LETTER FROM CAIRO

BEHIND MUBARAK

Egyptian clerics and intellectuals respond to terrorism.

BY JEFFREY GOLDBERG

The Mohandessin section of Cairo is a fashionable district on the west bank of the Nile that contains a number of embassies, boutiques, and American fast-food restaurants. It also houses the Mustafa Mahmoud Mosque, which is named after a physician and Islamic television personality who founded it, twenty years ago. On Friday, September 21st, I arrived at the mosque just as the first worshippers were making their way there, and the egalitarianism that is one of the great virtues of the Muslim prayer service was evident: they were dark-skinned and light, rich and poor; one man drove up in a blue Jaguar; others, wearing grease-stained galabiyas and crude sandals, came on foot, or by donkey cart. (Women, as is customary, prayed apart.) I had arranged to meet the mosque’s imam, Sheikh Nasser Abdelrazi. A slight, anxious man, he preemptively offered up the observation that “Muslims are gentle and Islam is peace.”

Many in Cairo are on the defensive in the wake of the terror attacks on New York and the Pentagon. Greater Cairo, a city of sixteen million people, is the intellectual capital of the Arab world—home to its moviemakers, many of its great writers, and some of its most respected interpreters of Islam. Muslim leaders here are sensitive to the image of their faith—especially now, because Egyptians are among those allegedly involved in the attacks. Muhammad Atta, who is believed to have flown one of the hijacked planes into the World Trade Center, is the son of a middle-class Cairo lawyer, Ayman al-Zawahiri, a former leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, a fundamentalist group that sought to turn Egypt into an Islamic state, is said to be second-in-command to Osama bin Laden, the Saudi exile who is suspected of directing the attacks.

I did not dispute the Imam’s assertion, but the speaker at the service that Friday, Ahmed Youssef—an elderly, bespectacled professor at Cairo University, who joined us before the service got under way—did. “Look, what happened in New York is the work of a gangster mentality, but America must learn not to take the side of the aggressor,” he said. “I hope America learns from this mistake before it makes another mistake.”

In his view, the aggressor is Israel, which signed a peace agreement with Egypt almost twenty-three years ago. This historical fact is not immediately noticeable in Cairo, where the public obsession with Israel is overwhelming. Youssef said that the nineteen terrorists who on September 11th committed mass suicide in the course of committing mass murder engaged in an un-Islamic act. They killed civilians, which is haram, or forbidden, and they killed themselves, which is also haram. Only against Israel is it permissible to engage in a “martyrdom attack,” he said, and this is because it is “only the Jews who kill innocent people.”

He added, “There are no Israeli civilians, only soldiers, so this is a legitimate tactic.”

At this, Sheikh Abdelrazi blanched. “He is not speaking for the mosque,” he whispered. The mosque, like all mosques in Egypt, ostensibly comes under the supervision of the government, whose position on suicide attacks against Israeli civilians is ambiguous. When I asked President Hosni Mubarak’s chief spokesman, Nabil Omar, if his government condemns such attacks, he would say only, “One cannot condemn these acts without condemning the acts of the occupier.”

I asked Sheikh Abdelrazi and Youssef if they believed that the Palestinian cause was the motivating factor in Muhammad Atta’s alleged act.

“I don’t know what happened in New York,” Youssef said. “I don’t have the answer.”

The mosque’s muezzin began calling the faithful to prayer. “God is Greater,” he chanted, his voice carried by speakers across Arab League Street, beside the mosque. “I bear witness that there is no God but God. I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God.”

Some of the men who went to pray asked if I was a man of the Book; Christians and Jews, as monotheists, however flawed, still hold a certain status in Islam, and I was invited to perform the ablutions that would purify me for the prayer service. As we stepped outside to the fountain, where a great number of Muslims were already washing, an old man, sallow-skinned and stooped, moved our way, surrounded by courtiers.

“He has the answer,” Sheikh Abdelrazi said, pointing to the mosque’s founder, Mustafa Mahmoud himself. But Mahmoud hobbled into the mosque; the answer would wait until after prayers.

By now, two thousand or so worshippers had assembled. The Friday service was short, and the sermon lasted only a few minutes. In it, Youssef acknowledged that an injustice had been done in the United States but cautioned America to stay its hand. “Don’t say that one should not kill civilians and then kill civilians yourself.”

After prayer, Youssef found me and gave his interpretation of the differing outlooks of Christianity and Islam.

“In Islam, if I slap your cheek”—he slapped my cheek—you should slap my other cheek. But in Christianity, Jesus says turn the other cheek. The U.S. is Christian, so why doesn’t it turn the other cheek?”

The discussion was curtailed by the announcement that Mustafa Mahmoud was ready to meet with me. I made my way to an austere office where Mah-
moud, who is eighty, was already sitting. “I understand you want the answer,” Mahmoud said.

“I said yes. “Waco,” he said. At my silent surprise, he went on, “The Branch Davidians attacked the World Trade Center, the McVeigh people. The Mossad gave them help. Did you know that the Israelis who work at the World Trade Center were told to stay home that day?”

He had learned this, he said, from research on the Internet. “It is impossible for Osama bin Laden to do this,” Mahmoud continued. “No Arab could have done this.”

For moral reasons? I asked. “No!” he said. “For technical reasons. Arabs are always late! They aren’t coordinated enough to do this, all at once on four airplanes. What does Osama bin Laden know about American air travel, anyway? He lives in Afghanistan.”

Mustafa Mahmoud is not a marginal figure in Egyptian society. He is an eminent surgeon and onetime Marxist who found religion; his popular tele-
vision show, "Science and Faith," explores the connections between religion and reason; a charitable organization that bears his name runs several clinics and hospitals in Cairo, including an eye institute that is reputed to be one of the most advanced in the Middle East.

Mahmoud told me that he is not sorry about the destruction of the World Trade Center. "Even Rome was a great empire once," he said. "This was an attack on American arrogance."

He said I could read more about his beliefs in a newspaper column that would appear the next day. In addition to his other achievements, Mahmoud regularly contributes articles to Al-Abram, which is the largest and most respected daily newspaper in Egypt.

I later found, on the Internet, a translation of one of Mahmoud's columns, from late June. Its headline was "ISRAEL—THE PLAGUE OF OUR TIME AND A TERRORIST STATE." Much of the column is taken up with a recounting of the main points of the notorious turn-of-the-century tsarist forgery "Protocols of the Elders of Zion." "What exactly do the Jews want?" he wrote on June 23rd. "Read what the Ninth Protocol of 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion' says: 'We have limitless ambitions, inexhaustible greed, merciless vengeance and hatred beyond imagination. We are a secret army whose plans are impossible to understand by using honest methods.'"

The image of Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin joyously clasping hands with Jimmy Carter at the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace accord is indelible but misleading, because it did not herald a true peace between two peoples. It has been a cold peace, particularly on the Egyptian side. Israelis have visited Egypt by the thousands, but the Egyptian government has long discouraged its citizens from visiting Israel or doing business with Israelis. Since the latest outbreak of the Palestinian uprising, a year ago, and the attendant photographs of Israeli soldiers firing on Palestinian rock throwers, the relationship has turned frigid. Mubarak supports the peace treaty signed by his predecessor, Sadat—an American-aid package of two billion dollars a year fairly demands this of him—but he has discouraged the normalization of relations between the two states.

It is in the domain of the press that Mubarak's position is most evident. Al-Abram is often described in the American press as a "semi-official" daily newspaper, but this may be an understatement. Its editor, two government officials told me, is chosen by President Mubarak, who also chooses the editors of other government newspapers and magazines. Even supposedly independent or opposition newspapers are said never to criticize the President. The one area in which they are given especially wide latitude is in criticizing Israel and, to a lesser extent, America.

One day last week, I visited the offices of the newspaper Al-Usbu, an independent weekly that is distinctly anti-Israel and critical of ministers in the Mubarak government—though not, of course, of Mubarak himself. Its editor, Mustafa Bakri, who is in his forties, was in his office, watching Al-Jazeera, the Pan-Arabic cable channel. He was impeccably dressed, polite and deferential. I had wanted to meet him for some time, ever since I read a translation of a column in which he described a dream. The dream began with his appointment as one of Ariel Sharon's bodyguards, assigned to protect the Israeli Prime Minister at Cairo's airport, and in the column, which appeared in February, he wrote:

The pig landed; its face was diabolical, a murderer; his hands soaked with the blood of women and children. A criminal who should be executed in the town square. Should I remain silent as many others did? Should I guard this butcher on my homeland's soil? All of a sudden, I forgot everything: the past and the future, my wife and my children and I decided to do it. I pulled my gun and aimed it at the cowardly pig's head. I emptied all the bullets and screamed... The murderer collapsed under my feet. I breathed a sigh of relief. I realized the meaning of virility, and of self-sacrifice. The criminal died. I stepped on the pig's head with my shoes and screamed from the bottom of my heart: Long live Egypt, long live Palestine, Jerusalem will never die and never will the honor of the nation be lost.

Bakri offered me an orange soda, and talked of the attack on the World Trade Center. He spoke in terms that, in the current shorthand, are considered Nasserist, after Gamal Abdel Nasser, the revolutionary leader and Egypt's first President. Nasserism today combines populism, Pan-Arab socialism, and opposition to all relations with Israel. Nasserists also resent American economic influence.

"The new globalists want to impose American thinking on the Arabs," Bakri said. "This is a reaction to their thinking." Bakri blamed the September 11th
attacks on the American right wing, with help from the Mossad. “Five Is-
raelis were arrested the day before the attack outside the World Trade Center
taking pictures,” he said, and added that he knew this from reading Amer-
ican newspapers. If America responds militarily to the attacks, he continued,
“American targets will be legitimate tar-
gets of Arab anger.”

I also went to the offices of Al-Abram
to talk about this phenomenon. I met
with Abdel Monem Said Aly, the direc-
tor of the Al-Abram Center for Political
and Strategic Studies, a respected mod-
erate think tank attached to the news-
paper. I asked him about the many
anti-Israel and anti-American articles
published in the official Egyptian press
in the years leading up to the terror at-
tacks. He himself has not disseminated
anti-American ideas, and has fought the
spread of conspiracy theories in Egyp-
tian life.

“We have anti-Semitic papers and fa-
natics, yes, but these are garbage maga-
zines,” he said. “Al-Abram, Al-Akbar,
these are very moderate newspapers.
Sometimes they are highly critical of the
U.S., but that does not mean that they’re
anti-American.”

Nevertheless, Al-Akbar this year has
run opinion pieces defending Hitler. I
found one of them translated on the Web
site of the Middle East Media Research
Institute, a watchdog organization based
in Washington. “Thanks to Hitler, of
blessed memory, who on behalf of the
Palestinians took revenge in advance,
against the most vile criminals in the
face of the Earth,” the Al-Akbar column-
ist Ahmad Ragab wrote in April. “Al-
though we do have a complaint against
him, for his revenge was not enough.”

Holocaust denial is a regular feature of
Al-Gombriya, another government
daily. Its deputy chief editor, Lotfi Nasif,
sat with me in his windowless office
in downtown Cairo last week and ex-
plained that the Holocaust is “an exag-
geration” and that gas chambers are a
product of the “Jewish imagination.” He
told me, “The crimes of the Zionists
against the Palestinians far outweigh any
of the crimes committed by the Nazis.”

Colin Powell has frequently been de-
nounced in the government press, some-
times in racial terms, and, shortly before
the attacks in New York and in Wash-
ington, the Al-Akbar columnist Mah-
moud Abd Al-Mumin Murad wrote,
“The Statue of Liberty in New York
Harbor must be destroyed because of…
the idiotic American policy that
goes from disgrace to disgrace in the
swamp of bias and blind fanaticism.” He
also declared that “the age of the Amer-
ican collapse has begun.” This is a not
uncommon theme among members of
the Egyptian intellectual class.

O

n one subject of international
controversy—the use of suicide
bombers against Israel—there is near
unanimity: despite slight shades of dif-
fERENCE, as seen at the Mustafa Mah-
moud Mosque, most people agree that it
is sometimes allowable. Some Islamic
moderates believe that suicide attacks
are doctrinally permissible only against
Israelis; a more extremist position
holds that all Israelis are legitimate
targets.

Before September 11th, American
officials who worked closely with Egypt
tried to downplay the role of anti-Israel
and anti-American incitement in the
local press. One of the few incidents that
provoked a public American response
came in 1998, when the newly appointed
American Ambassador in Cairo, an Or-
thodox Jew named Daniel Kurtzer (who
is now the Ambassador to Israel), was
attacked in anti-Semitic terms in the
Egyptian press.

Dennis Ross, who guided Middle
East policy under the first Bush Admin-
istration and was the chief Middle East
negotiator for Bill Clinton, told me last
week that he and others had underestim-
ated the influence that the press and
the imams had in creating a climate hos-
tile to Israel and America.

“The media have been a kind of
safety valve to release tensions, and you
could even say that a safety valve is a le-
gitimate way to approach such prob-
lems,” Ross, who is now a distinguished
fellow at the Washington Institute for
Near East Policy, said. “But in doing
so they appealed extremist sentiments
rather than countering them. A climate
has been created in which the practice of
suicide attacks has come to be seen as le-
gitimate. I’m concerned that there are
those who say that it’s O.K. against Is-
raels, then it’s O.K. against Americans.”

When I summarized Ross’s view to
Muhammad El-Sayed Said, the deputy
director of the Al-Ahram Center, he
blamed Ross for the failure of the peace
process. “Dennis Ross is behind it all,”
Said said. “The Americans should be
blamed for the disaster we are in,” he
continued, referring to the collapsed
peace process, and, indirectly, to the ter-
or attacks on the United States. “There’s
an ambivalence about the World Trade
Center. I saw so many people crying
when they heard the news, but the other
side of it is that many Egyptians saw this
as a useful blow against American arro-
gance. The sense is that it will help the
Americans learn that they, too, are vul-
nerable. That they are paying a price for
their total support for Israel.”

Egyptian political elites, unlike the
makers of street opinion, do not suggest
that Israel, either alone or in concert with
American extremists, carried out the at-
tacks, but they blame Israel for creating
an atmosphere of despair which leads to
terrorism.

Last Tuesday, I met with Amr
Moussa, the secretary-general of the
Arab League, which is housed in a palat-
tial building on Tahrir Square, in the
center of Cairo. Before being appointed
secretary-general, Moussa served as
President Mubarak’s Foreign Minister.
He is known as an outspoken critic of
Israel. Moussa is a dapper man who, like
many veteran diplomats, can speak at
great length without giving much away.
He said first that he hoped the World
Trade Center would be rebuilt; then he
outlined the current thinking of the
Mubarak regime.

“There is a wide menu of coöpera-
tion,” he said. “Countries will choose the
areas where they can do best. All of us
will fight terrorism, confront terrorism,
but not necessarily by conducting a mil-
itary campaign.”

Moussa said that the World Trade
Center attack should provide the impe-
tus for America to “reassess” its Middle
East alliances. “When it comes to the
 crunch, such as the Persian Gulf War,
ten years ago, or the situation today,
America has to sideline Israel,” he said.

“If Israel intervened on the side of
America, it would be destructive to any
coalition against terrorism.” Many Arab
governments have stated that they will
not participate in a coalition in which Is-
rael plays a part, and the Bush Adminis-
A religious celebration led by the Muslim Brotherhood, a movement that has advocated the Islamization of Egyptian society for decades.
Last October, during a visit here to attend an Arab summit on the Palestinian uprising, I spent a morning with a Muslim cleric named Muhammad Sayed Tantawi. Tantawi is the highest-ranking cleric in Egypt, and an influential figure across the Sunni Islamic world. I met him in his office near Al-Azhar University, the venerable Muslim theological center, which he oversees. Tantawi is known as the Sheikh of Al-Azhar.

Tantawi was appointed by Mubarak, whose official photograph hangs in Tantawi's office. Sheikh Tantawi usually has taken the side of Islamic moderation and believes in interfaith dialogue, but he also supports the development of an Arab nuclear weapon. Last October, the Palestinian uprising was in its infancy; there had not been a wave of suicide bombings since 1997. But in the interview Tantawi forcefully addressed the issue of jihad. "If someone takes something from you by force, it is your right to take it back by force," he said. "This is a requirement of Islam. If the Israelis would stop transgressing Muslim land, then there no longer would be a requirement to rise up and fight them."

I asked if Muslims were forbidden by Islamic law to engage in specific acts of retribution. "The killing of civilians is always wrong," he said. "Women, children. This is abhorrent to Islam."

Tantawi has since endorsed some suicide attacks against soldiers. In an interview earlier this year, he said, "The Palestinian youth who bomb themselves among people who fight against them are considered martyrs." Last week, though, he would not talk about suicide attacks. When I spoke to him briefly outside his office, he said only that he was sorry for the attacks on America, and he approved the notion of an international conference on terrorism. I noticed that he moved with a serious-looking security detail; men with submachine guns hanging under their jackets shadowed him through the building.

I asked one of Sheikh Tantawi's aides if he had been a specific threat against the Sheikh's life. No, he said, but added, "Egyptians are the victims of terrorism..."
as well." He was referring to the anti-government campaigns of the nineteen-nineties, in which terrorists operated on behalf of two fundamentalist Muslim groups: the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the Gama'a al-Islamiya. In this wave of terror, Egyptians and foreign tourists alike were murdered in a brutal campaign to convert Egypt into an Islamic state. Fundamentalists killed President Sadat in October of 1981, and they have tried to kill Mubarak as well. But the security around Tantawi suggests that they might want to kill him, too—and they could find, in a liberal interpretation of Tantawi's ruling favoring suicide attacks against "oppressors," a new and devastating way to carry out their vision.

From an Islamic theological perspective, perhaps the most significant suicide attack to have taken place in the last two weeks occurred on September 9th, in northern Afghanistan. Two men suspected of being under the command of Osama bin Laden blew themselves up along with the leader of the Afghan opposition, Ahmed Shah Massoud. It is one thing for Muslim extremists to martyr themselves while attacking infidels; it is quite another for them to begin defining religious Muslims such as Massoud as infidels. Even among the Islamic Jihad and Hamas clerics of the Gaza Strip, I never heard anyone justify the use of suicide bombers against Muslim targets.

For some fundamentalists, the Massoud murder seemed to have significantly shifted the boundaries of what is considered permissible. Some Islamic scholars, including those under Sheikh Tantawi's supervision at Al-Azhar, have argued that, if one could attack Israelis, one could also attack anyone who stands in the way of their vision of what the world should look like.

To better understand the thinking of Muslims who have killed fellow-Muslims in holy war, I went to see Montasser al-Zayyat, the spokesman of the Gama'a al-Islamiya, which is the larger of Egypt's two fundamentalist terrorist groups. He is a lawyer and has represented, among others, his organization's spiritual leader, Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, who is in prison in America for plotting to blow up a number of New York landmarks, including the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels, the Empire State Building, and the United Nations.

When I arrived at a decrepit building in downtown Cairo, where al-Zayyat has his office, it was 9 P.M., and in his waiting room were several bearded men who were seeking an audience with him. They were noticeably hostile toward me, but I could not tell if they were upset by the presence of an American or by the fact that the American was jumping the line.

Al-Zayyat himself, a heavy featured, bearded man, was friendly, but, in the wake of the World Trade Center attacks, he was evasive. At a press conference in Cairo earlier this year, he had warned, "The U.S. will reap a bitter harvest if it continues humiliating Dr. Omar"—Sheikh Rahman. "The continuation of the Sheikh's abuse may result in an explosion of events targeted against U.S. interests. Sheikh Omar has many followers." That night, he said that his threats were not to be taken literally. "I'm very sorry for what happened in New York," he said.

Although Muslim fundamentalists in Egypt have been less visible since President Mubarak ordered a crackdown in the mid-nineties, they have been especially discreet over the last two weeks. The Gama'a al-Islamiya declared a ceasefire in 1999, but thousands of its members remain in jail. Like its rival, the ideologically similar Islamic Jihad, the Gama'a grew out of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, which for decades has been advocating the Islamization of Egyptian society. Unlike the Gama'a, which is illegal, the Muslim brothers exist in an ambiguous political state described to me by one government official as "illegal but tolerated."

The Egyptian Islamic Jihad is also illegal, and in any case seems to have transferred its operations to Afghanistan and merged with Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network, with the help of Jihad's Ayman al-Zawahiri. Though they represent rival organizations, al-Zayyat considers al-Zawahiri a friend.

"He's a very sensible man, a very quiet man," al-Zayyat said, when I asked him to describe al-Zawahiri. "When he speaks, you listen to him carefully."

I asked al-Zayyat what might have driven al-Zawahiri to help organize the American attacks. He replied that he had no knowledge of the attacks, and also said, "I'm not going to be a witness against my friend."

I had a final question: What is it about America that incites the fury of so many Islamists? I suggested that it is American values, especially as they relate to sex and the role of women in society, which Islamic conservatives abhor. "We have sex in Egypt," al-Zayyat said, laughing. Then he went on, "We don't have feelings of hatred toward the people of the U.S., but feelings of hatred toward the government of the U.S. have developed because you support Israel so blindly." At that moment, Montasser al-Zayyat's views seemed inseparable from those of Mubarak's spokesmen.

One evening, I met a friend, a member of the small Egyptian upper class, for drinks in a hotel by the Nile. Cairo isn't Islamabad: Muslims are free to drink alcohol, and there are movie theatres and belly dancing, although the percentage of women wearing traditional headscarves seems to have increased dramatically since I first visited, ten years ago. What people aren't encouraged to do is express interest in democratic reform. My friend asked that I not name him in anything I might write; he believes that the soft despotism of the Mubarak government is hardening, and he wants to stay out of jail. Earlier this year, a prominent sociologist and democracy advocate, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, was sentenced to seven years' hard labor on trumped-up charges, and, like the Egyptian peace camp, the number of those who support true democracy is purposefully shrinking from view.

We spoke about the Egyptian preoccupation with Israel. He is no friend of Israel—"I'm an Arab, how can I have warm feelings for such a place?" he said—but he believes that hatred of Israel, and, to a lesser extent, hatred of
America, is fomented by the Mubarak regime as a diversion; as long as Egyptians think about Palestinians, they aren’t thinking about themselves. “Egyptians live in just appalling conditions today,” he said.

Per-capita income in Egypt is less than the per-capita income on the West Bank. Cairo is a tumultuous, decaying city with a wealthy elite and great masses of the destitute and the near-destitute. The universities are turning out thousands of graduates each year for whom there are no jobs. “The gap between rich and poor is widening, and what does the government give us? Hatred of the peace process.” He ascribes to Mubarak’s circle the ability to turn on and off anti-Western rhetoric.

All of this, he went on, is indirectly the fault of America, which gives Egypt two billion dollars a year in aid but demands little in return. “You allow them to manipulate you. Every time anti-American feelings appear here, Mubarak says, ‘Support me or else you see what you’ll get.’ But the suppression and the corruption and the anti-democratic behavior will create much worse fundamentalism over time. Washington never stands up to them.” He cited the imprisonment of the democracy advocate Saad Ibrahim, and said, “Look what they just did on the Queen Boat.”

The boat in question, a well-known disco that allegedly attracted a gay clientele, was anchored a short distance from where we sat. (“Queen” is thought to refer to the wife of the deposed King Farouk.) Following a police raid of the vessel in May, fifty-three men were arrested for presumed homosexuality; these men are now on trial in Cairo. Two weeks ago, the first sentence was handed down: a seventeen-year-old received three years’ hard labor.

“What does the U.S. do about this? Nothing,” my friend said. The only prescription is the robust export of democratic values. “There’s no Cold War anymore. You can’t drive him into an alliance with the Soviets.”

There are few Egyptian intellectuals who still argue publicly in favor of normalization with Jerusalem. They are despised, and for the most part quiet. One of them is Ali Salem, a playwright recently expelled from the Egyptian Writers’ Union for making frequent visits to Israel and for assuming a pro-normalization stance.

I wanted to ask Salem, who is sixty-five years old and looks like the literary critic Harold Bloom, what had happened, but he said that he was interested in talking about “something deeper than that.” We sat in a cafeteria not far from the Mahmoud mosque. Salem drank coffee and chain-smoked Marlboros. “History is cruel,” he said. “It is trying to drag America backward. But I think in this case history is right.”

He explained, “We here need to be more progressive, but you need to take a step back. If the bureaucrats in your airports were just a little more paranoid, like us, it would be a different world. Really, America is a beautiful place: no one even asked why all these guys wanted flying lessons. You should learn to be suspicious. A little backwardness would be healthy.”

I asked him to identify the cause of the attacks on America.

“People say that Americans are arrogant, but it’s not true,” he said. “Americans enjoy life and they are proud of their lives, and they are boastful of their wonderful inventions that have made life so much easier and more convenient. It’s very difficult to understand the machinery of hatred, because you wind up sorting to logic, but trying to understand this with logic is like measuring distance in kilograms. These are people who are afraid of America, afraid of life itself. . . . These are people who are envious. To them, life is an unbearable burden. Modernism is the only way out. But modernism is frightening. It means we have to compete. It means we can’t explain everything away with conspiracy theories.”

Ali Salem paused to order another cup of coffee. “Bernard Shaw said it best, you know. In the preface to ‘St. Joan,’ he said Joan of Arc was burned not for any reason except that she was talented. Talent gives rise to jealousy in the hearts of the untalented.”

Soon after seeing Ali Salem, I ran into Muhammad Atta’s father, Muhammad al-Amir Atta, outside a downtown Cairo hotel. He was agitated, alternately aggressive and disconsolate. He had spent much of the week defending himself to reporters and defending his son. I asked him the same question: What, in his mind, lay behind the attack on the World Trade Center?

“The Mossad kidnapped my son and stole his papers,” he told me. “Then they spread those papers out at the World Trade Center in order to make it seem like he did it.”