

Were Israelis Detained on Sept. 11 Spies?

By ABC News



June 21, 2002 -- Millions saw the horrific images of the World Trade Center attacks, and those who saw them won't forget them. But a New Jersey homemaker saw something that morning that prompted an investigation into five young Israelis and their possible connection to Israeli intelligence.

Maria, who asked us not to use her last name, had a view of the World Trade Center from her New Jersey apartment building. She remembers a neighbor calling her shortly after the first plane hit the towers.

She grabbed her binoculars and watched the destruction unfolding in lower Manhattan. But as she watched the disaster, something else caught her eye.

Maria says she saw three young men kneeling on the roof of a white van in the parking lot of her apartment building. "They seemed to be taking a movie," Maria said.

The men were taking video or photos of themselves with the World Trade Center burning in the background, she said. What struck Maria were the expressions on the men's faces. "They were like happy, you know ... They didn't look shocked to me. I thought it was very strange," she said.

She found the behavior so suspicious that she wrote down the license plate number of the van and called the police. Before long, the FBI was also on the scene, and a statewide bulletin was issued on the van.

The plate number was traced to a van owned by a company called Urban Moving. Around 4 p.m. on Sept. 11, the van was spotted on a service road off Route 3, near New Jersey's Giants Stadium. A police officer pulled the van over, finding five men, between 22 and 27 years old, in the vehicle. The men were taken out of the van at gunpoint and handcuffed by police.

The arresting officers said they saw a lot that aroused their suspicion about the men. One of the passengers had \$4,700 in cash hidden in his sock. Another was carrying two foreign passports. A box cutter was found in the van. But perhaps the biggest surprise for the officers came when the five men identified themselves as Israeli citizens.

'We Are Not Your Problem'

According to the police report, one of the passengers told the officers they had been on the West Side Highway in Manhattan "during the incident" — referring to the World Trade Center attack. The driver of the van, Sivan Kurzberg, told the officers, "We are Israeli. We are not your problem. Your problems are our problems. The Palestinians are the problem." The other passengers were his brother Paul Kurzberg, Yaron Shmuel, Oded Ellner and Omer Marmari.

When the men were transferred to jail, the case was transferred out of the FBI's Criminal Division, and into the bureau's Foreign Counterintelligence Section, which is responsible for espionage cases, ABCNEWS has learned.

One reason for the shift, sources told ABCNEWS, was that the FBI believed Urban Moving may have been providing cover for an Israeli intelligence operation.

After the five men were arrested, the FBI got a warrant and searched Urban Moving's Weehawken, N.J., offices.

The FBI searched Urban Moving's offices for several hours, removing boxes of documents and a dozen computer hard drives. The FBI also questioned Urban Moving's owner. His attorney insists that his client answered all of the FBI's questions. But when FBI agents tried to interview him again a few days later, he was gone.

Three months later 2020's cameras photographed the inside of Urban Moving, and it looked as if the business had been shut down in a big hurry. Cell phones were lying around; office phones were still connected; and the property of dozens of clients remained in the warehouse.

The owner had also cleared out of his New Jersey home, put it up for sale and returned with his family to Israel.

'A Scary Situation'

Steven Gordon, the attorney for the five Israeli detainees, acknowledged that his clients' actions on Sept. 11 would easily have aroused suspicions. "You got a group of guys that are taking pictures, on top of a roof, of the World Trade Center. They're speaking in a foreign language. They got two passports on 'em. One's got a wad of cash on him, and they got box cutters. Now that's a scary situation."

But Gordon insisted that his clients were just five young men who had come to America for a vacation, ended up working for a moving company, and were taking pictures of the event.

The five Israelis were held at the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, ostensibly for overstaying their tourist visas and working in the United States illegally. Two weeks after their arrest, an immigration judge ordered them to be deported. But sources told ABCNEWS that FBI and CIA officials in Washington put a hold on the case.

The five men were held in detention for more than two months. Some of them were placed in solitary confinement for 40 days, and some of them were given as many as seven lie-detector tests.

Plenty of Speculation

Since their arrest, plenty of speculation has swirled about the case, and what the five men were doing that morning. Eventually, *The Forward*, a respected Jewish newspaper in New York, reported the FBI concluded that two of the men were Israeli intelligence operatives.

Vince Cannistraro, a former chief of operations for counterterrorism with the CIA who is now a consultant for ABCNEWS, said federal authorities' interest in the case was heightened when some of the men's names were found in a search of a national intelligence database.

Israeli Intelligence Connection?

According to Cannistraro, many people in the U.S. intelligence community believed that some of the men arrested were working for Israeli intelligence. Cannistraro said there was speculation as to whether Urban Moving had been "set up or exploited for the purpose of launching an intelligence operation against radical Islamists in the area, particularly in the New Jersey-New York area."

Under this scenario, the alleged spying operation was not aimed against the United States, but at penetrating or monitoring radical fund-raising and support networks in Muslim communities like Paterson, N.J., which was one of the places where several of the hijackers lived in the months prior to Sept. 11.

For the FBI, deciphering the truth from the five Israelis proved to be difficult. One of them, Paul Kurzberg, refused to take a lie-detector test for 10 weeks — then failed it, according to his lawyer. Another of his lawyers told us Kurzberg

had been reluctant to take the test because he had once worked for Israeli intelligence in another country.

Sources say the Israelis were targeting these fund-raising networks because they were thought to be channeling money to Hamas and Islamic Jihad, groups that are responsible for most of the suicide bombings in Israel. "[The] Israeli government has been very concerned about the activity of radical Islamic groups in the United States that could be a support apparatus to Hamas and Islamic Jihad," Cannistraro said.

The men denied that they had been working for Israeli intelligence out of the New Jersey moving company, and Ram Horvitz, their Israeli attorney, dismissed the allegations as "stupid and ridiculous."

Mark Regev, the spokesman for the Israeli Embassy in Washington, goes even further, asserting the issue was never even discussed with U.S. officials.

"These five men were not involved in any intelligence operation in the United States, and the American intelligence authorities have never raised this issue with us," Regev said. "The story is simply false."

No 'Pre-Knowledge'

Despite the denials, sources tell ABCNEWS there is still debate within the FBI over whether or not the young men were spies. Many U.S. government officials still believe that some of them were on a mission for Israeli intelligence. But the FBI told ABCNEWS, "To date, this investigation has not identified anybody who in this country had pre-knowledge of the events of 9/11."

Sources also said that even if the men were spies, there is no evidence to conclude they had advance knowledge of the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11. The investigation, at the end of the day, after all the polygraphs, all of the field work, all the cross-checking, the intelligence work, concluded that they probably did not have advance knowledge of 9/11," Cannistraro noted.

As to what they were doing on the van, they say they read about the attack on the Internet, couldn't see it from their offices and went to the parking lot for a better view. But no one has been able to find a good explanation for why they may have been smiling with the towers of the World Trade Center burning in the background. Both the lawyers for the young men and the Israeli Embassy chalk it up to immature conduct.

According to ABCNEWS sources, Israeli and U.S. government officials worked out a deal — and after 71 days, the five Israelis were taken out of jail, put on a plane, and deported back home.

While the former detainees refused to answer ABCNEWS' questions about their detention and what they were doing on Sept. 11, several of the detainees discussed their experience in America on an Israeli talk show after their return home.

Said one of the men, denying that they were laughing or happy on the morning of Sept. 11, "The fact of the matter is we are coming from a country that experiences terror daily. Our purpose was to document the event."

ABCNEWS' Chris Isham, John Miller, Glenn Silber and Chris Vlasto contributed to this report.

