

NEW YORK POST*America's oldest continuously published daily newspaper*

The terror sheik and beyond

The lengthy sentences meted out to Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman and nine associates for their involvement in a plot to blow up the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels, the United Nations building and the George Washington Bridge cannot but give New Yorkers a sense of satisfaction. Four men who were under the terror sheik's influence have already been convicted in connection with the World Trade Center bombing, which killed six; had that explosion gone according to plan and toppled one of the twin towers, it might easily have killed thousands.

According to federal prosecutors, both attacks were conceived as part of a cataclysmic terror campaign directly against the United States.

It is important to recognize the scope of the two plots: Either one, had it succeeded, would have resulted in more carnage than any violence that has occurred on American soil since the Civil War.

In this light, the fact that the terror sheik's future rantings about the Great Satan will take place behind prison walls is welcome news.

Unfortunately, the conviction and incarceration of a band of Middle Eastern misfits (only two of the conspirators — Clement Hampton-El, and Victor Alvarez — were native-born U.S. citizens) doesn't get anywhere near the root of the terrorism threat America faces.

Last January, a man traveling under an Iraqi passport made out to Ramzi Yousef was arrested in Pakistan; he'd fled there from the Philippines following a chemical explosion in his Manila home. After the arrest, police investigators found evidence of his involvement in a plot to blow up 11 U.S. commercial airliners. Actually, Yousef had been the subject of a two-year international manhunt due to his suspected role in the World Trade Center bombing.

Unlike the other captured Trade Center conspirators, Yousef is a well-educated professional. A denizen of the seamier side of Manila night life, he was certainly no devout Islamic fundamentalist. In his home, police found documents linking him to a wider network; last month, nine more Islamic radicals were arrested in Manila with a large arsenal of explosives, and with weapons and passports in their possession.

Yousef, an engineer, is scheduled to go on trial for his role in the World Trade Center blast later this year. But his life in Manila, and his ties to a wider web of terrorists, suggest that the individuals

around Sheik Abdel-Rahman are mere links in a larger chain.

An important article by Middle East expert Laurie Mylroie in a Washington-based quarterly — *The National Interest* — attempts to break apart this chain, while suggesting that the strategy the U.S. is using to combat terror may not be adequate to ensure American security.

Mylroie makes a persuasive — if circumstantial — case that the Islamic fundamentalists in Sheik Abdel-Rahman's orbit are not the main players in the conspiracy, but have been manipulated by trained and sophisticated Iraqi agents. She believes that the World Trade Center bombing was an act of Iraqi-sponsored state terrorism and that Ramzi Yousef is an Iraqi agent who was able to hook up with disaffected fundamentalists and push them into more deadly and intricate operations than they themselves would ever likely have conceived.

Individuals like the hapless Mohammad Salameh, who returned to a New Jersey car rental agency three times to collect his deposit for the van used in the World Trade Center blast, may well have been dupes — left behind to be caught while the ringleaders escaped.

Mylroie has analyzed the extensive links — including dozens of hours in phone calls — between one of the arrested fundamentalists and a convicted terrorist residing in Saddam Hussein's decidedly secular Baghdad.

She argues that there hasn't been a sufficiently thorough probe of the bombing by American intelligence agencies, and suggests that Washington takes a grave risk by barring the CIA and other national-security agencies from investigating crimes that take place on U.S. soil. Thus far, however, the Justice Department has focused only on prosecuting individual perpetrators.

But if America is in fact confronting a campaign of state-sponsored terror (and experience has shown that most sophisticated terror operations require the kind of support that only a sovereign government can provide), then it may well be inappropriate simply to expect federal prosecutors to meet the threat.

In short, the sentencing of Sheik Abdel-Rahman brings an appropriate end to a chapter that opened with the bombing of the World Trade Center. But there is strong reason to suspect that the entire story is far from complete.