

Warnings Before 1995 Oklahoma Bombing

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WASHINGTON (AP) - Just weeks before Timothy McVeigh bombed the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995, U.S. intelligence and law enforcement received several warnings that Islamic terrorists were seeking to strike on American soil and that a likely target was government buildings, documents show.

The information, though it was never linked to McVeigh, was stark enough that the Clinton administration urged stepped up security patrols and screening at federal buildings nationwide, including those in Oklahoma.

The government, however, didn't fortify buildings with cement barriers like those hurriedly installed after McVeigh detonated his explosive-laden truck at the curb of the Murrah building on April 19, 1995, officials said.

Islamic extremists are determined to ``strike inside the U.S. against objects symbolizing the American government in the near future," said one warning obtained by The Associated Press.

The intelligence that prompted the warnings was gathered across the globe from Iran and Syria to the Philippines and became more specific as to the potential type attack (suicide bombing), target (government building) and likely date (after the third week in March 1995), the documents show.

The U.S. Marshal's Service issued an alert on March 15, 1995, to federal courthouses it protects, including the one in Oklahoma City across the street from where McVeigh's truck bomb killed 168 people, the documents show.

``Iranian extremists want it made clear that steps are being taken to strike at the Great Satan," a term used frequently in the Mideast to describe the United States, the marshal's memo said. It said a fatwa - a religious order - had been issued to attack marshals or their buildings.

``There is sufficient threat potential to request that a heightened level of security awareness and caution be implemented," the memo added.

Separately, the General Services Administration received a warning from the FBI and asked hundreds of federal buildings it operates to increase security details, including the Murrah building, officials said.

``We were told there was a fatwa threatening to target federal buildings," GSA spokeswoman Viki Reath said this week. ``We increased our patrols to 12-hour shifts."

More than two dozen current and former intelligence and law enforcement officials interviewed by AP said the period of spring 1995 was a time of heightened ``chatter" among terrorists seeking to strike the United States.

But the officials cautioned the FBI and CIA exhaustively investigated whether McVeigh could have been aided by Mideast terrorist and found no credible evidence linking him to any Islamic extremists, including those who prompted the 1995 warnings.

The information about 1995 emerges as a joint House-Senate panel examining the intelligence and law enforcement failures that preceded Sept. 11 has expanded its mission to look back at the late 1980s and 1990s.

John Gannon, former deputy CIA director for intelligence under President Clinton, said spring 1995 was one of a handful of periods in the 1990s when intelligence on terror threats peaked as the government increasingly turned its attention to Osama bin Laden and his emerging terrorist network.

Gannon said the 1995 warnings were plentiful enough that he initially assumed Islamic extremists had struck when the bomb exploded in Oklahoma City. Law enforcement too issued initial bulletins looking for Arab suspects and borrowed Arabic translators from the military.

“When I first heard about the Oklahoma bombing, the first reaction I had was I wonder if this were a foreign group that had done this or the Islamic extremists that had come up on our screen,” Gannon said.

He said it was in 1998, after bin Laden issued a fatwa urging specific attacks on America and two U.S. embassies in Africa were bombed, that U.S. anti-terrorism efforts escalated markedly.

“If there was a watershed year, it was 1998. That significantly elevated our concern and resulted in a concerted effort, and a very strong program to go get Osama bin Laden,” he said.

The 1995 intelligence was specific enough that “if that was today, you'd have (Bush Homeland Security Director) Tom Ridge going out and saying we have this threat,” said former Rep. Bill McCollum, R-Fla., who in 1995 was a member of the House Intelligence Committee.

McCollum formed a congressional task force in the late 1980s that began warning of the growing threat of terrorism, and which issued some of the 1995 alerts.

“For a good number of years, there was a failure to acknowledge the severity of the threat,” he said. “There really had been this disbelief or unwillingness to scare people.”

Former Clinton White House press secretary Joe Lockhart said “protecting America against terrorists was a high priority” during the 1990s. “Threat information regularly came in and steps were taken to deal with it,” he said.

``In general, the record is very clear that the Clinton administration increased counterterrorism funding and focus more than any other prior administration based on the emerging threats," Lockhart added.

Some of the 1995 warnings were pointed.

``Iranian sources confirmed Tehran's desire and determination to strike inside the U.S. against objects symbolizing the American government in the near future," said a Feb. 27, 1995, terror warning by the House Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare.

The warnings became increasingly specific as to the possible location, type of attack and likely dates.

``These strikes are most likely to occur either in the immediate future or in the new Iranian year - starting 21 March 1995," the congressional task force predicted.

U.S. intelligence monitored a series of meetings and conferences between senior officials of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and other terror organizations in mid-February 1995 in which the subject of killing Americans on U.S. soil came up, officials said.

During these conferences, known terrorists made specific mention of Congress and the White House as ``institutions that are great enemies of the Islamist movement," according to a congressional warning.

``This is a deviation from past discussions beyond referring to the U.S. as a single entity to pointing to specific branches of government as their true enemies," it added.

Around the same time, the FBI received intelligence from the Philippines that two men later convicted in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing had been arrested as they were plotting to blow up U.S. airliners. The men planned to hijack one airliner and crash it into the CIA, Pentagon or White House, documents show.

The marshal's warning explained that Islamic extremists had issued a fatwa to kill marshals personnel or strike their buildings because of an episode at the end of the World Trade Center bombing trial in which deputy marshals accidentally stepped on a copy of the Koran during a scuffle.

``Allegedly, the fatwa is being disseminated to persons in the United States who have the capability to carry it out," the memo said.

The terrorists could be suicide bombers who may ``target as many victims as possible and draw as much media coverage as possible," it added. ``Once the press is on the scene the new plans call for blowing up everyone."