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The Phantom Link to Iraq

BYLINE: By Michael Isikoff

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HIGHLIGHT: A spy story tying Saddam to 9-11 is looking very flimsy

Did September 11 hijacker Mohamed Atta meet with an Iraqi agent in the months before the terrorist attack? Last fall, the Czech government provided the CIA with intelligence suggesting that just such a rendezvous had taken place. The Czechs claimed that Atta, the ringleader of the hijackers, made a special trip to Prague in April 2001, where he met the agent at the Iraqi Embassy.

The story of the "Iraqi connection" spread rapidly through Washington. Advocates of U.S. action to topple Saddam Hussein seized on the account to bolster their arguments. New York Times columnist William Safire proclaimed the meeting an "undisputed fact" connecting Saddam to September 11. When Vice President Dick Cheney flew to the Middle East last month, a "senior U.S. official" on the trip referred to "meetings that have been made public" between Atta and Iraqi intelligence. "This story has taken on a life of its own," says a U.S. intelligence official. It shouldn't have. NEWSWEEK has learned that a few months ago, the Czechs quietly acknowledged that they may have been mistaken about the whole thing. U.S. intelligence and law enforcement officials now believe that Atta wasn't even in Prague at the time the Czechs claimed. "We looked at this real hard because, obviously, if it were true, it would be huge," one senior U.S. law enforcement official told NEWSWEEK. "But nothing has matched up."

The story behind the purported Atta-Iraqi meeting is nonetheless an illuminating window into the murky world of intelligence in the war on terrorism-and how easily facts can become distorted for political purposes. The tale begins in 1998, when Radio Free Europe, which is headquartered in Prague, started broadcasting anti-Saddam programs into Iraq, infuriating the dictator. Late that year, Tom Dine, the director of Radio Free Europe, says U.S. officials warned him that "the Iraqis were plotting to blow us up." The information about the plot, sources said, came from a recent Iraqi defector who had fled Prague for Great Britain carrying nine suitcases and \$150,000 in cash-the proceeds of which were supposed to have been used to finance the operation.

Radio Free Europe started round-the-clock video surveillance of the building. Soon enough, the cameras picked up a heavyset Middle Eastern man who was hanging around the RFE building taking pictures. He was sometimes accompanied by a thinner, taller man who wore a Shell Oil jacket. RFE passed along the pictures to the Czech intelligence agency, known as the BIS. The Czechs identified the heavier man as Ahmed Khalil Ibrahim Samir al-Ani, an Iraqi diplomat widely believed to be a spy. The thinner man was never identified.

In late April 2001, al-Ani was again caught casing the building, and he was expelled from the country. Then, in the chaotic days after September 11, a Czech intelligence source inside Prague's Middle Eastern community saw Atta's picture in the media and reported that he had seen the same person meeting al-Ani at the Iraqi Embassy five months earlier. Czech Prime Minister Milos Zeman publicly confirmed the story to CNN during a visit to Washington last November. But the uncorroborated report, some Czechs now concede, should have generated more skepticism. "These [informants] tend to tell you what you want to believe," says Oldrich Cerny, the former director of Czech intelligence.

On closer scrutiny, however, the evidence became even less convincing. Although Atta had indeed flown from Prague to the United States in June 2000, the Czechs had placed the alleged meeting in April 2001. The FBI could find no visa or airline records showing he had left or re-entered the United States that month. The bureau does have records showing Atta was in Virginia Beach- where officials suspect he was casing U.S. naval facilities in the area - and Florida in April. "Neither we nor the Czechs nor anybody else has any information he was coming or going [to Prague] at that time," says a U.S. official.

But intelligence officials have been reluctant to set the record straight- both out of reluctance to embarrass an allied government and because so many anti-Saddam hawks in the Bush administration had embraced the story. To be sure, administration hardliners aren't ready to give up. Newsweek has learned that Pentagon analysts are still aggressively hunting for evidence that might tie Atta, or any of the other hijackers, to Saddam's agents. It may yet turn up, but for now, at least, the much touted "Prague connection" appears to be an intriguing, but embarrassing, mistake.

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