

Doubts arise on Iraqi link to attacks

By Sam Roe
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PRAGUE, Czech Republic—As the debate intensifies over a possible U.S. anti-terrorism strike against Saddam Hussein, the only reported link between Iraq and the Sept. 11 attacks is increasingly coming under question.

The Czech government disclosed in October that Mohamed Atta, a ringleader in the terrorist attacks, had met here

in the spring with a senior Iraqi intelligence agent, fueling speculation that Iraq had a role in the attacks and providing ammunition to those calling for U.S. strikes against the Persian Gulf nation.

But in recent weeks, few new details have emerged about the meeting, and Czech officials have made conflicting statements about the likelihood that it even occurred. Interior Minister Stanislav Gross said it did take place, while Czech Presi-

dent Vaclav Havel said there was only a "70 percent" chance that it did.

And Czech news reports, citing anonymous sources, say some Czech authorities now believe that the Iraqi intelligence agent might not have met with Atta but rather with a businessman who looked strikingly like him.

Gross dismissed the press accounts, reiterating that Atta indeed met with the Iraqi agent. While the media reports could

not be independently confirmed, they muddle an already murky picture of how many times Atta visited the Czech Republic and with whom he met.

Whether the meeting occurred is potentially important because the Bush administration has been debating the merits of shifting its war on terrorism to Iraq.

Initially, the Czech government appeared certain of the meeting between Atta and the Iraqi officer, Ahmed Khalil Ibra-

him Samir al-Ani. Prime Minister Milos Zeman said Atta and al-Ani had discussed attacking a building in Prague housing the U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe. But Czech authorities later said Zeman's statement was only a hypothesis and that they did not know what was discussed.

Authorities here have not explained how they know Atta met with al-Ani. Havel has said there was no recording of the meeting but that a Czech intelligence agent had been monitoring the Iraqi's movements.

Similarly, Czech media report that there is no hard evidence of the meeting—no pictures, tape

recordings or other documentation. The only evidence, they report, comes from a paid informant of the Czech intelligence agency who apparently had been following the Iraqi officer.

The Mlada Fronta Dnes newspaper said Czech police and some counterintelligence officers now believe the informant confused Atta with an Iraqi businessman from Germany who frequently visited the Iraqi intelligence officer.

While accounts vary, some Czech authorities indicate that Atta visited the country three times. The first was in May 2000, when he flew to Prague from Hamburg, Germany, where he lived for eight years. But he did not have a visa and was not allowed to leave the transit area.

He returned to Prague with the proper documentation a few days later, in June 2000, and stayed one night at an unknown location before flying to Newark, N.J.

The third visit reportedly was in April, when Atta allegedly met with the Iraqi. Czech authorities believe Atta used a false passport to enter the country for the meeting, according to media reports. If the meeting took place, it marks the first known contact between one of the Sept. 11 hijackers and a hostile foreign government. Atta is believed to have piloted one of the jets that slammed into the World Trade Center.

Iraq has denied that the meeting took place, and al-Ani told a Czech journalist that he never heard of Atta until after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Al-Ani worked at the Iraqi Embassy in Prague with an official title of second secretary, but Czech authorities described him as "an officer of the Iraqi secret service." On April 22, a couple of weeks after the alleged meeting with Atta, al-Ani was expelled from the country for espionage. Authorities said his expulsion was not related to the Atta meeting but rather a plot to bomb the Radio Free Europe building.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Ales Pospisil said al-Ani had been under surveillance for months. During that time, al-Ani was meeting with hundreds of people in Prague, many from foreign countries. Atta was just one of them and he did not raise specific concerns, nor was he monitored, Pospisil said.

The Czech government did not warn the United States about Atta, he said, because he was viewed as a nobody. "At the time, no one could foresee such an attack," he said.

Majid Waleed Majed, a 22-year-old Iraqi whose family runs the Bavodo restaurant in Prague, said al-Ani often came into the eatery, taking a table in the back with other Iraqi Embassy officials. Majed described al-Ani as a charming, clever man who frequently bought drinks for other patrons but sometimes left without paying the tab.

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