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





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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.



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.)

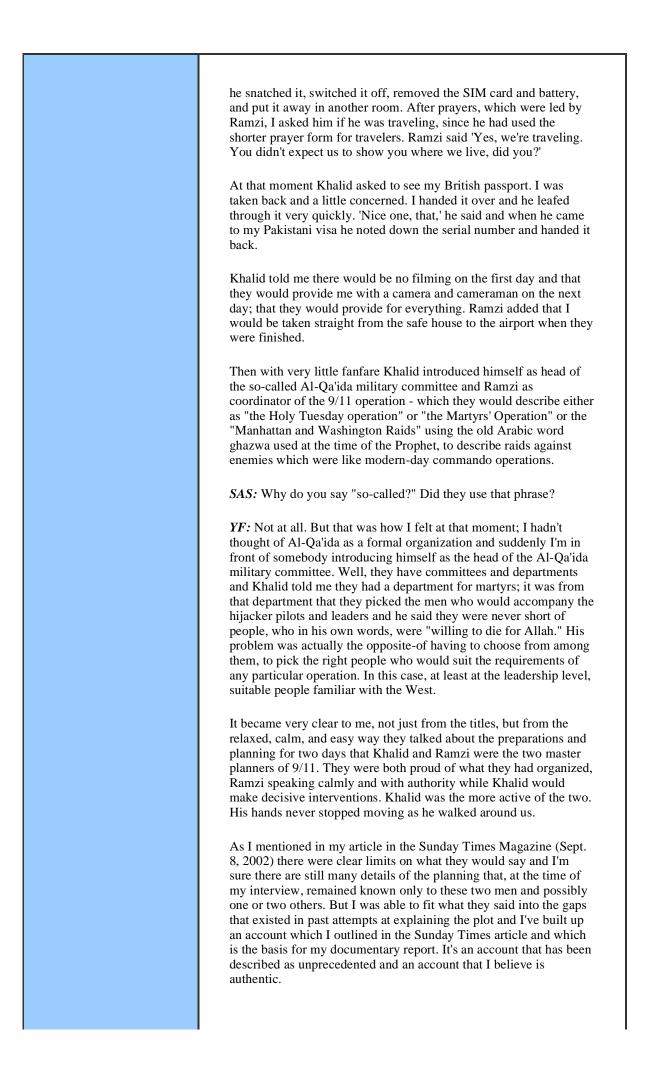
Anyway the interview wasn't some sort of discussion and I didn't go there to argue with them and I didn't go there to judge them. I went there in the hope I could come back with some solid information and they knew that and that's why they cut a long story short, and started telling me specifics, about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



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."

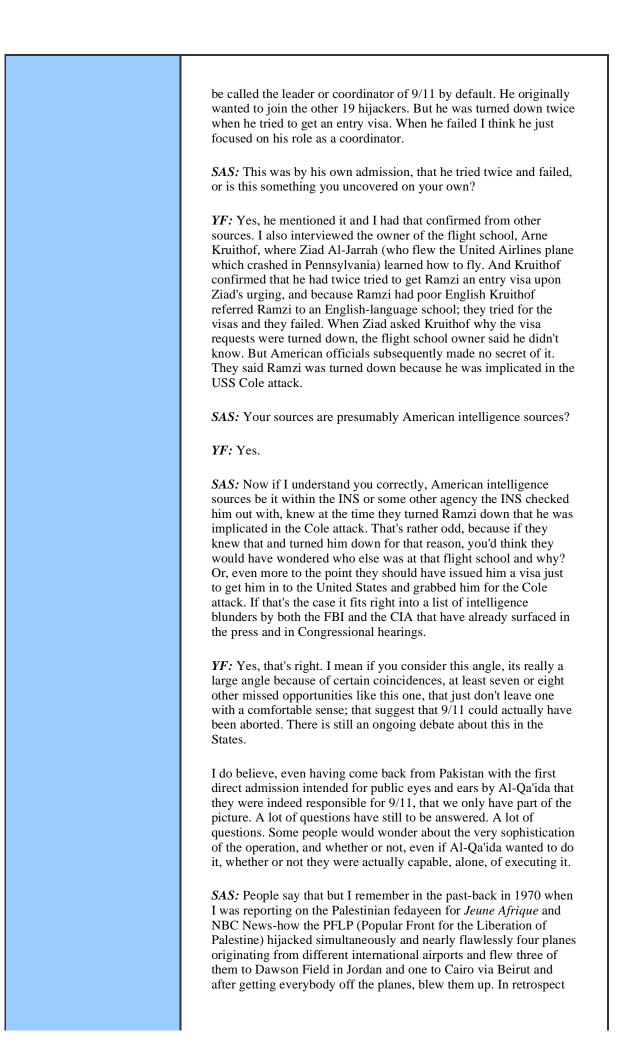
SAS: So that means that Khalid, who is still at large, was implying that Al-Qa'ida reserved the right to blow up nuclear facilities in the future?

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



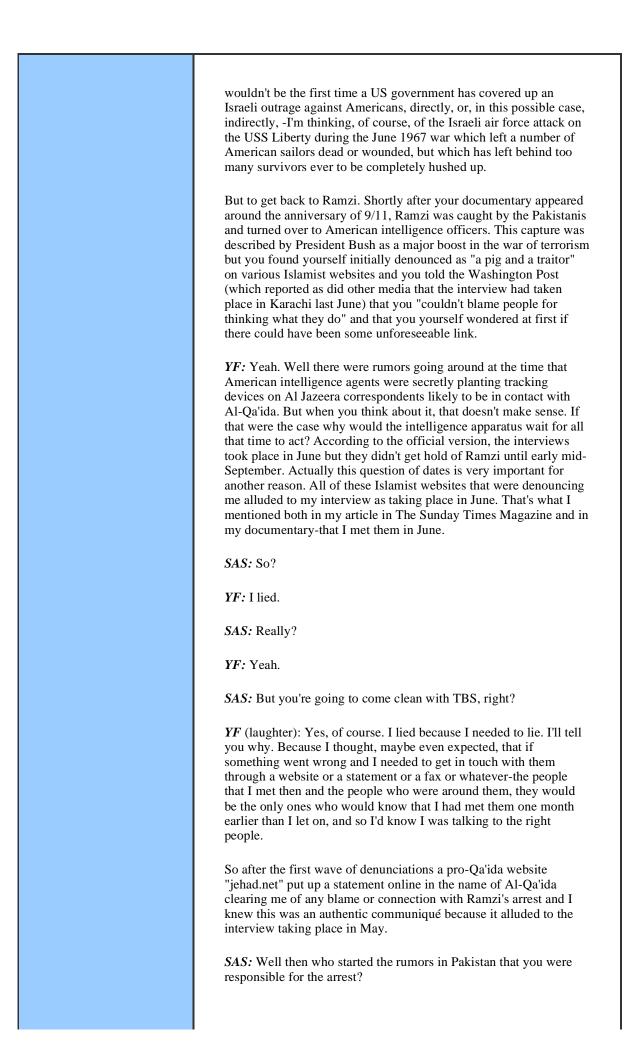
those were much nicer times - people hijacked planes then to make a political point, not to murder the passengers and lots of other people. In fact they were even pleasant to the passengers. Al Qa'ida makes one almost a little nostalgic for old-fashioned Marxist revolutionaries. But that isn't the point 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.

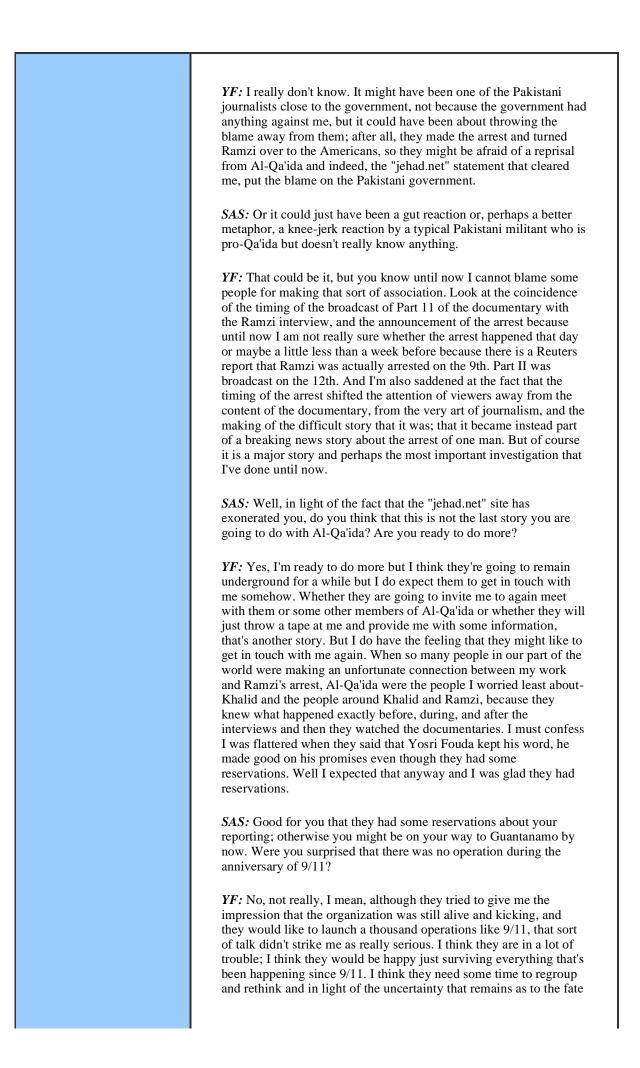
YF: But there is another thing. You know I was interviewed on CNN on the eve of the first anniversary of 9/11 and Jonathan Mann, who was interviewing me for his program "Inside," challenged my information during the taped interview, when I referred to the case of a group of Israelis taking pictures with 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





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.

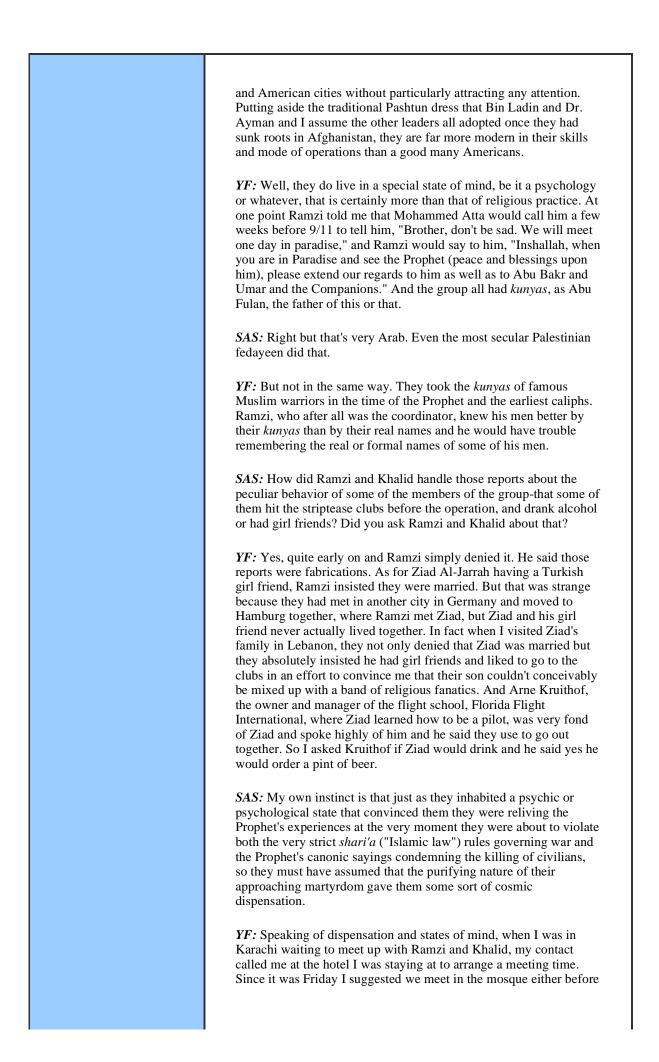
Ramzi made quite an impression on me. True I'm not surprised that it was Ramzi who got caught and not Khalid. Khalid was much more careful, much more experienced and Khalid is much more the operational officer type; more tactically minded, less ideological than Ramzi. For instance Ramzi would comment 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.

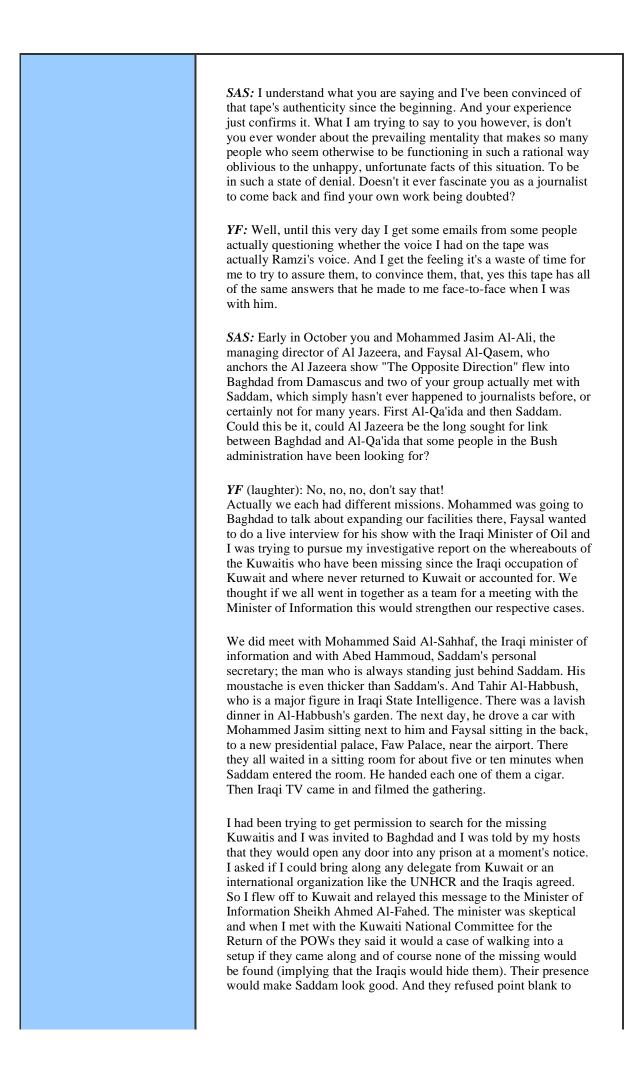
SAS: Religious knowledge? Al Azhar would certainly contest that. From an orthodox, Azhari perspective all of those *fatwas* that Bin Ladin and Dr. Ayman issued and which Ramzi obviously believes in, were totally off the wall and were thoroughly condemned. I'm not saying that Bin Ladin wasn't or isn't 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



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.



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?

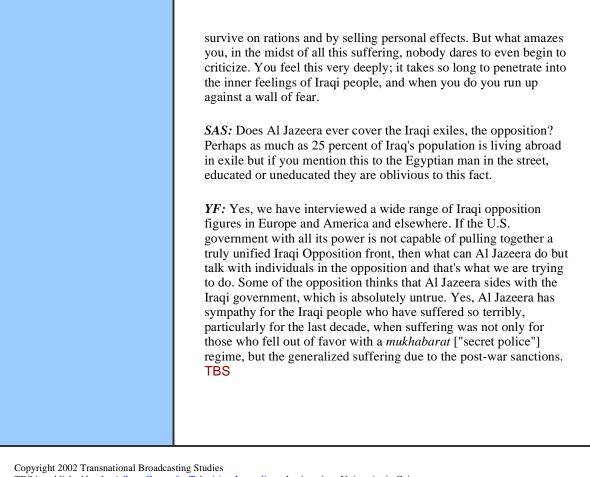
YF: I think that the Iraqi government is very much more open to the outside world, perhaps because they truly feel the heat and they are looking for some sympathy.

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



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