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Iraq link to Sept 11 attack and anthrax is ruled out

By Peter Green in Prague

Last Updated: 12:18am GMT 18/12/2001

THE case for [widening the war on terrorism against Iraq](#) suffered a major setback yesterday when a vital piece of evidence allegedly linking Baghdad to the September 11 attacks appeared unfounded.

Czech police said yesterday they had no evidence that the ringleader of the suicide attacks, Mohammed Atta, met an Iraqi intelligence agent in Prague earlier this year. Administration [hardliners in Washington had cited the alleged meeting](#) in support of their argument that Saddam Hussein's regime had been backing terrorism.

The story emerged as the White House announced that the anthrax attacks that swept America probably originated from a domestic source. It had been [suggested that the bacillus had originated in an Iraqi biological weapons lab](#).

advertisement Ari Fleischer, the White House spokesman, said: "There is nothing that has been final, that has been concluded. But the evidence is increasingly looking like it was a domestic source."

The story of Atta's possible link to Iraq first surfaced in Czech and US newspapers and later appeared to be confirmed by the interior minister, Stanislav Gross. In [a briefing to journalists two months ago](#), Mr Gross said the Czech counter-intelligence service, the BIS, had evidence of a meeting in April this year between Atta and an Iraqi spy, Ahmed al-Ani, who was working as consul at the Prague embassy.

But yesterday Jiri Kolar, the police chief, said there were no documents showing that Atta visited Prague at any time this year, although he had visited twice in 2000.

Atta could have entered the country using false papers, but Mr Gross questioned why Atta would do so when he was not a wanted man. "I don't see any reason for him to visit under a false name," he said. "He was 'legal' when he was in Germany."

The true story of any Prague connection appears to be much less definite than Mr Gross first suggested. The Czech president, Vaclav Havel, who has access to papers of the counter-intelligence service, said earlier this month that it was only "70 per cent" certain that Atta had met the Iraqi spy in Prague.

It had been assumed that the information on the April meeting came from BIS agents trailing an Iraqi spy, something that is common in Nato states such as the Czech Republic. But Mr Havel said the report of the meeting came "from an informer who followed this Iraqi spy", rather than a BIS staff member.

Other Nato states, including Britain - which is [known to be lukewarm](#) about the idea of attacking Iraq during the next round of the war on terrorism - have questioned accounts of Baghdad's possible involvement in the September 11 attacks.

On a visit to Prague last month, Geoff Hoon, the Defence Secretary, said there was no proof of Iraqi involvement in the attacks. "I must emphasise that we do not have any proof of Baghdad's participation in the attacks on New York and Washington," he told a Czech newspaper.

In recent days, there have been suggestions in the Czech press that another Mohammed Atta had visited Prague this year. A man of the same name did arrive in the Czech capital in 2001, an intelligence source told a Czech newspaper, but it was not the Egyptian terrorist.

"He didn't have the same identity card number, there was a great difference in their ages, their nationalities didn't match, basically nothing. It was someone else," an unidentified interior ministry official told the newspaper Mlada Fronta Dnes.

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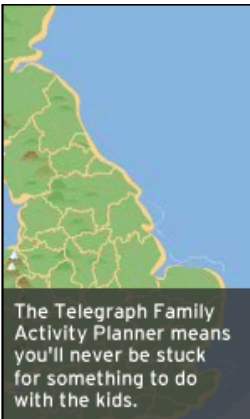
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A police spokesman, Major Ivana Zelenakova, said Atta the hijacker had been in Prague, but a year before the alleged meeting with al-Ani. Atta's two confirmed visits in 2000 took place a few days apart, in May and June. On both occasions, Atta's entry was logged by Czech police. "What exactly he did here during that time, we do not know," she said.

According to the FBI, Atta left the US for several days in early April this year for Europe. Credit card records indicate that he bought a knife at Zurich airport and show him returning to Florida a few days later.

His alleged contact, the Iraqi consul al-Ani, was expelled from Prague soon after the alleged Atta meeting for "conduct incompatible with his diplomatic duties". The Czechs suspected that al-Ani was a spy because he was noticeably absent from all diplomatic functions. "He was paid for performing some duties, and he had no diplomatic duties, so we checked, we found and we acted," said a senior Czech official.

One long-time member of Prague's Arab community, a businessman who prefers to be known only as Hassan, said that he was a close friend of the Iraqi and that he believed the Czechs had mistaken another man for Atta.

Hassan said a man he knew only as Saleh, a used car dealer from Nuremburg, often came to Prague to meet al-Ani and sold him at least one car. "I have sat with the two of them at least twice. The double is an Iraqi who has met with the consul. If someone saw a photo of Atta he might easily mistake the two," Hassan said.



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