History

Enquiry 2: “Out of the blue”: When did 9/11 begin?

Mindless terrorism?
Is this a fair summary of the 9/11 attacks on the USA?

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Mindless terrorism?

Is this a fair summary of the 9/11 attacks on the USA? In January 1996, in a secret system of caves high in the Tora Bora mountains of Afghanistan, two men met in something like a deadly version of television’s Dragon’s Den. One was a 32-year-old Kuwaiti citizen called Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. He had come to the cave with an idea and he wanted the other man to help him turn the idea into a grim reality. The other man was a 39-year-old Saudi Arabian by the name Osama bin Laden. Their discussion in the Tora Bora cave that day was to change the world.

Activity 1

People sometimes say that the 9/11 attacks are an example of “mindless terrorism”, but nothing could be further from the truth. In the next few pages you will learn about the events that followed the meeting of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Osama bin Laden. As you read what happened, make a list of evidence that shows that the 9/11 attacks were far from mindless: they were planned with considerable attention to detail – something that makes them, if possible, even more terrible.

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Osama bin Laden may have met before that day in January 1996. In 1979, the communist Russian army had invaded Afghanistan, and Muslim warriors called Mujahideen fought to drive them out. In 1988, an accord was signed, allowing the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the return of the Communist regime. But 1996 was a new beginning. The situation in Afghanistan was ripe for the growth of a terror group with a specific agenda.
back. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Osama bin Laden were among thousands of young Muslims from around the world who travelled to Afghanistan to help the Mujahideen. By 1989, the Russians were defeated. Encouraged by the defeat of the Russians, Osama bin Laden stayed in Afghanistan; from his secret base in the caves, he set up a new organisation that promised to support anyone, anywhere, who would attack what he believed to be the enemies of Islam. He called his organisation “Al-Qaeda”, which means “The Base”.

When the two men met in January 1996, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was the latest of many visitors to approach bin Laden for support. By that time, certain extreme Muslims believed they should attack people who they saw as enemies of Islam. Some of these extremists made their way to Afghanistan and asked bin Laden for money or other support. Bin Laden would listen to their idea and weigh it up in his mind. He might agree to train them in one of his camps high in the mountains or he might provide money or link them with one of his more experienced agents. Or he might simply turn them away.

In this case, bin Laden listened quietly as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed outlined his plan: he wanted to train men as airline pilots, hijack airliners and fly them into buildings in the United States. This was over five years before the 9/11 attacks eventually took place.

Bin Laden did not agree to support the plan but he invited Khalid Sheikh Mohammed to join the select few who were officially part of Al-Qaeda. But Khalid Sheikh Mohammed declined the offer.

In August 1998, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed tried once more to gain bin Laden’s support. This time he said he wanted to hijack ten airliners and attack a range of targets on the East and West Coasts of the USA. He aimed to catch the attention of the world’s media and to weaken American trade, pride and power. The targets were:

- The World Trade Center in New York
- The Pentagon
- The US Capitol buildings
- The headquarters of the FBI
- The headquarters of the CIA
- Nuclear power stations
- The tallest building in California (US Bank Tower)

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Khalid Sheikh Mohammed planned to fly the tenth plane, land it at an American airport, kill all the men on board and make a speech to the television cameras of the world condemning America for its anti-Muslim policies.

Once again, bin Laden disappointed Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. He said the plan was too grand and that it would be too hard to coordinate all the details. But he did agree to support a scaled-down version of the plan. He gave the go-ahead for the attacks that eventually hit America on 11 September 2001.

Bin Laden and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed sat down to plan the attacks on the USA in detail. Bin Laden sent agents to New York to decide on suitable targets there. He also selected Al-Qaeda agents who were experienced in fighting for Islam. Two of these were particularly keen to die in suicide attacks against the USA. These two had already obtained the visas that they would need to travel to America.

The agents went into training. They practised close combat fighting, firearms work, shooting from motorcycles and night operations. Then Khalid Sheikh Mohammed – who had lived and studied in the USA when he was younger – taught them about the American way of life, as they would need to spend time in the USA before launching their attack.

By summer 1999, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was also finding details of flight schools in the USA where the terrorists would later learn how to fly airliners. To prepare them, he bought computer flight simulation software for them to practise with. (The picture shows an example of such software.)

In January 1999, the first two agents had travelled to the West Coast of America and they settled down to improve their English and begin to learn how to fly airliners. In the end, neither one of them flew a plane in the 9/11 attacks. They had real difficulty in learning English, and this made it much harder to learn to fly. One left America and the other went on to take part in the attacks but as a hijacker, not as a pilot. It was a bad start.
It seems that Al-Qaeda was prepared to learn from its mistakes. In the summer of 1999, three more agents arrived in the USA and settled on the East Coast. This group had been recruited from an unlikely place – the city of Hamburg in Germany. They came from different Arab nations but had met as students in Hamburg. They shared extreme beliefs and decided to go to Afghanistan to train for fighting. From there they were sent to the USA, as they already spoke good English and understood the Western way of life. Within weeks, they were learning how to fly commercial airliners at flight schools in Florida.

The lead hijacker in the USA was called Mohammed Atta. By the summer of 2001, the pilot training was finishing and the attack could take place quite soon. By June, 15 more Al-Qaeda agents had flown to the USA. These were the “muscle hijackers” who took over the airliners so that the Al-Qaeda pilots could take the controls.

On 8 July 2001, Mohammed Atta flew to Spain for a meeting with a man called Ramzi bin al-Shibh. He had wanted to be a pilot in the 9/11 attack but could not get a visa to enter the USA. Instead, it became his job to sort out all the practical details. In Spain, the two men agreed exactly what knives to use as weapons, how long to wait before attacking the cabin crew and what type of aircraft to target. They also decided to hijack airliners that were due to fly long distances, as they would carry more fuel and be more explosive when they crashed. The men even bought expensive necklaces and bracelets for the hijackers to wear so they would look respectable as they went through security at the airports. Everything was considered with clinical, deadly detail.
After returning to the USA, Mohammed Atta organised the final steps. He met most of the agents to talk over the plan. The hijackers went for flights on exactly the same types of aircraft they would capture to be sure they knew the layout. They bought the knives and they bought the tickets, dated 11 September 2011. All was set.

This was no mindless terrorism.

Activity 2

By now, you should have plenty of evidence to show that the 9/11 attacks cannot be called “mindless”. Compare your evidence with someone else’s list.

Finally, if the attacks can’t be called “mindless”, what short, powerful name would you give them, based on what you know now? Make sure it fits the evidence!