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A Much-Shunned Terrorist Is Said to Find Haven in Iraq

By JAMES RISEN

Abu Nidal, one of the world's most infamous terrorists, moved to Baghdad late last year and obtained the protection of President Saddam Hussein, according to intelligence reports received by United States and Middle Eastern government officials. The reports have raised questions about whether Iraq is pushing to establish a terrorism network, American and Middle Eastern officials say.

Abu Nidal, a brutal survivor of the Middle East's terrorist wars dating to the 1970's, had been living in Cairo for more than a year, according to Middle Eastern government officials who say they have information from inside his organization. While intelligence information about terrorist groups is hard to corroborate, American intelligence officials say they consider these Middle Eastern officials to be highly reliable.

Although Abu Nidal's organization is a shadow of the terrorist machine that staged airport killings in the mid-1980's and raids on Arab, Jewish and other targets, since he moved to Egypt he has been directing attacks on Islamic radicals at war with the Egyptian Government, the Middle Eastern officials said.

United States intelligence officials said he has been hard-pressed financially and has been seeking a new government sponsor since Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya, looking for ways to persuade the United Nations to lift economic sanctions, backed away from him in the early 1990's.

Abu Nidal's move to Iraq, which he was forced to leave 15 years ago because of his ties to Syria, suggests that he may have renewed a relationship with President Hussein. "He could become a more significant threat again if he finds more effective state sponsorship," an American intelligence official said.

Abu Nidal still has 200 to 300 followers in his organization, and President Hussein lacks such hard-earned expertise at terrorism.

Officials caution that there is no evidence that Abu Nidal is planning to conduct terrorism on Iraq's behalf. In recent years he has not attacked American targets and thus has become a lower priority for American officials, who have focused instead on Osama bin Laden, the Saudi exile who officials say ordered the bombings of embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in August.

But counterterrorism experts in the Middle East say Abu Nidal remains a significant threat. One official who has watched Abu Nidal for years said, "Osama bin Laden is a student by comparison."

About 10 days before American and British again attacked Iraq on Dec. 16, Abu Nidal traveled from Cairo to Baghdad through Teheran, Middle Eastern officials said.

Egyptian authorities have denied that he was recently in their country. But other Middle Eastern officials said Abu Nidal arrived in Cairo from Libya in 1997, and was in Egypt with the knowledge of Egypt's internal security service.

A coup attempt within his organization forced the Egyptians to take him into custody, which eventually drew wider attention to his presence in Egypt, posing a problem for the Government, the Middle Eastern officials

said. Abu Nidal's move to Baghdad ended any embarrassing attention for Egypt, they added.

Though American officials had concluded that the Central Intelligence Agency and other intelligence services had blunted Iraq's previous efforts to sponsor terrorism, officials in Washington say that could change with the arrival of Abu Nidal.

Abu Nidal was once America's most wanted terrorist. A 1989 State Department report called his organization the most dangerous in the world, and a 1991 report calculated that it had been responsible for more than 100 attacks and the deaths of more than 280 people since 1974.

Abu Nidal, now about 60, is a Palestinian renegade who broke with the Palestinian Liberation Organization to launch his own terrorist campaign. He has had a long-running war with both the Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat and King Hussein of Jordan, accusing them of being too willing to compromise with Israel. He has vowed to kill both men, and the P.L.O. sentenced him to death in absentia in 1974.

Abu Nidal and President Hussein also have a tortured history, and their relationship is not built on mutual trust. Iraq helped Abu Nidal become an international terrorist in the early 1970's, but he left Baghdad in the early 1980's, in part because President Hussein had discovered that he was also working with Syria. "He was double dealing on Iraq," says one Middle Eastern expert.

Although he has a history of conducting terrorist acts on behalf of his hosts, Abu Nidal has also often worn out his welcome because of his willingness to betray his sponsors.

Reports last year that he was in Cairo proved awkward for the Clinton Administration because Egyptian support is vital to American policies in the region. Yet the United States has also expressed qualms about Egypt's counterterrorism, especially its ruthless tactics. The C.I.A. suspended a counterterrorism training program for a hostage-rescue unit from Egypt.

Washington did not press the Egyptians about Abu Nidal's presence: When the Administration asked about him last fall, Cairo denied that he was in the country, and Washington did not publicly protest.

Egyptian officials continue to deny that Abu Nidal was in Cairo, or that Egyptian intelligence was complicit in his terrorism. They note that Egypt was the victim of Abu Nidal in the past, and say their country would not deal with him.

"There is absolutely no foundation for any of these allegations," said an Egyptian Embassy spokesman, Abdelaleem Elabyad. "I was told to deny them in the most affirmative way."

American intelligence officials declined to comment on allegations that Abu Nidal conducted terrorist acts while in Egypt, or that the Egyptians knew of his actions. State Department officials said they were unaware of the allegations.

Born Sabri al-Banna in Palestine in 1938, Abu Nidal grew into a Palestinian nationalist. After briefly working in Saudi Arabia, he moved to Jordan and joined Fatah, the Palestinian movement that was the forerunner of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Mr. Arafat, the leader of Fatah, sent him to Sudan in 1969, and while there he apparently first came in contact with Iraqi intelligence officers. He briefly returned to Fatah headquarters in Amman, Jordan, but soon came to believe that Mr. Arafat was too willing to compromise with Israel.

Abu Nidal was next sent to be the P.L.O. representative in Baghdad, just as Iraq's relations with the Palestinian organization were souring. Baghdad refused to turn its army loose to support the Palestinians

during the Black September uprising against Jordan in 1970. Abu Nidal, already out of favor with the P.L.O. leadership, allied himself with the new Iraqi leader, Saddam Hussein, and in 1973 he confiscated the organization's offices in Baghdad and declared that he had officially broken with the Palestinian group.

In 1973, with Iraqi weapons, training and intelligence support, he began a wave of terrorism when his group occupied the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Paris and took 11 people hostage.

Abu Nidal stayed in Iraq until November 1983, when he was forced out by President Hussein, who was seeking Western support in his war with Iran. Mr. Hussein had also discovered that Abu Nidal had established a secret intelligence relationship with Syria.

He then moved to Syria, staying until 1987 and carrying out a long string of terrorist acts against other Arab and Jewish targets, often working with Syrian intelligence. In 1986 he provided Syrian Air Force intelligence with the suitcase bomb used in an abortive attempt to blow up an El Al airliner in London, Middle Eastern officials say. A Syrian intelligence agent, Nezar Hindawi, was later convicted for trying to have his girlfriend carry the suitcase aboard an El Al plane at Heathrow.

But Abu Nidal once again had a falling out with his hosts after Syrian agents caught one of his lieutenants at the Damascus airport carrying sensitive documents and found weapons he had stored in Syria without their knowledge, according to Middle Eastern government officials.

In 1987 his organization shifted to Libya, while Abu Nidal moved to Poland for a year, where he was apparently protected by the Communist security service.

In Libya, internal feuds ripped his group apart. In 1989 and 1990, hundreds died in battles between Abu Nidal and dissidents supported by the P.L.O. who sought to take control of his operations in Libya and Lebanon.

In April 1998, after Abu Nidal moved to Egypt, a fundamentalist mosque in Sana, Yemen, was bombed. In July an Egyptian radical sheik, Mohammed Salah Abdal Mottalib, was killed at another mosque in Yemen. Al Hayat, a London-based Arab newspaper often used by militant groups, reported that one suspect in the killing was affiliated with the Abu Nidal organization.

Middle Eastern government officials also say his group was behind the mosque bombing and the attack on the sheik. In May 1998, the officials said, he met with a colleague, Rifqi al-Mahseri, and told him to plan the sheik's killing, but to act only after receiving a message from Abu Nidal.

On July 3, 1998, while living in Cairo, Abu Nidal was confronted by 10 members of his organization who wanted to end his control over the group. But the Government, tipped off to the coup attempt by a member of the group, convinced them to hold off. Two days later, on July 5, the Egyptians arrested Abu Nidal, and eventually ordered the 10 dissidents out of Egypt.

Abu Nidal was apparently able to order the murder of Sheik Salah from jail in Cairo, the Middle Eastern officials say. But his time in Egypt was limited. While it is not clear how long he remained in jail, the officials said, Abu Nidal remained in Cairo until his move to Baghdad.