

Okla. City Survivors Allege Conspiracy

by Jennifer L. Brown, Associated Press

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OKLAHOMA CITY (AP)--Timothy McVeigh was executed last year. His co-conspirator Terry Nichols is in prison. Yet V.Z. Lawton isn't convinced all those behind the Oklahoma City bombing have been brought to justice.

Lawton, who was knocked unconscious during the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in 1995, has long believed that Middle Eastern terrorists were behind the deadly blast.

But it wasn't until after Sept. 11 that his attorney thought the time was right to file a lawsuit alleging a conspiracy theory involving Iraqi government agents.

“I didn't personally feel like the climate was right and that the country would be receptive to the idea that Middle Eastern terrorist cells were in the heart of the United States until after 9-11,” attorney Michael Johnston said.

Now Lawton and 13 other Oklahoma City bombing survivors and victims' relatives have become plaintiffs in a \$1.5 billion federal lawsuit against Iraq, claiming Iraqi officials provided money and training to McVeigh and Nichols.

The FBI has declined to comment on the lawsuit.

Prosecutors have rejected suggestions that there was any foreign involvement in the bombing, which killed 168 people and wounded hundreds. A judge refused to allow lawyers to raise the theory at McVeigh's trial.

The lawsuit alleges Ramzi Yousef, now imprisoned for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, was an Iraqi government agent who recruited Nichols in the Philippines--the home of Nichols' mail-order bride.

“I want everybody to be held accountable for what they did down there,” said Lawton. “I lost 58 friends in the building. There's nobody really fighting to pursue the people that killed them.”

Early in the bombing investigation, the FBI released sketches of two men it believed had rented the Ryder truck that blew up outside the federal building.

One of the sketches was of McVeigh. The other sketch--so-called John Doe No. 2--was eventually identified by authorities as an Army private who was cleared by the FBI of involvement in the bombing.

But several survivors and victims' relatives--basing their suspicions on reported sightings of McVeigh with five or six other men--believe John Doe No. 2 looked like a man of Middle Eastern descent.

The government maintains that McVeigh was the mastermind behind the crime and that it was an act of revenge for the government's clash with the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. McVeigh himself maintained there was no larger conspiracy.

Others aren't convinced, including McVeigh's trial attorney, Stephen Jones, who claimed in a book titled "Others Unknown" that McVeigh was a "patsy" for Middle Eastern terrorists.

The lawsuit cites foreign and U.S. intelligence and law enforcement documents, as well as accounts from unnamed witnesses and sealed trial records. Many of the allegations are stated without specifying a source.

Jane Graham, one of the plaintiffs, said she saw two mysterious men in the federal building before the explosion and thinks McVeigh's truck bomb was simply a decoy for another blast.

"There were certainly more people involved," she said. "Everybody just wanted it to go away. I think the government needs to admit that it was wrapped up much too early. The main thing is trying to get to the truth."

The lawsuit was filed Thursday in U.S. District Court in Washington by Judicial Watch, which has initiated multiple lawsuits alleging government wrongdoing.

It was filed under a 1996 law that allows American terror victims to seek damages from nations that sponsor terrorism if those countries are on the State Department's list of terrorist states.

"The goal of the lawsuit is to make the Iraqis pay for what they've done," Lawton said. "That's one of the best ways to get people's attention--to attack them in their pocketbook."

On the Net:

The suit: <http://www.judicialwatch.org/cases/86/complaint.html>

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