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Israeli security issued urgent warning to CIA of large-scale terror attacks

By David Wastell in Washington and Philip Jacobson in Jerusalem
(Filed: 16/09/2001)

ISRAELI intelligence officials say that they warned their counterparts in the United States last month that large-scale terrorist attacks on highly visible targets on the American mainland were imminent.

The [attacks on the World Trade Centre's twin towers and the Pentagon](#) were humiliating blows to the intelligence services, [which failed to foresee them](#), and to the defence forces of the most powerful nation in the world, which failed to deflect them.

The Telegraph has learnt that two senior experts with Mossad, the Israeli military intelligence service, were sent to Washington in August to alert the CIA and FBI to the existence of a cell of as many of 200 terrorists said to be preparing a big operation.

"They had no specific information about what was being planned but linked the plot to Osama bin Laden and told the Americans that there were strong grounds for suspecting Iraqi involvement," said a senior Israeli security official.

The CIA has said that it had no hard information that would have led to the prevention of the hijacking, but the FBI said it believed that cells operating within America and totalling at least 50 terrorists were behind last week's devastating hijacks; the names of new suspects are being added to the list daily.

America's intelligence agencies are being widely blamed for their failure to predict the attacks, or anything like them, and for not discovering any of the terrorist cells before the hijackings on Tuesday. Some of those who took part had lived in the US for months, or even years.

Evidence that a clear Israeli warning was delivered to American authorities, but ignored, would be a further blow to the reputation of the CIA, which is under fire for its failure last week.

An administration official in Washington said: "If this is true then the refusal to take it seriously will mean heads will roll. It is quite credible that the CIA might not heed a Mossad warning: it has a history of being overcautious about Israeli information."

For years, staff at the Pentagon joked that they worked at "Ground Zero", the spot at which an incoming nuclear missile aimed at America's defences would explode. There is even a snack bar of that name in the central courtyard of the five-sided building, America's most obvious military bullseye.

This weekend, five days after that target was struck with devastating effect by a hijacked plane, the joking has stopped.

It is far from certain that any military commander would

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have had the courage to recommend shooting down a passenger airliner, even in the unprecedented circumstances of last Tuesday.

For three of the four airliners hijacked last week, however, the question did not even arise. Two pairs of combat fighters were scrambled into action but did not get near enough to shoot any of them down.

Norad, the command headquarters in Colorado responsible for defending all of North America from air attack, was notified of the first hijack at 8.38am and six minutes later two F-15 fighter jets were ordered into the air from Otis airforce base on Cape Cod.

Before they could take off, however, the first hijacked airliner crashed into the World Trade Centre's north tower at 8.46am. Six minutes later the two military jets were airborne, but when the second hijacked airliner hit the south tower shortly after 9am they were still 70 miles from Manhattan.

The only successful action against the hijackers was taken by passengers of the fourth airliner, [whose heroic decision to fight back](#) led to its crashing into the fields of Pennsylvania.

The reason lies in the strict distinction America draws between civil and military power, combined with the fact that until last week nobody had confronted the possibility that a terrorist hijacker might turn kamikaze pilot.

Although Norad has its own radar system to track aircraft over the US, its prime task is to watch for hostile aircraft approaching America from outside. "We assume anything originating in US airspace is friendly," said a spokesman.

For the same reason, the 20 or so American fighter planes on permanent full alert in case of a suspect intruder, were deployed at half a dozen bases in the likeliest flightpaths of an attack from the former Soviet Union, several hundred miles from New York or Washington DC.

All aircraft flying over American airspace are monitored and controlled by a network of 20 regional Federal Aviation Authority air traffic control centres, backed up by individual airport control towers. Military aircraft under Norad control can intervene with domestic traffic only if called on for help by their civilian colleagues.

That is what happened on Tuesday, but in no case was there apparently enough time after the FAA's warning for fighter planes to reach the hijacked airliners.

More puzzling, there were 45 minutes between air traffic controllers losing contact with the third airliner, which took off from Dulles airport just outside Washington, and its crash on to the Pentagon.

At that point, however, the aircraft was still flying on its intended course westwards. It may not have been until later, possibly after a passenger's mobile phone call to the Justice Department, that the civil authorities finally twigged what was happening.

It was not the military but civilian air traffic controllers at Washington's Reagan National Airport - tipped off by their colleagues at Dulles - who alerted the White House to the fact that an unauthorised jet was flying at full throttle towards it.

As shaken White House staff began a frantic evacuation, the aircraft banked, performed a 270 degree turn and

sailed past lines of aghast drivers on expressways to crash explosively into the west side of the Pentagon.

If the airliner had approached much nearer to the White House it might have been shot down by the Secret Service, who are believed to have a battery of ground-to-air Stinger missiles ready to defend the president's home.

The Pentagon is not similarly defended. "We are an open society," said a military official. "We don't have soldiers positioned on the White House lawn and we don't have the Pentagon ringed with bunkers and tanks."

It emerged last night that two F-16 fighters took off from Langley airforce base in Virginia just two minutes before the American Airlines Boeing 767 crashed into the Pentagon, again too late to have a chance of intercepting.

Only the fourth hijacked airliner, which was less than 30 minutes from Washington when it crashed, might have been successfully intercepted: air traffic controllers at a regional centre in Nashua, New Hampshire, told a Boston newspaper that at least one F-16 fighter was in hot pursuit, and defence officials confirmed that the fighters already launched from Langley were on their way to intercept the flight when passengers apparently took matters into their own hands.

Deep inside the Pentagon, in the hardened bunkers of the National Military Joint Intelligence Centre, senior officials were said to be "stunned" by the terrorists' achievement.

Within minutes of the attack American forces around the world were put on one of their highest states of alert - Defcon 3, just two notches short of all-out war - and F-16s from Andrews Air Force Base were in the air over Washington DC.

A flotilla of warships was deployed along the east coast from bases in Virginia and Florida, with two aircraft-carriers to help protect the airspace around New York and Washington DC. Off the west coast, a further 10 ships put to sea to take up station close to the shore.

Extra Awacs aerial reconnaissance aircraft were sent aloft to ensure that nothing other than military aircraft flew in American airspace - a home-grown version of the "no-fly zones" enforced for many years over Iraq. For much of the rest of the week, the unsettling roar of F-15 and F-16 fighters patrolling the skies high above America's biggest cities replaced the usual rumble of commercial airliners.

On Friday, in a tacit admission that America must in future be better prepared, Donald Rumsfeld, the Defence Secretary, announced that fighters were being put on a 15-minute "strip" alert at 26 bases nationwide.

There was anger among politicians at what many saw as the failure of the intelligence services, and some officials on Capitol Hill began canvassing support for a move to force George Tenet, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, originally appointed by Clinton, to step aside.

James Traficant, a Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania, said that for years Congress had poured billions of dollars of largely unscrutinised funding into America's intelligence services, "yet we learnt of every one of these tragedies from Fox News and CNN"- two television channels. Senator Richard Shelby, a Republican member of the Senate intelligence committee, said it was "a failure of great dimension".

There are moves to address one severe shortcoming noted by many critics: the CIA's reliance on technological rather than "human" means to gather information, and its weakness as a means of finding out what Osama bin Laden is up to.

During the Clinton administration, Congress banned the CIA from recruiting as a paid informer anyone with a criminal record or who was guilty of human rights violations. James Woolsey, another former CIA director, said: "Inside bin Laden's organisation there are only people who want to be human rights violators. If you don't recruit them then you don't recruit anyone."

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