

93-170-P

Approved For Release 2001/03/07 : CIA-RDP96-00789R003900260009-3

5th Suspect Arrested in Bombing

Firing Device Found In Home, Court Told

By Jim McGee
and Rachel Stassen-Berger
Washington Post Staff Writers

NEW YORK, March 25—The investigation of the bombing of the World Trade Center reached a new plateau Thursday with the arrest of a fifth suspect and disclosure of new evidence against a circle of Middle Eastern immigrants from the New York-New Jersey area.

Today's developments began shortly after midnight, when FBI agents in Newark placed Bilal Alkai Alkai 27, under arrest after several hours of questioning. Later in the day he was formally charged with "aiding and abetting" the bombing, which killed six persons, injured more than 1,000 and crippled one of the world's largest office complexes.

When FBI agents arrested Nidal A. Ayyad, a chemical engineer implicated in the case, on March 10, he was carrying an American Express card in the name of Alkai. American Express records listed Ayyad's residence as the billing address for the card, the federal complaint said.

A search of Ayyad's residence the same day turned up a "timing mechanism which had been modified . . . as a time-delay firing system, consistent with timing mechanism used in other terrorist bombs," according to the complaint.

In related court proceedings today, Ayyad and three other suspects pleaded not guilty to charges involving the Feb. 26 explosion in the trade center's underground parking garage.

While they are optimistic after five arrests within a month after the bombing, senior officials said they are still unsure about the motive.

"The circle is now very narrow in terms of the individuals we are still seeking who we believe are responsible for this bombing," said Jim Esposito, special agent in charge of the New York FBI office. But he said "the motive for this bombing is unclear."



REUTERS
Mahmud Abouhalima, center, an Egyptian, is arraigned in New York courtroom on charges of causing Feb. 26 bombing of the World Trade Center.

Esposito's counterpart in New York, FBI Assistant Director Jim Fox, cautioned that it may be months before the investigation is complete in the case, which defense attorneys are quick to note is based—so far as is publicly understood—on evidence that is largely circumstantial. "The investigation is continuing on a large scale," Fox said at the news conference.

Each of the five suspects now in custody appeared in federal court on separate charges related to the bombing, but a federal prosecutor said in court that some of the defendants can expect to be re-indicted within a week under a more comprehensive set of charges. Such a step, known as a superseding indictment, might define in greater detail the legal underpinnings of the government's case.

"I . . . am . . . not . . . guilty," said Mohammed A. Salameh, his loud voice rising above the din of the courtroom. Salameh, the first arrested in connection with the bombing, rented a van that the FBI alleges was used to carry the explosives.

Moments later, Ayyad, who is implicated in the case as a result of his dealings with Salameh, stood up and gave a prepared statement: "I swear by all I hold dear—the Koran, my wife, my children, my mother—I am not guilty," he said. "I had nothing to do with this."

Minutes later, Ibrahim A. Elgabrowni, 42, was led into the same courtroom, where he was greeted with a bear hug from William N. Kunstler, his defense attorney, known for his representation of scores of controversial defendants over the past generation.

Elgabrowni is charged with ob-

structing the search of his residence and possessing fraudulent passports, but the U.S. Attorney's office has publicly connected him with the bombing indictment. "Not guilty," said Elgabrowni.

According to the indictment unsealed today, the grand jury charged Salameh, Ayyad and Mahmud Abouhalima, an Egyptian flown here from his homeland on Wednesday, with causing the bombing of the trade center.

Abouhalima "was beaten, he was tortured," during 10 days of confinement in Egypt, his defense attorney, Jesse Berman, told the court. In the hallway after the hearing, Berman told reporters that Abouhalima claimed that his interrogators in Egypt tortured him with cigarette burns to his genitals and demanded that he confess to involvement in the bombing.

A spokesman for Egypt's Interior Ministry said today he did not know "anything about" the charges. Washington Post correspondent Caryle Murphy reported from Cairo. "Telephone again after tomorrow," he said.

Alkai was brought before a magistrate, but did not enter a plea.

The federal complaint said that at least one witness saw Alkai with Salameh before the bombing, at a storage shed in New Jersey where agents discovered a cache of chemicals that can be used to create explosives.

During questioning at the Newark FBI office, Alkai "stated" substance and in part that he did not know Salameh well and only had contact with him through Nidal Ayyad, said the federal complaint. He also denied ever going to the shed.