty of making their own interpretation of these dispensations or liberties granted to the one making *jihad*.

SAS: Your documentary is built around the actual voice of Ramzi telling you how Al-Qa'ida pulled it off. And there was the much earlier amateurishly filmed video tape that the American government says they found in Afghanistan, and which was not intended for public viewing, in which a militant Saudi sheikh, visiting with Bin Ladin leads Bin Ladin into an acknowledgement that it was Al-Qa'ida operatives known only to him and a few others, who staged the operation and Bin Ladin re-enacts his great joy when the operation succeeded well beyond his expectations. My intuition as a journalist told me when I watched the tape on CNN that it was authentic and that it was Bin Ladin but my intuition also told me that the Sheikh was an intelligence agent, probably for the Americans and the their taped conversation a sting operation. A few days later a respectable British newspaper confirmed it was a sting but they said it was set up by Saudi intelligence. And certainly the former head of Saudi intelligence has made it clear in no uncertain terms that 9/11 was an Al-Qa'ida operation. Now despite all of this and other documentation, so many Arabs were in a state of denial and many are still in a state of denial, insisting that Al-Qa'ida or any Arabs for that matter could not have had anything to do with this operation, that this was a Mossad or CIA operation.

YF: I'm very very sad, being an Egyptian and having graduated from Cairo University and then studying TV Journalism at the American University in Cairo to know that just about every newspaper and TV station in the world were dying to have a couple of words from me on this story except for the Egyptian press. You know, I'm told that some of the leading columnists in Egypt like Salah Montasser criticized my coverage and asked rhetorically "How come Yosri Fouda had access to American airports? There must be something between him and the CIA."

As for that tape you mentioned that we didn't screen, I have some news for you. Until I got to meet Ramzi and Khalid there was a lot of doubt as to the possibility that that tape might have been fabricated. But I got it on videotape from one of the other people from Al-Qa'ida who were there at the apartment that the tape was legitimate. I asked him whether that tape was genuine and he said it was. And in the end when I went back I put that Saudi Sheikh's video tape with Bin Ladin on and listened to it for four or five times, and certain bits and pieces that Bin Ladin said on that tape fit in very nicely with what Ramzi and Khalid had said to me. You know like the first time that they knew of the zero hour.

SAS: I understand what you are saying and I've been convinced of that tape's authenticity since the beginning. And your experience just confirms it. What I am trying to say to you however, is don't you ever wonder about the prevailing mentality that makes so many people who seem otherwise to be functioning in such a rational way oblivious to the unhappy, unfortunate facts of this situation. To be in such a state of denial. Doesn't it ever fascinate you as a journalist to come back and find your own work being doubted?

YF: Well, until this very day I get some emails from some people actually questioning whether the voice I had on the tape was actually Ramzi's voice. And I get the feeling it's a waste of time for me to try to assure them, to convince them, that, yes this tape has all of the same answers that he made to me face-to-face when I was with him.

SAS: Early in October you and Mohammed Jasim Al-Ali, the managing director of Al Jazeera, and Faysal Al-Qasem, who anchors the Al Jazeera show "The Opposite Direction" flew into Baghdad from Damascus and two of your group actually met with Saddam, which simply hasn't ever happened to journalists before, or certainly not for many years. First Al-Qa'ida and then Saddam. Could this be it, could Al Jazeera be the long sought for link between Baghdad and Al-Qa'ida that some people in the Bush administration have been looking for?

YF (laughter): No, no, no, don't say that! Actually we each had different missions. Mohammed was going to Baghdad to talk about expanding our facilities there, Faysal wanted to do a live interview for his show with the Iraqi Minister of Oil and I was trying to pursue my investigative report on the whereabouts of the Kuwaitis who have been missing since the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait and where never returned to Kuwait or accounted for. We thought if we all went in together as a team for a meeting with the Minister of Information this would strengthen our respective cases.

We did meet with Mohammed Said Al-Sahhaf, the Iraqi minister of information and with Abed Hammoud, Saddam's personal secretary; the man who is always standing just behind Saddam. His moustache is even thicker than Saddam's. And Tahir Al-Habbush, who is a major figure in Iraqi State Intelligence. There was a lavish dinner in Al-Habbush's garden. The next day, he drove a car with Mohammed Jasim sitting next to him and Faysal sitting in the back, to a new presidential palace, Faw Palace, near the airport. There they all waited in a sitting room for about five or ten minutes when Saddam entered the room. He handed each one of them a cigar. Then Iraqi TV came in and filmed the gathering.

I had been trying to get permission to search for the missing Kuwaitis and I was invited to Baghdad and I was told by my hosts that they would open any door into any prison at a moment's notice. I asked if I could bring along any delegate from Kuwait or an international organization like the UNHCR and the Iraqis agreed. So I flew off to Kuwait and relayed this message to the Minister of Information Sheikh Ahmed Al-Fahed. The minister was skeptical and when I met with the Kuwaiti National Committee for the Return of the POWs they said it would be a case of walking into a setup if they came along and of course none of the missing would be found (implying that the Iraqis would hide them). Their presence would make Saddam look good. And they refused point blank to

appear on a panel for my story with their Iraqi counterparts. It took me three days to convince them that even if all we get is news about one missing POW it is worth it so in the end they agreed to appear on program with the Iraqis. I did some more shuttling back and forth, including a chance to film at Basra Prison after all the prisoners were released, so there was nothing there but empty cells, and the Iraqis let me film them at the Kuwaiti border handing over the Kuwaiti Archives.

SAS: Sounds like some of the time you were playing a similar diplomatic role for the sake of a good story as Walter Cronkite did nearly thirty years ago, when, with Mohamed Gohar's help (Gohar was then filming for CBS Cairo), Cronkite got President Sadat and Prime Minister Begin to talk to each other by satellite, on CBS Television. That was the beginning of the peace process. When was the last time you were in Baghdad?

YF: Nearly a year and a half ago when I was working on the story about the assassination of an Egyptian nuclear scientist who was part of the Iraqi nuclear project. He was assassinated in Paris in 1980 while he was there on a mission representing Iraq to finalize a deal to import important material for the Tamouz reactor. He was assassinated the same year the Israelis took out the Tamouz. A former Mossad agent subsequently wrote a book acknowledging the assassination.

SAS: What's the difference in the mood then and now?

YF: I think that the Iraqi government is very much more open to the outside world, perhaps because they truly feel the heat and they are looking for some sympathy.

SAS: My theory is Saddam believes, in the end, in Saddam. Not in socialism, not in Arabism, not in Islamism. He believes in Saddam and if it's necessary to close down the prisons and free the prisoners so that Saddam may survive he closes down the prisons. And since he is a man of much cunning and impulse, if he is convinced that only free elections and invitations to all the Iraqi parties to return from exile and set up shop in Baghdad-to the Iraqi Communists, the Kurdish parties, the old Nasserist Arab Socialists, the Islamist parties-he just might do it if he is convinced that's the only way to save himself.

YF: I think that's a viable theory and I would add to it. If Saddam thinks that killing Saddam would save Saddam he would try to figure out how to do it and survive.

SAS: What about exile? Rumors are starting to fly about possible haven for him in Saudi Arabia or in Russia.

YF: Out of the question. Because to say Saddam is for Saddam, means, without even saying it, Saddam in Power. You know I always try to make this distinction between the government and the people. For those in the government, or at least for many of them at the top, its too late to jump off Saddam's boat onto an alternative vehicle. The die is cast for them. Their fate is linked inescapably to Saddam. As for Iraq, it's been set back by the war and then the sanctions at least fifty years. Everything is being recycled. A university professor's salary is worth three dollars a month. They all

survive on rations and by selling personal effects. But what amazes you, in the midst of all this suffering, nobody dares to even begin to criticize. You feel this very deeply; it takes so long to penetrate into the inner feelings of Iraqi people, and when you do you run up against a wall of fear.

SAS: Does Al Jazeera ever cover the Iraqi exiles, the opposition? Perhaps as much as 25 percent of Iraq's population is living abroad in exile but if you mention this to the Egyptian man in the street, educated or uneducated they are oblivious to this fact.

YF: Yes, we have interviewed a wide range of Iraqi opposition figures in Europe and America and elsewhere. If the U.S. government with all its power is not capable of pulling together a truly unified Iraqi Opposition front, then what can Al Jazeera do but talk with individuals in the opposition and that's what we are trying to do. Some of the opposition thinks that Al Jazeera sides with the Iraqi government, which is absolutely untrue. Yes, Al Jazeera has sympathy for the Iraqi people who have suffered so terribly, particularly for the last decade, when suffering was not only for those who fell out of favor with a *mukhabarat* ["secret police"] regime, but the generalized suffering due to the post-war sanctions.

TBS

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